

awakening for - Tacoma silent film! - Long - - News Tribune, The (Tacoma, WA) - May 24, 2015 - page 1A  
May 24, 2015 | News Tribune, The (Tacoma, WA) | Craig Sailor; Staff writer | Page 1A

A made-in-Tacoma silent movie - thought to be lost forever - has been found in the vaults of a New York City museum and will once again be projected on the big screen.

The intact melodrama, complete with Hollywood stars and scenes of 1926 Tacoma, is being restored for a late-summer screening at the Rialto Theater - the first theater it was projected at more than 80 years ago.

"Eyes of the Totem" is a story of a woman who sacrifices everything for her daughter's welfare. It's entertaining in its own right, but the story of how it was made, lost and then rediscovered is worthy of a Hollywood script on its own.

The real-life characters include a renegade studio chief who tried to turn Tacoma into "Hollywood-by-

the-Sea," a director who went on to make some of film's biggest movies and a young city employee who wouldn't give up on her quest to find Tacoma's long-lost film legacy.

The story also involves a team of dedicated local citizens who have made restoring and screening "Totem" their mission.

"Not only is the film a boon for Tacoma but also for the movie world," said Tacoma historian Michael Sullivan. "The discovery of an intact American silent movie that was made outside of California is extremely rare. Only a handful exist."

## HOLLYWOOD-BY-THE-SEA

In the mid-1920s, Hollywood, California, already was established as the epicenter of movie making. Studios such as Paramount and 20th Century Fox were attracted to the open land, varied scenery and abundant sunshine of Southern California.

But a few specialty and regional studios existed around the country.

In 1924, Hollywood film producer Harvey C. Weaver came to Tacoma to establish what he would call Hollywood-by-the-Sea. Soon he and his investors, who included Gen. James M. Ashton and banker Chester Thorne, started H.C. Weaver Productions Inc.

So eager were local businessmen to get in on the venture that a 5-acre parcel at Titlow Beach was provided. Tacoma lumbermen donated the wood for the building, which became the third-largest studio in the country. The 108-foot by 105-foot building had a 50-foot-high ceiling.

Residing at the Tacoma Hotel, Weaver told The Tacoma Ledger in September 1924 that great strides in artificial lighting had made constant sunshine unnecessary for film production.

He also hinted that locals would be used in the films, but "it was necessary to use nationally known stars as well as a famous director."

Weaver was bullish on the Pacific Northwest and its varied terrain.

"The public is getting tired of seeing the same scenery - the country immediately surrounding Los Angeles," Weaver said. "Within the same distance of Tacoma we have much more wonderful scenery.

"If we stayed here for 100 years and made a new picture every three months, we could show some new beautiful views in every picture."

The studio's first film, "Hearts and Fists," was made in 1925. It starred Alan Hale Sr., the father of Alan Hale Jr., who went on to play the skipper in the classic TV castaway comedy, "Gilligan's Island."

The second film, "Eyes of the Totem" and its third and last film, "Heart of the Yukon," were released in 1927.

All three films had aspects that included the Yukon. Not only was the 1896-1899 Klondike gold rush on the minds of audiences, but Charlie Chaplin's "The Gold Rush" had come out in 1925. It was the highest-grossing comedic silent film in history, according to Turner Classic Movies.

After the commercial releases of the three Tacoma films, little was heard about them again and all negatives and prints were presumed lost.

Like many Tacomans interested in the city's past, Sullivan had long known about Weaver Studios and its missing films.

"I remember (Tacoma historian) Murray Morgan telling me that there wasn't even five frames (left) of a movie," Sullivan said. "Even Murray didn't believe anyone had kept a copy of the films."

Only 30 percent of the nearly 11,000 American feature films made in the silent era (1912-1929) survive to this day, according to a 2013 report by The Library of Congress. Only 14 percent survive in their original-release 35mm format.

"They were considered ephemeral," said Claudia Gorbman, a former University of Washington Tacoma film studies professor. "If a movie was sent to a theater in Tacoma, it would have its run for a week or two and then it was time for the next movie.

"The studio couldn't use them after and they were enormous (with multiple reels.)"

Unless they ended up in somebody's attic, most were discarded.

## THE SILENT FILM ERA

In the 1910s and 1920s, the vaudeville era was giving way to the increasing popularity of film - they

weren't called "silents" until the talkies came along.

Cities such as Tacoma converted its live-action theaters to show movies and built new ones as fast as the demand allowed.

An April 9, 1926, listing in The Tacoma News Tribune showed 13 theaters in the area showing mostly movies and some vaudeville. "The Blackbird" with Lon Chaney was showing at the Rialto, "Sporting Life" was at the Proctor Street Blue Mouse and the Pantages had vaudeville and features.

To meet the demand, the film industry was churning out movies, sometimes several a week by a big studio. And a new phenomenon was created: the film star.

Crowds flocked to see the latest comic creations from Charlie Chaplin and Harold Lloyd or swoon over a Rudolph Valentino or Greta Garbo romance.

Because filmmaking was a novelty in Tacoma every bit of news about Weaver Studios was heavily covered by the city's three major daily newspapers.

#### 'THE TOTEM POLE BEGGAR'

When "Hearts and Fists" was released in 1926, Weaver turned to his next picture. He called it "The Totem Pole Beggar."

In 1924, while Weaver was living at the Tacoma Hotel downtown, he must have gazed out at the 83-foot-tall **totem pole** installed in the park next door at 10th and A streets.

The pole - carved in 1903 in time for President Theodore Roosevelt's visit to Tacoma - plays a major role in the film. The heroine begs from a bench just in front of it. Carved eyes on the pole dissolve into the killer's eyes periodically in the film.

The movie also offers glimpses of the Tacoma Hotel, considered the finest lodging north of San Francisco. The grand hotel burned in 1935.

The pole was moved in 1953 to its present location in Fireman's Park at Ninth and A streets.

By 2013, the then-110-year-old pole had degraded to the point where it was in danger of falling. After a civic debate on its future (letting it rot in a forest was one proposal) it was reinforced with steel in 2014 and left in place where it stands today.

"We came so close to destroying the pole," Sullivan said.

Weaver and Ashton traveled to Hollywood in February 1926 to cast actors for "Totem."

Anne Cornwall, Gareth Hughes and Bert Woodruff would play supporting roles. The villain would be played by veteran Western actor Tom Santschi. The star - the **totem pole** beggar - would be Wanda Hawley.

Hawley was known to Tacomans not only from her film work but also because she was a former Tacoman.

A March 7, 1920, front page headline in The Tacoma Sunday Ledger (a predecessor of The News Tribune) called Hawley, "Another Tacoma Girl Who Has Found Success in Picturedom."

Born in Pennsylvania, Hawley grew up in the Puget Sound area. The newspaper described the 30-year-old actress as "golden-haired, peach bloom as to complexion, sweet of face and manner."

For a period in her career the diminutive actress called herself Wanda Petit.

Hawley got her first notable role in "Old Wives for New," a 1918 Cecil B. DeMille film. During her career she acted alongside Valentino, Tom Mix, Gloria Swanson and Douglas Fairbanks.

In addition to actors the film also needed a director.

'ONE TAKE WOODY'

Woodbridge Strong Van Dyke already had an extensive career in film by the time Weaver hired him to direct "Totem." The 36-year-old director had 37 titles to his credit.

"He was quite a respected filmmaker in Hollywood in the '20s and went on to have a flourishing career after this," Gorbman said.

After "Totem," Van Dyke directed "The Heart of the Yukon" for Weaver and went on to direct some of the early talking era's most famous films, including 1932's "Tarzan the Ape Man" with Johnny Weissmuller and Maureen O'Sullivan.

He directed 1934's "The Thin Man" with William Powell and Myrna Loy (and three sequels), 1939's "It's a Wonderful World" with Jimmy Stewart and Claudette Colbert, 1936's "San Francisco" and several musicals with Nelson Eddy and Jeanette MacDonald.

The director got the nickname of "One Take Woody" from his economical shooting style, which brought films in on time and under budget.

"He would often do one take of a shot and move on to the next," Gorbman said.

Van Dyke was nominated twice for Oscars and has a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. He died in 1943.

His hiring for "Totem" was big news in Tacoma.

"This puts an end to the wild rumors that have been circulating throughout the city during the past few days," The Tacoma Times reported on Feb. 18, 1926.

The Times said Van Dyke, a former vaudeville actor, also had connections to Tacoma. He had

moved to Seattle while in his teens. Later he was a member of the Tacoma Masons and Elks and acted in the city's professional stock company.

Van Dyke played the part of a beat cop in the first part of the "Totem" and the police chief in the latter part, which takes place about 15 years later.

## TALKIE TAKE-OVER

The year "Totem" was released, 1927, was a turning point in the film industry.

In October, Al Jolson's "The Jazz Singer" was released - the first major release of a movie with synchronized sound. It was just a few minutes of sound in an otherwise silent film but it marked the death knell of silent films.

Actors who couldn't make the transition to sound because of voice, accents, acting or other issues saw their careers evaporate overnight. Hawley was one of them. She made only four movies after "Totem." She died in 1963.

But actors weren't the only casualties of the talkies. In the 1920s, sound represented a new medium and added a major expense to filmmaking.

"You had to bring in new kinds of lighting that didn't make noise," Gorbman said. "You had to bring in voice coaches, new quieter cameras, sound departments."

If studios couldn't find the money to invest, they were doomed. Weaver Studios was one of the victims as the film industry once again coalesced in Hollywood.

A year after "Heart of the Yukon" was released in 1927, the Weaver studios shut down. The large building was converted in to a dance hall in 1932 but burned in a fire that same year.

In a few years, Hollywood-by-the-Sea and its three films were all but forgotten.

"Eyes of the Totem" had a brief revival of interest in 2013 when novelist Jamie Ford included it in the plot of "Songs of Willow Frost." The novel centers on a Chinese-American actress.

"(Gaston) Lance was the art director on the film and had turned the Winthrop Hotel into 'The Golden Dragon,' and they had used Chinese extras," Ford said. "That was exactly the type of scene I was looking for. It dovetailed perfectly into what I'd written."

## MOVIE DETECTIVE

Lauren Hoogkamer bears no resemblance to a film noir gumshoe but her detective skills rival those of Sam Spade or Nick Charles.

As the city of Tacoma's historic preservation coordinator, Hoogkamer's job is to review designs, develop public programs and manage nominations for historic districts and landmarks.

It's not to search for long-lost silent movies.

But in a previous position at the history-focused Los Angeles Conservancy she was involved with the organization's "Last Remaining Seats," a program that screens silent films at the city's historic theaters.

"It gets people really excited about historic buildings," Hoogkamer said of the program.

So shortly after Tacoma hired the Lewis County native in June 2014, she became intrigued with the tales of the Weaver Studios and its missing films.

"A lot of people have researched it but couldn't find the films," she recalled.

Local filmmaker Mick Flaaen was one of those people. He had been looking for the films since 2011.

"I did the same search everyone else did and came up with nothing," Flaaen said.

The Northwest Room at the Tacoma Public Library has an extensive photography archive of Tacoma. But little exists of the city on film.

"It's great to have all these old photos, but there's something about moving pictures," Flaaen said.

Hoogkamer, meanwhile, was hearing a rumor around town: that just maybe a print of "Eyes of the Totem" existed in the vast archives of the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

When Van Dyke had died in 1943, he had willed his personal archives to the museum.

"But people had contacted MOMA and had never been able to locate it," Hoogkamer said. She tried a new tact. "People had researched H.C. Weaver. I started researching under W.S. Van Dyke."

The decision was fortuitous. One day in late summer, Hoogkamere opened her email inbox and found a message from MOMA. The rumor was true.

"They said yes, we have the film," she recalled. "I was pretty shocked."

And then the bad news came.

"It's really unstable," Hoogkamer was told. "It's highly unlikely it can be restored. It's combustible. We don't know what condition it's in. No one's opened it."

The movie's seven reels were on nitrate, the common medium of the day for film.

Nitrate was the first viable plastic-like medium that made moving pictures possible. It was flexible and provided a stable medium for the photo-sensitive emulsion that held the images.

But it has flaws: First, it's highly flammable. And after several decades it can decompose into a goo

or dust.

The flammability problem was so dangerous that studios such as Weaver's had film vaults in safe locations in case films caught fire. Weaver's concrete film vault still exists today in the backyard of a Titlow Beach residence.

If the condition of the film wasn't enough to worry about Hoogkamer was given more roadblocks facing the resurrection of "Totem": MOMA estimated transferring the delicate film to a digital copy would cost close to \$40,000.

And that was after it finished work on the many other films in the museum's collection that also needed to be copied to digital.

"Obviously that's not in my budget," Hoogkamer said.

At an impasse, the city bowed out.

## TEAM TOTEM

But Team Totem, as the growing group of enthusiasts headed by Sullivan called themselves, was about to get a new member with a talent for working out deals.

As director of the Tacoma Art Museum, Stephanie Stebich frequently loans her institution's art and in turn requests artworks from other museums for TAM shows.

She was working on such a deal with MOMA director Glenn Lowry when Sullivan contacted her.

"The museum world is fairly small so it's helpful to pick up the phone and plead your case," Stebich said.

But this was an unusual request.

"Usually I plead my case when I want to borrow a work of art," she said.

Stebich told Lowry the film was important to Tacoma's cultural and historical heritage. And, oh, by the way, could you slash the cost and prioritize the film conservation?

"He understood its importance to our community," said Stebich, who had yet to see the film.

"If I had known it was such a feminist manifesto, I would have argued that for my case at MOMA as another reason why this is so important for our community and the larger film community."

The movie was sent to the top of the list and the \$40,000 cost was dropped to \$4,300 for a high-definition digital conversion.

And MOMA got to borrow the Jacob Lawrence painting it wanted from TAM.

## A FILM ARRIVES

Eager to get the film preserved, Sullivan paid the \$4,300 fee. Since then Team Totem has started a Kickstarter campaign to pay other costs associated with restoring the film, scoring it and presenting it.

In February, Team Totem assembled at Tacoma's Blue Mouse Theater to see the movie presented for the first time in 88 years.

When the lights came up over an hour later, the group of about 20 were elated. The movie was intact, sharp and, aside from expected scratches, almost pristine.

"I had not dreamed we would end up with something as clear as we have," Sullivan said. "You can pick out people in the windows of buildings. It's a good story and not amateurishly told."

Gorbman, who was at the Blue Mouse that day, called the film a godsend to Tacoma's history.

"I just couldn't believe what exquisite shape it's in," she said.

Some intertitles would need some work, but other than that the film needed little restoration.

But as amazing as the survival of the print is so too is seeing Tacoma come alive, circa 1926, on film. Tacoma streetcars and 1920s vehicles move past hotels, businesses and municipal docks. Most are gone but some still stand to this day.

"It's amazing that there could be moving pictures of the city," Sullivan said.

The movie even came with a color tinting. When Hawley's character lights a candle in her cabin the film changes from a cool gray to a brownish sepia tone. It then alternates between the two colors, depending on whether the scenes are indoors or outdoors.

There was, of course, one major aspect missing from the film: sound.

## SCORE

Silent movies came with sheet music played by an organist, live musical group or sometimes on a player piano. They did not come with a recorded soundtrack.

Team Totem knew their film would need one to fully recreate the movie-going experience of 1927.

"We had no inkling of what the original score was like," Sullivan said.

Team Totem has hired Tacoma composer John Christopher Baymen to create a score. While Baymen's music career spans four decades, this was his first silent film score.

Because Baymen doesn't know what Van Dyke's intent with the music was, the composer is

writing it in the style of 1926 but with a 2015 perspective.

"I plan to use all of the tools, stylistically and instrumentally, that were available in the 1920s," he said. He's writing a lead motif as well as themes for characters, emotions and events.

The soundtrack will be recorded using musical libraries as well as some live performances from a Seattle Symphony cellist and a violinist.

"I don't know if you could call it easy, but satisfying? Heck yeah," Baymen said.

TODAY

"It was a one-in-a-million find, an extraordinary story of Hollywood on the sea coming back to life," said former Tacoma mayor and Tacoma Historical Society President Bill Baarsma.

"To actually see Tacoma in 1926 when this film was produced is reliving history."

The society has taken over coordinating the legalities, publicity and fiscal responsibilities for the film. It also will maintain ownership of the digital copies.

Filmmaker Flaaen has produced a documentary on Weaver Studios. He also wants to make a documentary on the rediscovery of "Totem."

"Anytime someone finds a silent film it's a huge deal," he said. "They're just all gone. Then on top of that was actually made in your community."

Novelist Ford was thrilled to hear that the film had been found.

"It was like I was 8 years old again on Christmas morning. I could hardly believe it," Ford said "These things are rarely found, even classics like 'Lost Horizon' are missing pieces. To find 'Eyes of the Totem' intact was like a marvelous gift from the universe. Seeing that film is the closest we we'll ever get to a time machine. It's a window to 1926."

On Sept. 18, for the first time in 88 years, "Eyes of the Totem" will again appear to the public on a movie screen when it screens at Tacoma's Rialto Theater, where it had its sneak peek and across the alley from where it premiered.

The city-owned facility has waived rent for the screening because the movie fits neatly into the center's mission of community entertainment as well as honoring history, said David Fisher, executive director of the Broadway Center for the Performing Arts.

"In some of the shots you can see the Pantages' marquee," he said.

In 2018, the Rialto and the Pantages theaters will mark their 100th anniversaries. The Rialto was built as a movie theater, complete with pipe organ for silent film soundtracks.

And as for those two other missing Weaver films?

"There's a rumor that 'Heart of the Yukon' is owned by a private collector," Hoogkamer said.

And she is not one to dismiss rumors.

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'Eyes of the Totem'

When: Sept. 18.

Where: Rialto Theater, 310 S. Ninth St., Tacoma.

Running time: 1 hour, 20 minutes.

Tickets: To be announced.

Website: eyesofthetotem.com.

COMING WEDNESDAY

After a brief film career, Gaston Lance, the art director of Weaver Studios, became a noted Tacoma architect. Wednesday's News Tribune will include a feature on one of his houses.

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