

THE GENERAL

From the Files of the Cottage Grove Historical Society

The "General" was a real train used in the south in the mid 1800s. During the Civil War, a group of union soldiers known as Andrew's Raiders, stole the train and headed south, cutting telegraph lines and tearing up railroad tracks along the way. They were eventually caught and their plans **thwarted**.



While the General was the title engine, the Texas also played a key role in the film. Here you can see both engines and a film crew on a parallel track.

The 1862 battle was written into a book by William Pittenger called *The Great Locomotive Chase*. Buster Keaton would later take this story and adapt it for the silver screen by adding two fictional characters - a hero...Johnnie, and a heroine... Annabelle Lee.

Buster Keaton went to Georgia to see the original General which is in a museum in Kennesaw. He liked to work with stories of heroes...he believed all ordinary people are heroes when they attempt to do extraordinary tasks. He bought a **locomotive** that resembled the General, then went searching for the necessary **narrow gauge track** and scenery that resembled the original location of the chase. He found both in the areas of Culp Creek and Cottage Grove, Oregon.

The film company arrived with wagons, uniforms, horses, and locomotives in April, 1926 and stayed 6 months. A complete movie set was built in the area of 14th and Main. Later locals would recall the set looked colorful and real, with fresh geraniums and grass clippings for lawns in front of the houses. The only scenes filmed in a Hollywood studio are the indoor scenes...and the drenching rain scenes!

The great train wreck was filmed 20 miles out at Culp Creek, where two bridges were



Playing Baseball at Kelly Field

built and an **artificial** pond created to film the adventuresome scenes. The crew left the Cottage Grove Hotel each morning and rode the train for an hour to get there. All the extras went along, too. One estimate is that there were 60 extras for the crowd scenes. It looks like there were hundreds in some scenes, but this was a film trick. Extras were reportedly paid



each day by a man who held a huge roll of \$5 bills in his hand and peeled them off one at a time to the people in line. Children were paid the same as adults, and at \$5 a day and a free lunch, all made more than the local millworkers!

Many in town came to know Buster Keaton personally, he was described as shy and delightful. He visited with local families and enjoyed the outdoors. He also loved playing baseball, sometimes setting filming aside for hours if a game was good! He was a comedian on and off the screen. People remember him riding down the hotel stairs on the back of his large St. Bernard dog, and sliding down the railing, too.

Marion Mack, the woman who plays Annabelle, knew they had become friends when he followed her out to where she bicycled to go swimming, and tied her clothes in knots. Remember this is 1926 when bathing suits were just getting above the knee. She had to ride back into town in just the bathing suit - something you just did not see or do!!

The story of the locomotive falling into the pond could be told by hundreds since nearly all of Cottage Grove and much of Lane County came out to watch this scene being filmed. There were two bridges in these scenes - one under water. The pond was deep, yet you see the horses and armies walking casually across the water... because there was a bridge built and suspended under the water for these scenes. To ensure that the trestle collapsed on cue, Keaton had the crew cut into the structure and load it with small charges of dynamite. After the wreck, the locomotive rusted in the water until the metal, used to tell a Civil War tale, was salvaged to support the efforts of WWII.



Buster Keaton is ranked alongside Charlie Chaplin as a great comedian of the silent film era, yet their styles were very different. Chaplin was always being funny - every scene, every movement and his films moved rapidly in this style. Keaton did not record just funny moments, he structured events methodically so audiences expect something funny coming up throughout the movie.

Discussion Points

1. Why was Cottage Grove and Culp Creek ideal for filming this railroad movie?
 2. Busters Main Street Café is in the Cottage Grove Hotel, where Buster Keaton and his crew stayed during filming. What assumptions can you make about the building when it was a hotel?
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Vocabulary

Artificial: made or produced by human beings rather than occurring naturally

Locomotive: a powered rail vehicle used for pulling trains

Narrow Gauge Track: metal railroad tracks that are closer together than the standard British and American distance of 56.5 inches

Thwarted: prevent (someone) from accomplishing something

