

# THE SILENT SCREEN, 1895–1927

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*The motion-picture maker sets up his whirring camera in the wilds and the crowded city alike.*

—David S. Hulfish, *Cyclopedia of Motion-Picture Work*, 1911

*When I went out one glorious morning . . . [to] take the first “stills,” and actually began posing the artists, it felt to me, just like it must feel to a prisoner leaving solitary confinement for the open air. Imagine the horizon is your stage limit and the sky your gridiron. . . . Our perspective was the upper chain of the Rockies, and our ceiling was God’s own blue and amber sky. I felt inspired. I felt that I could do things which the confines of a theatre would not permit. . . . Nature did the rest.*

—Cecil B. DeMille, 1914

In an article published in the *New York Dramatic Mirror* in 1914, Cecil B. DeMille claimed to have shot his first feature, *The Squaw Man*, on location in the Rocky Mountains. As quoted in the epigraph, he explained, “I felt inspired. . . . Nature did the rest.” But in fact, DeMille was not telling the truth when he said that “our perspective was the upper chain of the Rockies.” While the film was indeed shot partly outdoors, its location work took place entirely in Southern California.<sup>1</sup> While the West may have seemed like a generalized geography to many people in the 1910s, it is certainly a stretch to conflate Southern California and the Rocky Mountains, which are located roughly a thousand miles apart. But as a struggling young filmmaker eager to make his mark, DeMille’s fabrication is hardly surprising and rather less scandalous than some of the other tall tales of the early film industry. In fact, DeMille’s self-promoting yarn reveals a contradiction at the heart of the concept of cinematic location. Although the term

“location shooting” implies authenticity and strict fidelity of place, the actual practice of shooting on location often means simply shooting outside the studio in some place that more or less resembles where the story is set. Location shooting is one of the core cinematic practices used to shore up film’s celebrated sense of realism. But more often than not, filmmakers have used one location to stand for another. “Good enough” is the rule of location shooting, not “exactly” or “precisely.” “Stunt locations” (as they are often called today) are extremely common, and as this example demonstrates, the practice of substituting one location for another dates from the silent era.<sup>2</sup>

DeMille’s claim reveals a second timeworn concept at the heart of cinematic location: the idea that “nature” itself is a coauthor of films shot on location. For films set in the wilderness, exact coordinates were less important than the location’s ability to signify nature’s grandeur. What makes the outdoor scenes in *The Squaw Man* feel particularly “real” is not the specific geographical location in which it was shot but the materiality of nature, including real mountains, trees, rivers, and rocks. Nature, it seems, composed a generic theatrical outdoor space in the silent era. Indeed, it is around the time of *The Squaw Man* that the concept of “location” emerges in film history. As this chapter will show, there was already a well-established tradition of shooting films outdoors before the studio era, but the concept of location shooting as we think of it today emerged as a by-product of the studio system.

Finally, as DeMille’s statement indicates, one particular kind of location bears a special relationship to American cinema: western scenery for western films. Western scenery is more than just a setting, according to DeMille; rather, wilderness landscapes add a sublime pathos that is, in this and other westerns, inextricably connected to American national identity. At the same time, “the West” was a particular kind of location in which particular kinds of stories could be told—about settlement, conquering nature, or the conflict between “civilization” and “savagery” that propels so many westerns. While this chapter does not focus specifically on westerns, it should be noted at the outset that the western is one of the genres most inextricably bound up with location shooting in American film history. Quite literally, the film industry’s move west in the silent era echoed the nation’s settlement of the West in the previous century. In this way, silent-era films dramatize a logic of settlement not just in many of their stories but in their evolving visualization of real, material landscapes.

The practice of shooting films on location is fundamental to cinema and can be traced back to the earliest films ever made. Well-known examples such as *The Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat* (Auguste and Louis Lumière, 1895) and *Rough Sea at Dover* (Birt Acres and R. W. Paul, 1895) make this point plain. But what does it mean to shoot a film on location? As it so often does, the history of early cinema reveals a complexity at the heart of this seemingly straightforward filmmaking practice. The technological and industrial idiosyncrasies of early cinema

underscore the necessity of defining what location shooting meant in different historical periods. The concept of location shooting as it came to be understood by Hollywood did not develop until the consolidation of the narrative/feature-film-oriented studio system in the late 1910s. Before that, cinema was characterized by a set of competing ideas about the significance of outdoor shooting and the use of specific, identifiable real-life locations in film.

This chapter presents an overview of the predominant location shooting practices of U.S. film companies during the silent era. It also sketches a series of definitions for the different meanings of location work from 1895 to 1927. As this chapter demonstrates, silent cinema's phases of industrial development created different horizons of possibility for location work. Although its meaning changed, some form of shooting "on location" was always a prominent practice even as filmmaking developed from a minor and undercapitalized set of competing small businesses into a large, highly capitalized, vertically integrated industry. What changed was both the meaning of what was once called outdoor shooting and the range of places that came to signify realistic locations on film. Early cinema was characterized by a variety of outdoor shooting practices. In the so-called transitional era, various nomadic filmmaking practices were common. By the time the film industry had shifted (mostly) to Southern California, a new and more efficient set of location practices emerged that would remain dominant for much of the studio era. Location shooting gives the illusion of what Walter Benjamin called "the equipment free aspect of reality." But in fact, as Benjamin further explained, this representational trope is actually "the height of artifice."<sup>3</sup> In order to create the illusion of pristine nature and unfettered reality, filmmakers on location shoots relied on many of the same concepts and technologies they used in the studio.

#### EARLY CINEMA: OUTDOOR SHOOTING AND SCENIC FILMS

Beginning with the first moving pictures made in the 1890s, every American film company shot films outside, and every kind of early film subject was filmed outdoors, including news stories, scenic views, sports, and comedies. Although studio filmmaking began with Edison's Black Maria studio in West Orange, New Jersey (in use from 1893 until its demolition in 1903), outdoor shooting was the more common practice for at least the first five years of American cinema history. The reasons for this are both aesthetic and technological. Outdoor shooting was immediately appreciated for its verisimilitude, but more importantly, the idea of the film studio as the primary site of production had not yet emerged. Shooting outdoors was easy and required no expensive construction of structures or sets. Most importantly, moving pictures needed bright illumination, and artificial lighting was not yet available, which meant that sunlight had to be used until studio-grade artificial lighting was developed (the first artificial lights were

Cooper Hewitt lamps installed in the Biograph Company's New York studio in 1903). Indeed, as Brian Jacobson has shown, "The search for favorable climatic conditions or, in their absence, substitutes for sunlight thus became one of the major driving forces in the development of early cinematic production."<sup>4</sup> Filmmakers began constructing glass-enclosed studio buildings using sunlight for illumination as early as 1897, but shooting outdoors remained the default practice for a great deal of filmmaking in the earliest years of cinema.<sup>5</sup> This was not yet location shooting as it later came to be understood; rather, at first, outdoor and studio shooting were not rigidly distinguished. A decade later, however, the difference was clear. David S. Hulfish wrote in a section on "pictures without studios" in his 1911 *Cyclopedia of Motion-Picture Work*, "A prominent film manufacturing company operated for years without a studio and without painted scene sets, releasing a reel each week."<sup>6</sup> What had been common in the 1890s and early 1900s was now remarkable in 1911.

The history of location shooting is both a history of cinema technologies and a history of cinematic realism. Film history textbooks typically contrast the French Lumière films, known for their "documentary" qualities and outdoor shooting, with the American Edison films, known for their fairground/vaudeville subject matter and for having been shot inside the Black Maria. But this distinction has as much to do with these companies' respective technological devices as it does with national/cultural differences. While the Lumière Cinématographe camera was lightweight and portable (thus enabling the Lumières to produce and exhibit outdoor views six months before Edison), the Edison Manufacturing Company's first Kinetograph camera was bulky and limited to shooting within the Black Maria and its immediate environs. The Edison Company soon developed a more portable camera, however, and began shooting street scenes in New York City. *Herald Square*, shot by Edison cameraman William Heise on May 11, 1896, is considered the first film shot on location in New York.<sup>7</sup> A reviewer from the *Buffalo Courier* described the film in this way: "A scene covering Herald Square in New York, showing the noonday activity of Broadway at that point as clearly as if one were spectator of the original seems incredulous, nevertheless is presented life-like. The cable cars seem to move in opposite directions and look real enough to suggest a trip up and down that great thoroughfare, while at the same time the elevated trains are rushing overhead, pedestrians are seen moving along the sidewalks or crossing to opposite sides of the street, everything moving, or as it is seen in real life."<sup>8</sup> As this description makes clear, it was the detailed realism of this moving picture of a real location that was so impressive to early audiences. Not only was the urban bustle of New York accurately captured by the film, but the materiality of objects and people moving through space was also remarkable in its own right. This discourse of realism has continued to define our notion of location shooting ever since, although the styles of realism have shifted over time.

Outdoor shooting was also more common in early cinema because film was not yet seen as a predominantly narrative medium; rather, nonfiction subjects were more frequently produced than fiction films in the first decade of film history. For example, a 1902 catalog from the American Mutoscope & Biograph Company lists about twice as many films shot outdoors as indoors, and this breakdown occurs across fiction and nonfiction lines.<sup>9</sup> After a list of comedy, vaudeville, and trick film titles, the catalog presents a long list of films shot outdoors with generic categories such as sports and pastimes, railroads, scenic, fire and police, military, parades, marine, and expositions. The few remaining subjects in other categories may or may not have been shot outdoors—notable personages, children, educational, machinery, miscellaneous—but the point is that in the early years of cinema, moving pictures were not just a medium for representing fictional stories. Rather, early moving pictures were more often understood as a recording device.

Clearly, we must distinguish between what we think of as location shooting today and what the film industry thought about outdoor shooting in the early cinema period. Generally speaking, outdoor shooting in early cinema was connected to an idea of nonfiction, even though terms such as “nonfiction” and “documentary” did not yet exist. As a 1909 article on “photographing outdoor subjects” explained, “outdoor” pictures meant nonfiction: “By outdoor subjects I mean those which are not specially rehearsed as in the dramatic pictures that are so popular just now. Take for example a procession, a street scene, or an athletic contest.”<sup>10</sup>

But even in the realm of early nonfiction, some distinctions can be drawn. Although a film such as *President McKinley's First Campaign* (Biograph, 1902) was necessarily shot outdoors (in Canton, Ohio), its classification in the 1902 Biograph catalog under “Parades” indicates that it did not function as a film connected to a specific location, but rather its significance was the famous person it documented.<sup>11</sup> Scenic films such as *Washington Bridge and the Speedway* (Biograph, 1902), pictured in figure 1.1, are more clearly about specific places, and scenic films can be understood as an early form of location shooting. On the other hand, even though a surviving scenic film such as *Waterfall in the Catskills* (Edison, 1897) names a specific place in its title, the extant film presents little visual information about this specific place; indeed the waterfall is so tightly framed that we cannot even verify if it was actually shot where the title claims.<sup>12</sup> Although the film's location is not in doubt, the generic nature of such waterfall imagery suggests that it was the falling water that mattered more than the place. In sum, although outdoor shooting was a dominant practice in early cinema, it had not yet taken on its primary function as a setting for narrative.

Early and silent-era cinema can help us better understand the varied nature of location shooting, which has always been more complex than the term would suggest. I argue that scenic films (or travelogues, as they were also called) func-

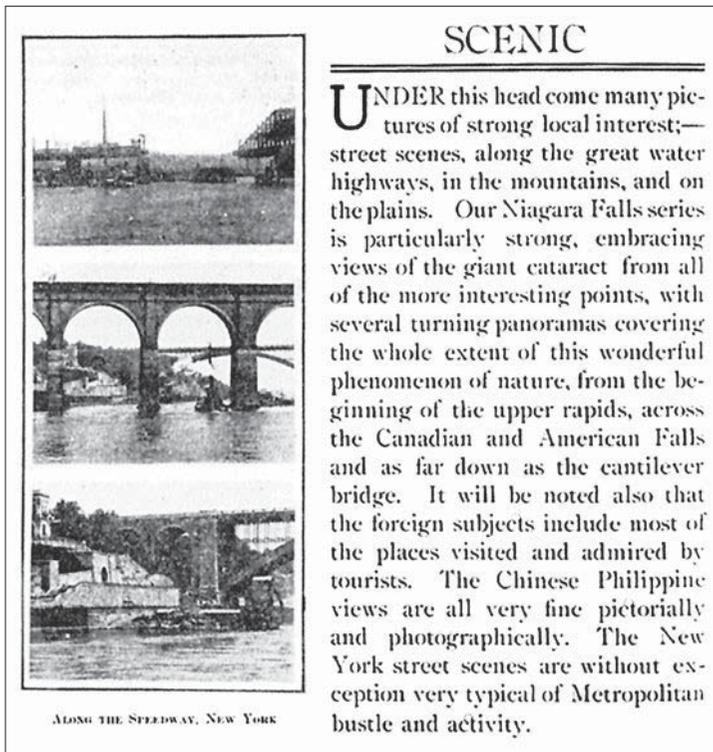


Figure 1.1. Scenic films as a prototype for location shooting. American Mutoscope & Biograph Company, *Picture Catalogue* (New York: AM&B, 1902), 130.

tioned as a prototype for what later became location shooting. In a taxonomy of early cinema location practices, scenic films stand as the limit case of an indexical notion of place. One of the most popular early film genres, scenics were short nonfiction films depicting geographical and cultural points of interest around the world, rather like postcards come alive. While they depicted places in the present moment, they often reified exotic or nostalgic ideas about traditional people, cultures, and landscapes that were perceived as fading away.<sup>13</sup>

In contrast, early fiction films often used outdoor settings as generic exterior non-places. The early British film *How It Feels to Be Run Over* (Hepworth, 1900), for example, was shot outdoors, but its indistinct diegesis (a dirt road flanked by hedges and trees) does not signify any specific place.<sup>14</sup> Here we can locate a second category of early cinema location work on the other end of the spectrum, a practice we might simply call “outdoor shooting.” This descriptive term was used in the trade press, although it was not applied systematically and could be used to describe both fiction and nonfiction films. Reviewers frequently praised fiction

films shot outdoors for their pictorial beauty, as in this review for a 1910 film: “as much as the picture has been taken outdoors, amid beautiful scenery, the general effect is very pleasing, and the photographic quality of the film leaves nothing to be desired.”<sup>15</sup> Outdoor shooting was concerned to show generic exterior scenery rather than any specific location; it was not bound to an indexical sense of place as it was in scenic films.

Outdoor shooting bears resemblance to the painting term *en plein air*, or open-air painting, in that it was generically applied to any manner of subjects rendered outside rather than inside. In art, the term connotes the practice of representing things that appear as they are before the eye; this concept clearly bears resemblance to the idea of cinematic realism. *Plein air* painting became popular in the nineteenth century with the rise of landscape painting and the related emergence of impressionism. Portable field easels were developed at this time, which were used by painters both professional and amateur as they ventured outdoors to find suitable subjects; the practice is depicted in Winslow Homer’s painting *Artists Sketching in the White Mountains* (1868). Early outdoor camera operators, with their cameras, tripods, and gear, resemble these fine-art practitioners outdoors with their apparatus of easel and paint. One commentator wrote in 1909, “Pictorial photography of the stationary kind is best done *en plein air*, as photographers know, and the same rule should hold good with regard to moving pictures.”<sup>16</sup> Early comedies and chase films regularly utilized outdoor shooting. In these films, the actual location is not significant; rather, a general sense of being in the open air is what matters.

In between these two practices—scenic films and generic outdoor shooting—we can locate what eventually became the dominant, aspirational idea of location shooting in the studio era: fiction films shot in the actual location in which the story is set. At first, this involved a juxtaposition of actuality footage with staged footage. Edwin S. Porter’s film *Execution of Czolgosz with Panorama of Auburn Prison* (Edison, 1901) is an important step toward this concept of cinematic location.<sup>17</sup> The four-shot film begins with two panoramic shots of the exterior of the prison taken on location the morning of the execution, shifting in the third and fourth shots to an interior reenactment of the execution. Thus, even though the film is a reenactment of a real event, the location shots add verisimilitude to the subject. Significantly, exhibitors could choose whether to purchase the film with or without the two opening actuality shots.<sup>18</sup> In its full-length version, this film begins to develop a unified sense of space in which inside and outside, actual and staged, signify a single diegesis. The location work on *Execution of Czolgosz* is faithful to the extreme—not only is the actual prison of the execution shown, but the exterior footage was also taken the morning of the actual execution (Porter had been denied permission to film inside the prison). Porter used a similar technique combining actuality footage with staged footage in his tourist parody film *European Rest Cure* in 1904.<sup>19</sup>

A fourth category of location work, which might be called the “substitute location”—the practice of using one location to stand for another—was also developing in the early years. One of the best-known early American films, *The Great Train Robbery* (Edwin S. Porter, 1903), is a good example of this practice. Like so many early films, this one was modeled after a popular stage play of the same name. Shooting a film outdoors was a way for cinema to distinguish itself from the theater, and early promotional efforts made note of this fact: “It has been posed and acted in faithful duplication of the genuine ‘Hold Ups’ made famous by various outlaw bands in the far West,” proclaimed an Edison promotional pamphlet.<sup>20</sup> The film’s exterior shots contain an element of indexical realism simply because they were shot outdoors in the woods, although the film’s diegetic setting in “the West” was shot in Passaic County, New Jersey, just a few miles north of Edison’s original Black Maria studio in West Orange. In *The Great Train Robbery*, the film’s diegetic setting is not arbitrary but produces narrative meaning: it is important that this railway robbery story takes place in the West. But rather than a strong indexical sense of a specific place, we find a weak indexical sense of a generic “western” outdoors. We might then characterize the practice of the substitute location as a kind of weak indexicality. Numerous early westerns were shot in the East; Scott Simmon has called this tradition the “eastern Western,” writing, “The overall stylistic conventions of filmmaking in these first years reinforce the landscape’s theatricality: The camera is generally fixed in place, actors’ bodies are filmed full length, and each shot is held for a relatively long duration.”<sup>21</sup> This practice illustrates early cinema’s debt to nineteenth-century landscape painting and illustration traditions, but the theatricality is also an effect of the imprecision of these landscapes: a generalized outdoor forest or lake only fifty miles inland from the Atlantic Ocean could evoke the western frontier.

In the first decade of film history, locations served as attractions in their own right (in scenic films), as arbitrary settings with better available lighting than early studios could provide (as in the outdoor shooting of *How It Feels to Be Run Over*), as actuality footage framing a staged drama (as in *Execution of Colgoosz*), or as substitute locations (as in early westerns set in the West but shot in the East, such as *The Great Train Robbery*). As moving pictures shifted from the cinema of attractions to a cinema of narrative integration, location work became more integrated into narratives, and its landscapes came to signify not so much actually existing places or a generic outdoors but fictional settings. Locations continued to function as visual spectacle, however, and were often foregrounded as establishing shots or pauses between narrative events.

#### CONSOLIDATING THE NARRATIVE USES OF LOCATION

As narrative films developed in complexity and length, location shooting practices began to coalesce around a stable set of meanings—namely, the merging of

diegetic story space and extradiegetic geographical space. Much has been made of the historical shift to more tightly framed shots in the early 1910s—film history textbooks cite the advent of the “9-foot line” as an important development in 1910, a closer camera distance that allowed for a more subtle presentation of the human figure. At the same time, however, a new deliberateness with the framing of extreme long shots was emerging, which enabled a more complex presentation of landscapes and exterior locations.

D. W. Griffith is one of the most important figures in the early history of location shooting, for his techniques signaled a new integration of naturalistic setting with narrative. First of all, the development of continuity editing, self-promoted by Griffith (though not invented by him as he claimed), allowed for a more seamless unification of exterior and interior spaces. The climactic canoe chase in *The Red Man and the Child* (Griffith, 1908), shot on location on the Passaic River (near the shooting location of *The Great Train Robbery*), creates what Tom Gunning describes as “a coherent geography which extends over five shots of the eighteen-shot film,” creating a synthetic space through shots of canoes entering and exiting the frame.<sup>22</sup> These continuity editing strategies had been used in the popular chase film genre in preceding years, but in this and other films for the Biograph Company, Griffith merged a consistent exterior story space into a larger and more emotionally engaging melodramatic narrative.

Griffith's one-reeler *The Country Doctor* (1909), shot partly on location in Greenwich, Connecticut, is a landmark film for its presentation of landscape in the service of narrative, pushing Porter's innovative location techniques for *The Execution of Colgoz* further toward narrative integration.<sup>23</sup> The film opens and closes with two panning shots that stand apart from the main narrative but that use location to create a powerful sense of rural setting. These two pans inaugurate the use of sweeping landscape panoramas as lyrical establishing shots, a tradition that continues to this day—think of *Brokeback Mountain* (Ang Lee, 2005), for example. As Gunning writes, “What is immediately striking about this pair of pans is their difference from all of Griffith's previous pans and from how pans were used in early narrative cinema. These pans do not follow the action of any of the film's characters, although in most early narrative films that was the case. In the opening shot of *The Country Doctor*, however, the camera itself initiates a movement through a landscape to introduce the film's characters and begin the narrative action.”<sup>24</sup> The film's final shot reverses the path of the opening shot, returning to the opening image of a pastoral landscape. Griffith uses the peaceful setting as an ironic contrast to the tragic events of the film's plot, which heightens the emotional devastation of the narrative, in which the doctor's own daughter dies while he is away curing another sick child. By evoking the specificity of this larger rural diegetic world, these two shots harness the power of location shooting to add both realism and poetic resonance.

Griffith continued to develop the dramatic potential of what he called “distant views” in films shot on wintertime trips to California with Biograph, including *The Last Drop of Water* (1911), *The Massacre* (1912), *The Sands of Dee* (1912), and *The Battle of Elderbush Gulch* (1913), each of which uses location in interesting ways. But while Griffith’s Biograph films developed a rhetoric of location that was more fully articulated than previous directors’, he still relied on an extremely generic notion of regional location in his films. Indeed, when Griffith chased down “realism” to a fetishistic degree, he was inspired by famous paintings—as in the “Historical Facsimiles” in *The Birth of a Nation* (1915)—rather than actually existing landscapes or places. It was not until the American film industry moved west for good that the term “location shooting” came to be used. The emergence of this concept was shaped by both geographic and industrial factors.

### THE NOMADIC EARLY FILM INDUSTRY

The history of location shooting is also a geographical history of the American film industry as it moved from its East Coast origins to a range of locations around the country, eventually settling on the West Coast in the mid-1910s. In 1909, American film production was centered predominantly in and around New York City and Chicago. But as the industry grew and more films were needed year-round to satisfy the growing audience of moviegoers in the nickel theaters, production companies began sending stock companies to warmer climates in order to continue filming during the winter months. The Essanay Company’s history serves as an exemplary case study: production that began in Chicago expanded to include itinerant filmmaking for a few years while remaining anchored in the Midwest, and eventually shifted entirely to California. Founded in April 1907, Essanay first specialized in producing split reels containing a comedy and an educational subject. In a 1918 *Photoplay* article, the comedian Ben Turpin remembered the early years at Essanay: “They didn’t use automobiles to go on locations then. . . . They sent us out in street cars. Every actor had to carry part of the scenery. Out of gallantry we let the ladies carry the tripods of the camera while we carried chairs and screens and office furniture. Of course we had to go in all our make-up and we used to have some strange adventures. They didn’t think much of picture folks in those days.”<sup>25</sup> Essanay produced numerous comedies and westerns in and around Chicago and on location in Berrien Springs, Michigan, but when winter came, they needed to maintain their fast-paced release schedule of one film a week.

In order to continue production through the cold winter months, the company sent a few key players out to make films in California’s warmer climate. Gilbert M. “Broncho Billy” Anderson, soon to become one of the first cowboy movie stars, was one of the founders of Essanay, and at this time, he was writing,

directing, acting in, and editing most of Essanay's productions. In December 1908, Anderson and Turpin, along with cameraman Jess Robbins, traveled to San Francisco and Los Angeles, making several westerns and a few educational films along the way.<sup>26</sup> After returning to Chicago, they ventured west again, this time to Golden, Colorado, in March 1909; there they continued to produce westerns, along with the occasional travel or local-color subject. Anderson and his crew returned to Chicago again and made more films at Essanay's new studio on Argyle Street but returned to Colorado in September 1909 to shoot more westerns, then headed back to Southern California by way of El Paso, Texas, in January 1910. In February 1910 alone, Essanay released four films made by Anderson and his crew—two dramas and a nonfiction film—shot during this trip in locations ranging across Colorado, Texas, and California. These titles include *The Mexican's Faith* (a western drama shot on location in Santa Barbara, California, released February 26, 1910) and *Aviation at Los Angeles, California* (a nonfiction film shot on location at the Dominguez Airfield in Los Angeles, released February 16, 1910), both of which survive today.<sup>27</sup>

Essanay's practices at first resembled the old scenic production method of sending a few filmmakers out to find the most picturesque landscapes, only now the production unit had grown to include actors and the priority had shifted to fictional narratives. Other companies followed a similar model: while shooting dramatic films on location, many traveling production units shot scenic and topical subjects on the side. As an increasing number of films were produced, itinerant film production also grew in scope and scale. By the late 1910s, as we shall see shortly, location shooting had come to take on many of the trappings of studio production, with the goal of efficient scheduling and as much control as possible over the natural environment. But in the early 1910s, itinerant film production was still fairly haphazard with regard to destination and low-tech in its production costs and techniques.

By 1910, ambulatory filmmaking was becoming common. As Eileen Bowser explains it, 1910 was a turning point because that year film companies could "afford to rent private railroad cars to transport large groups of players, directors, and cameramen across the continent, or to send stock companies overseas by ship. . . . The idea of trooping around the United States to make moving pictures probably seemed natural to those who once spent all their days with touring stock companies."<sup>28</sup> Around this time, filmmaking moved south and west to a few key locations such as Florida and Colorado, as well as California (both Northern and Southern). A few regular film-production units were established in "distant" locations such as Golden, Colorado (Selig, Essanay); Niles, California (Essanay); and especially Jacksonville, Florida (Kalem, Lubin, Selig, and more). At the same time, companies such as Kalem, Vitagraph, and Selig sent still more itinerant production troupes to New Orleans, San Antonio, Oklahoma's "101 Ranch," Arizona, Mexico, Cuba, Jamaica, Ireland, Germany, and even Egypt.

Although many early film companies sent production units out on location, the Kalem Company made location work a particular focus of its marketing strategy. Kalem sent a troupe to Ireland in 1910 and again in 1911, advertising this production unit in the trade press as the “O’Kalems.” Its first release, the one-thousand-foot *A Lad from Old Ireland* (Sidney Olcott), was promoted with great fanfare in November 1910. The film stars Kalem’s most famous player at the time, Gene Gauntier, who filmed numerous additional scenes in the studio after returning to New York, which allowed the company to promote the film as “the first production ever made on two continents.”<sup>29</sup> The company also shot nonfiction footage on this first trip, but it was not until after the troupe’s second trip abroad in 1911 that nonfiction films were released, such as *The O’Kalem’s Visit to Killarney* (released January 5, 1912).<sup>30</sup> Vitagraph sent a production unit to Jamaica in early 1910, releasing *Between Love and Honor* four months before *A Lad from Old Ireland*, in July 1910. An advertisement for the film boasts that the film was “photographed amid the beautiful scenery of Kingston, Jamaica.”<sup>31</sup> The Independent Moving Pictures Company (IMP) sent a production unit to Cuba in late 1910 / early 1911, and the Yankee Film Company soon followed suit, sending a troupe to Bermuda, Jamaica, and Cuba in early 1911.<sup>32</sup>

The trade press demonstrates that 1910 was a turning point in the film industry’s expansion of its location shooting efforts. Film companies can be seen trying to one-up each other in stories and advertisements about their traveling production troupes in the fall of 1910 and winter of 1911. One perceptive writer in *Moving Picture World* claimed that all this traveling production was evidence of a new stability for the industry and also characteristic of the global cross-currents of the new modern world:

To our mind this [far-flung production] is one more proof, if proof be needed, of the stability of the moving picture business as a whole. Shrewd business men have satisfied themselves that the demand for the picture instead of diminishing is likely to expand with the growth of the population. . . . Of course, there is nothing remarkable to this fact of manufacturers being located hundreds of thousands of miles from New York City. The apple that we ate this morning was probably from Oregon; there is no reason why the moving picture that we looked at last night should not also have been made in the same distant State. The telephone, the telegraph, the aeroplane, as well as the fast railroad are, to modern business economics, rapidly annihilating time and space.<sup>33</sup>

The O’Kalem unit was sent out for a third trip in 1912, but this time it made a longer production tour, beginning in Egypt and the Middle East and then moving north through Europe. This time, the troupe was dubbed the “El Kalems.” The trip lasted nearly a year, and numerous films were produced, including *Down through the Ages* (Olcott, 1912), along with several scenic and educational films including *Luxor, Egypt* (released May 29, 1912) and *Palestine* (released August

28, 1912).<sup>34</sup> *Moving Picture World* featured a photo showing the construction of a portable Kalem “Airdome” studio in Jerusalem, demonstrating how traveling production units aimed to replicate studio practices while on location.<sup>35</sup> The highlight of the trip was Kalem’s most ambitious film, *From the Manger to the Cross* (Olcott, 1912), a multireel extravaganza with a large cast and color tinting shot in Jerusalem, Nazareth, Galilee, and the Egyptian pyramids. The film was well received and became one of Kalem’s most profitable titles.<sup>36</sup>

Despite this expansion of shooting in far-flung locations, production outside the main hubs continued to be perceived as the exception rather than the norm in the early 1910s, and many filmmakers returned to New York and Chicago during the summer months. That began to change by 1912, as Southern California became increasingly popular as a permanent destination for film companies. By the mid-1910s, the geographical center of the film industry had shifted: what had formerly been understood as “remote” filming in California was transformed into a permanent central hub for the industry. A story in the *Los Angeles Times* explained as early as 1910, “The coming to Southern California by the picture firms is not a winter engagement, but will be an all-year enterprise. At first, they came here to avoid the snow and ice, but the bright quality of the sunshine and the number of clear days in which they may work, together with the variety of scenery, has all been found ideal and their making here is now permanent.”<sup>37</sup>

The American film industry relocated from the East to the West for several reasons, and this territorial shift had important consequences for the development of location shooting as a standard industry practice. Most film histories explain the move west as a result of four factors: (1) the mild climate of Southern California enabled the film industry to shoot year-round; (2) the varied topography of Southern California (from ocean to forest to desert) enabled the production of many different genres; (3) filmmakers wanted to be as far away from the Motion Picture Patents Company as possible (it took at least four days to travel from New York to Los Angeles by train); and (4) labor unions were weak in California at this time, which was appealing to the undercapitalized and frequently exploitative young industry. What seems symptomatic (but rarely commented on) about this list of factors is the ideology of manifest destiny and settler colonialism that undergirds it. It is time to acknowledge the ways in which the film industry’s move west and the stories it was able to tell using western locations rendered empire one of the dominant strands of Hollywood narratives.

By the end of the 1910s, there was a veritable gold rush of scenery afoot as filmmakers and studios sought to find ever-new landscapes to colonize with their cameras. The trade press spoke of “prospecting” for locations, envisioning landscapes as a natural resource to be exploited by the cinema. In a 1914 article for *Moving Picture World*, Jesse Lasky wrote, “We acquired a lease of a ranch of about 20,000 acres. Here is to be found some of the finest scenery in California.

Mountains rise to a height of 6,000 feet. On the top we can get snow, while at the base there is an abundance of tropical foliage. Included in this property are three or four acres of remarkable desert and cactus. . . . This setting has been available for ‘Cameo Kirby.’”<sup>38</sup> The photo accompanying this story shows Lasky and DeMille (probably Cecil B. and not William C., though it is hard to discern faces) “prospecting for locations” on horseback in the mountains, presumably at the ranch Lasky is describing.<sup>39</sup> However, the story of *Cameo Kirby*, based on a play of the same name, takes place in antebellum Mississippi, which makes this a substitute location and thus an odd title to brag about for its desert and cactus.<sup>40</sup> It seems possible that Lasky might be describing a location at Mount Palomar instead, where Cecil B. DeMille shot scenes for *The Squaw Man* in 1914.<sup>41</sup>

Regardless of whether Lasky was speaking accurately, this was a moment when the idea of location shooting took on one of its predominant functions: to visualize nature and natural scenery. Location shooting also takes place in urban locations, of course, as underscored by the first epigraph of this chapter. But audiences have long singled out location shooting for particular praise when it presents sweeping vistas of nature. The grandiosity of location shooting in the landscapes of the American West proved to be a marketable commodity when contrasted with the constricted vision of films shot inside the studios. Location shooting was not just a strategy for realism but a marketing concept.

#### THE YOUNG HOLLYWOOD STUDIOS: A DIVERSITY OF LOCATIONS

Studio location work had the potential to range across the globe; but in practice during the silent era, much location shooting took place in the Southwest, and most of that occurred within driving range of Hollywood. Wherever it took place, the operating principle of a location shoot was to control exterior locations as much as possible. This concept of “location” is not so much a realistic depiction of natural landscapes but a theatricalization of actually existing places. As Lou Strohm, location manager for Metro Pictures, wrote in 1922, “There are, in California, locations that because of their peculiar topography, are admirably adapted to the filming of scenes depicting far-distant places and lands. Carpenters and scene makers build sets out in the open location and bring to the place the appearance of the native soil or surroundings that are to be depicted.”<sup>42</sup> By 1917, as the studio system began to settle in as the dominant mode of production in American film, the history of location shooting shifted into a new phase. No longer can we break location shooting into the four-part taxonomy of early cinema: scenic, outdoor shooting, narrative integration, and substitute locations. While travel films continued to be produced throughout the silent era (they were now shown as part of the shorts program before the feature film), they were no longer one of the primary cinematic experiences of place. Instead, location

shooting became further embedded into narrative filmmaking practices, and it was transformed by its new California landscapes, where the substitute location came to be institutionalized.

While the studios were building increasingly large and more expensive indoor studios, they also walled off plots of land adjacent to their buildings for more controlled outdoor shooting on the back lot. Back lot filmmaking does not qualify as location shooting, but it does help to define what location shooting was not: by this time, location shooting meant more than just shooting outdoors. At the same time, the entire city of Los Angeles and its surrounding municipalities became one giant outdoor set for filmmakers, and this use of the rapidly industrializing city must be seen as the first and most common form of location shooting in the early studio era. In addition, the studios began to purchase or lease land on the far borders of Los Angeles for shooting westerns and other genres in the ranches, ravines, and mountains of the area. These peripheral studio properties, known as “movie ranches,” should be understood as a gray area between studio filmmaking and location shooting. Movie ranches and location shooting farther afield also demonstrate the pervasiveness of the substitute location, as California’s diverse regions were used to stand for a range of global settings. The studios soon formed location departments to scout locations in an efficient manner that fit within newly regimented modes of production. Production units were sent to far-flung locations around California and the Southwest, but these trips were now prescouted and planned ahead. Finally, although location shooting in foreign countries was still unusual in the late 1910s and early 1920s, there are some high-profile examples. I conclude this chapter with a brief consideration of *Ben-Hur* (Fred Niblo, 1925), a runaway big-budget feature shot mostly on location in Italy and perhaps the most high-profile example of silent-era location shooting in a foreign country. These practices—shooting in the streets of Los Angeles, movie ranches around the greater Los Angeles periphery, California as a double for the world, and foreign location shooting—are discussed in the remainder of this chapter.

#### IN AND AROUND LOS ANGELES: THE STUDIO ZONE

Thanks to mild weather and the often slapdash methods of early filmmaking, early Hollywood utilized a wide range of interior and exterior filmmaking spaces, often setting up shoots in makeshift open-air stages, in the road, or in whatever park or empty lot that seemed suitable. Indeed, some of the earliest companies such as Selig made films entirely outdoors upon their initial arrival in Los Angeles. From the start, filmmakers used the city of Los Angeles and its environs as their open-air movie studio. Slapstick comedies made by the Mack Sennett Studios and the Mutual Film Corporation were frequently shot on the streets. Films starring Charlie Chaplin, Roscoe “Fatty” Arbuckle, Buster Keaton, and Harold

Lloyd made great use of Los Angeles cityscapes in the late 1910s and early 1920s. These comedies, including *Tillie's Punctured Romance* (Sennett, 1914) and *Cops* (Keaton, 1922), are among the most famous films of the silent era, and numerous books and documentaries have traced their shooting locations.<sup>43</sup> Mark Shiel has discussed at length how silent comedy shaped the world's vision of Los Angeles as a place. He argues that the city's emergent sprawl was well suited for slapstick chase narratives in which characters traveled between two or more places. "In this way, the process of narrative integration found a city especially conducive to it because of its exceptional horizontality."<sup>44</sup>

At what point did the temporary and remote location work in Los Angeles (perceived as such by the home office in Chicago or New York) become reimagined as studio work conducted within the heart of the industry? While it may be impossible to locate a precise date for this shift from the perception of Los Angeles as a faraway location to the epicenter of the moviemaking universe, one development—the formation of the so-called studio zone—can illustrate how things changed along the way. Today the term "studio zone" or "thirty-mile zone" (TMZ) refers to the so-called thirty-mile zone in which most studio filmmaking occurs; outside this zone, permitting is different and production costs are higher. The mythology of the studio zone has yet to be thoroughly analyzed by film historians, and there is a great deal of imprecise information that circulates.<sup>45</sup> The first official version of the studio zone—initially inside a six-mile radius centered at Fifth and Rossmore Streets in what is now the Mid-Wilshire district—was established in 1934 in order to establish pay rates for extras.<sup>46</sup> By the 1970s, its expansion to a thirty-mile radius was ratified by all the industry's labor unions. Today the zone is centered on the corners of Beverly Boulevard and La Cienega Boulevard in West Hollywood (three and a half miles west of its original location), and it is used to establish per diem rates and driving distances for union crew members.<sup>47</sup> But a brief zoning incident in 1917 demonstrates that in the silent era, the "studio zone" could have quite a different meaning. As the growing city of Los Angeles issued zoning ordinances in the 1910s, the location of the movie studios was examined by the city from the perspective of property values. While many residents and businesses tolerated or even appreciated the film industry, some property owners felt that the movie studios were an unwelcome presence that should be moved to the periphery of the city.

In March 1917, *Moving Picture World* noted, "Establishment of a moving picture studio zone in Hollywood may be recommended by the City Council. The residents of East Hollywood and of the Sunset Boulevard and Western avenue districts have petitioned the council to forbid the moving picture people from operating in the residential districts to the deterioration of property values, and the peace and attractiveness of the district."<sup>48</sup> The next week, the same journal explained that the residents of Hollywood found that "motion picture studios are more or less of a nuisance and should be restricted in a zone by themselves."<sup>49</sup>

In other words, some locals were fed up with studios located in their neighborhoods and movies being made on city streets.

This first “studio zone” proposed in Los Angeles was envisioned as a film-making sector specifically relocated away from the Hollywood district and moved off the city streets. The Association of Hollywood Property Owners successfully lobbied the Los Angeles City Council to consider an ordinance creating a Moving Picture Zone outside the city limits. A March 1917 article in *Motion Picture News* explained, “It is the claim of the property owners that studios have caused a depreciation of the values of real estate adjoining the film companies’ plants.”<sup>50</sup> For a couple of months, it was unclear if the city would pass or enforce the ordinance. A May article in *Motion Picture Magazine* explained that “the Los Angeles film colony is all agog because the City Council has passed an ordinance creating a Moving Picture Zone,” listing eight studios that might be forced to move.<sup>51</sup> But the ordinance was not universally supported, and the *Los Angeles Times* reported on a citizens’ protest against the ordinance as early as February.<sup>52</sup> The ordinance was evidently not passed or never enforced, for the Hollywood studios did not move, and the issue disappears from the press after spring 1917.

This brief episode—and the failure of property owners to forcefully relocate the film studios outside the city limits—would have probably contributed to a sense of permanence for the fledgling film industry. By the mid-1920s, the whole debate seems to have been forgotten, and the concept of a “studio zone” had become a term of pride rather than opprobrium.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, most business leaders and residents in the 1910s and 1920s welcomed the movie industry, and many moved there expressly to work in it. While the changing perception of Los Angeles as a center rather than a periphery was certainly gradual (and indeed it continues to this day), this 1917 studio zone episode can serve to mark a turning point for the idea of Los Angeles as a home for the film industry.

#### SILENT-ERA STUDIO LOCATION DEPARTMENTS AND PRACTICES

The standard idea of “location shooting” began to emerge as an industrial concept in the mid-1910s, and by the 1920s, location shooting had been thoroughly absorbed into studio production practices. In a 1918 filmmaking manual entitled *How Motion Pictures Are Made*, Homer Croy described the newly emergent job of the “location man” and his professional tasks:

If an exterior is chosen . . . it has been selected in advance by the “location man” and the director. To the former falls the duty of familiarizing himself with all spots in his territory that may have the least photographic appeal. This he accomplishes by riding around, often on a motorcycle, with a camera slung over his shoulder, making photographs of possible locations. Picturesque spots

form only a small part of the locations he must bring back; he has to have on his finger-tips ravines, brick-yards, gnarled trees, railroad stations and crossings, oil-wells, palm-trees, alkalai, and dead men's curves. The photographs are filed away alphabetically, so that when the director is ready to cast his exteriors he has but to turn through the photographs instead of having to go out himself and spend hours looking up suitable locations.<sup>54</sup>

Studio location departments began to form in the early 1920s as a key component of the regularized, compartmentalized work flow of the studio system. Fred Harris was appointed location director at Famous Players–Lasky in January 1921, and Lou Strohm began working as location manager for Metro Pictures in June of that same year.<sup>55</sup> Strohm published an article describing the job of location manager in 1922. He explained, “In bygone days the director was wont to ride about in a fast automobile seeking his own locations. This necessitated the spending of much valuable time. Today, whenever the location man is on tour, and he comes across a spot that appears to hold valuable possibilities for future location for a given purpose, it is immediately photographed. . . . Modern methods of motion picture producing demand that locations all be kept in elaborate index files.”<sup>56</sup> As these accounts attest, suitable locations were photographed, organized by category, and placed into file cabinets. What these descriptions do not tell us is how a location was determined to be potentially valuable for location shooting and how these photographs were organized.<sup>57</sup> We can infer that the location man chose sites on the basis of pictorial elements as well as budgetary concerns. Availability and permissions would also have been taken into account, although the legal barriers to shooting on location were unstandardized at this time. The professionalization of the “location man,” like the professionalization of many other studio jobs in the 1920s, is an effect of the studio system’s industrial mode of production, which operated on then-new principles of efficient business management.

Although we lack location managers’ cataloging metadata today, it is clear that by the early 1920s, they were attempting to systematically gather photos and information for every imaginable type of location. A 1927 article on “the unsung location man” explained that a location manager “must think of—and have plenty of pictures of—probably half a dozen different locations, for different directors, at the same time. He must have sufficient knowledge of the country to be able to tell one director where he can find a Japanese fishing village, another a Zulu village from the heart of Africa, another a typical Long Island estate, and whatnot for the rest of them.”<sup>58</sup> These kinds of grab-bag lists emphasizing the variety of locations used in film are common in promotional accounts of moviemaking in the 1920s (and beyond). What these lists of exotic locations mask, however, is the way the studio standardized and organized its potential locations into generic categories in order to make efficient use of them in its work flow.



Figure 1.2. “How They Pick Those Beautiful Locations,” *Picture-Play*, September 1925, 97.

A 1925 promotional photo in *Picture-Play* magazine shows how location managers such as Fred Harris were essentially cataloging locations by type and place (see figure 1.2). The photo, captioned “How They Pick Those Beautiful Locations,” shows Harris standing before dozens of location photos pinned up on a wall. As the photo implies, the location manager’s job was not just to organize and systematize the world’s geographies but also to maintain a running inventory of architecture, cityscapes, small towns, parks, and other potentially cinematic views. These locations could be used as primary shooting locations or filmed as B-roll for later use as stock footage. In this way, the location manager resembles

not only a cataloging librarian but also the actuality filmmakers of early cinema, who also attempted to film and categorize locations around the world. By 1927, there were enough location managers in place to establish a Motion Picture Location Managers' Association. Although not a guild, the small group (which had just over a dozen members) met monthly to discuss matters of business. The Location Managers' Association officers were R. C. Moore of the DeMille Studios (president), Jack Lawton of Universal Studios (vice president), and Fred Harris of the Lasky Studios (secretary-treasurer).<sup>59</sup> According to one article, this organization “was formed primarily to establish a better contact between the property owner, the public official and the motion picture studio.”<sup>60</sup>

The general operating principle of location shooting in the studio era was to ensure a smooth, efficient, and cost-effective shoot by controlling the location and reproducing studio conditions as much as possible. Indeed, Jacobson's notion of the Hollywood back lot as “the studio beyond the studio” can be extended to all location work undertaken by film studios during the studio era.<sup>61</sup> As Croy explained in his 1918 filmmaking manual, “For the photographing of so simple a scene as an exterior often half a dozen men are needed” (see figure 1.3).<sup>62</sup> The photo accompanying this caption reveals the elaborate apparatus necessary to shoot Douglas Fairbanks on location, including a camera crew on a raised platform with a light-reflecting white canvas. It is important to understand that location shooting—particularly in wilderness locations—frequently required that substantial alterations be made to the site. Location work often involved the building of sets on location, as well as the trimming back and/or enhancement

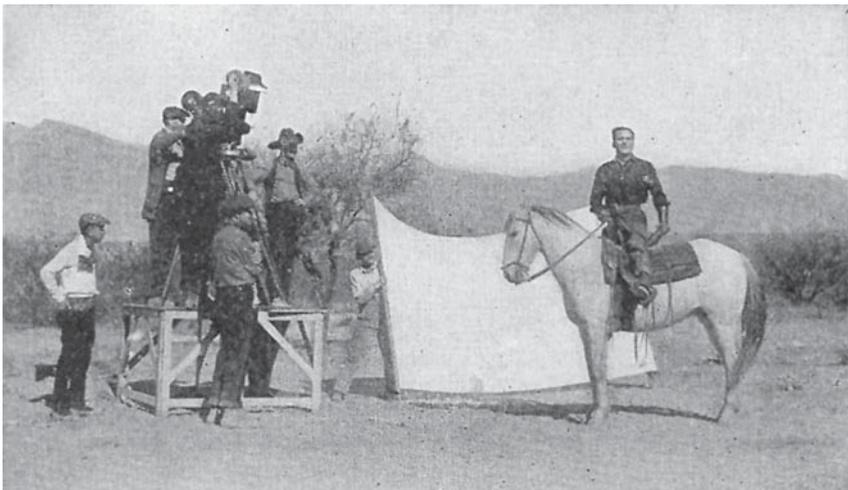


Figure 1.3. “For the photographing of so simple a scene as an exterior often half a dozen men are needed. Douglas Fairbanks is shown on horseback.” Homer Croy, *How Motion Pictures Are Made* (New York: Harper, 1918), 135.

of plants on the site. “Carpenters and scene makers build sets out in the open location and bring to the place the appearance of the native soil or surroundings that are to be depicted,” one 1922 filmmaking manual explained.<sup>63</sup> It was not enough just to go to a location; paradoxically, a location typically needed artificial enhancement to make it look like itself.

Significant studio resources were devoted to transporting equipment, props, costumes, crew, actors, food, and drink to off-studio locations. Already in the 1910s, transportation was becoming an essential component of the studio location shoot. In 1917, the Ince Culver City studio announced the addition of “two large carry-all automobiles” to its equipment for the express purpose of transporting cast and crew to exterior locations.<sup>64</sup> As productions grew in size and scope, studios formed transportation departments to organize this component of production labor. For example, in 1935, Ward Rawlings, the head of transportation at Columbia Pictures, estimated that his studio vehicles covered an average of 250,000 miles annually in the transportation of materials to off-studio locations within driving range across town or within Southern California.<sup>65</sup> Throughout the silent era and beyond, however, trains were still used as the primary means of transporting cast, crew, and equipment to more distant locations. When Raoul Walsh shot his location extravaganza *The Big Trail* in seven different western states in 1930, his giant cast, crew, and equipment apparatus traveled by train.

Depending on the picture and the place, location shooting could be cost-effective, or it might add a sizeable percentage to a film’s budget. Indeed, it is difficult for the historian to generalize about location shooting costs in the early studio era because itemized budgets rarely survive for many of these films. Some people claimed that location shooting was a cost-saving measure, as in a 1927 article boasting that a location shoot “often means the saving of thousands of dollars which would otherwise have to be spent for sets. In this, a good location man can often save his company many times his salary every month.”<sup>66</sup> On the other hand, location shooting was clearly an expensive practice. A 1935 *Los Angeles Times* article marveled at the huge fees for location shooting (from \$750 to \$1,500 per day) that were regularly paid out by the studios to local businesses and residents in towns all over California to cover costs such as lodging, food, lumber, and local transportation. The article’s subtitle proudly trumpeted the boon to local economies, proclaiming, “Sonora, Bear Valley, Kernville, Jacumba Benefit from Recent Films; \$1,000,000 to Be Spent Outdoors Next Year.”<sup>67</sup> There was no guarantee that each location shoot would bring a return on this kind of investment, but by this time, it was an accepted practice. Within the highly capitalized, mature studio system, each film was simply one component of a larger annual slate of titles. Location shooting for particular subjects was considered necessary to create “authenticity,” and these expenses could be absorbed by the studio as a whole. The fact that the practice was so common indicates that the studios considered it worth the expense.

## CALIFORNIA AS THE WORLD

By the 1920s, location shooting in Los Angeles, on the movie ranches, and across Southern California was a regular component of studio filmmaking. The substitute location—in which California settings were rendered in such a way that they could stand for locations around the world—became a regularized part of the industry. More distant location work was reserved for films with bigger budgets and stars. Many of the most famous films of the 1920s rely heavily on location shooting, including *The Covered Wagon* (James Cruze, 1923), *The Iron Horse* (John Ford, 1924), *The Gold Rush* (Charlie Chaplin, 1925), *The General* (Clyde Bruckman and Buster Keaton, 1926), and *The Wind* (Victor Sjöström, 1928). Many of the most famous silent-era documentaries also depended on foreign location work, including *Nanook of the North* (Robert Flaherty, 1922), *Grass* (Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack, 1925), *Chang* (Cooper and Schoedsack, 1927), and *Tabu* (F. W. Murnau, 1931). Many less famous films were also shot on location in this period, of course, and scenic films continued to be made, including a series called “Rothacker Outdoor Pictures” that included titles such as *Bad Men and Good Scenery* (1918).<sup>68</sup> While a complete filmography of silent-era films shot on location lies beyond the scope of this chapter, an informal survey of titles demonstrates that most of the films shot on location in this period used the western United States, and specifically California, as a substitute location. As one filmmaking manual put it, “There are, in California, locations that because of their particular topography, are admirably adapted to the filming of scenes depicting far-distant places and lands. . . . Do you imagine a company would care to send its players to that distant location [Banff, Canada] when a similar one might be found in the closely lying Sierra Nevada mountains?”<sup>69</sup>

Indeed, more than one map circulated in which California was overlaid with names of other places it could represent. For example, a 1920s Paramount studio location map shows that the Mojave Desert could be used to represent the Sahara Desert, the Sacramento River could be used for the Mississippi River, and the canals of Venice on the west side of Los Angeles could be used to depict Venice, Italy (see figure 1.4).<sup>70</sup> More surprisingly, the map suggests that the Central Valley could be used for the Swiss Alps and that Sacramento could stand in for New England. These suggestions feel almost like boasts from the California Chamber of Commerce; but they were certainly not jests, for these kinds of place combinations were used with regularity by the resourceful studio location managers. The goal was to keep costs low while still aiming for authenticity of place, and the practice of the substitute location fit the bill on both counts. Location “doubles” were a cause for praise and wonder; it was not a problem to reveal this technique but instead just another instance of movie magic at work.<sup>71</sup> In sum, studio practices institutionalized the substitute location in the 1920s.

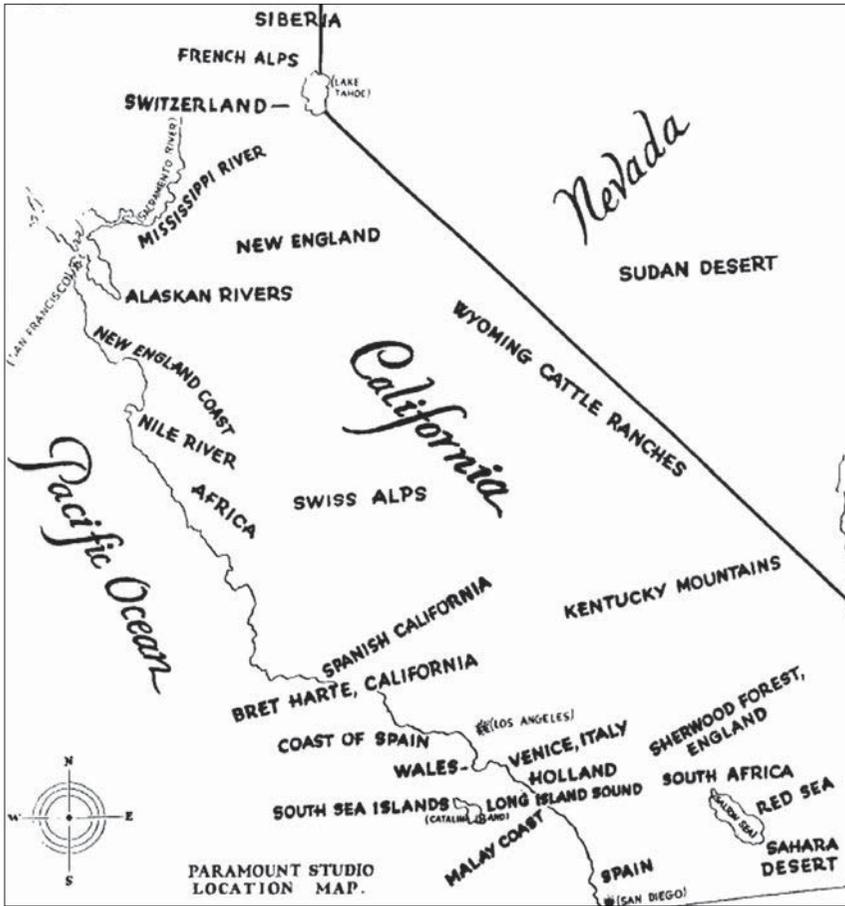


Figure 1.4. Paramount studio location map. From *The Motion Picture Industry as a Basis for Bond Financing* (Halsey, Stuart, 1927), 10; reproduced in Tino Balio, ed., *The American Film Industry* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1976), 202.

While location shooting was mostly confined to domestic geographies in the early studio era, as the industry grew, so did its foreign location shooting ambitions. *Ben-Hur* was not the only production shot on location in Europe in the 1920s, but it is perhaps the most famous. The film's disastrous production history and ultimate box-office triumph can dramatize some of the difficulties and contradictions of foreign location shooting in the silent era. *Ben-Hur* was initiated in 1922 but not completed until 1925. Its location shoot in Italy stalled out repeatedly due to studio mismanagement and Italian labor disputes and eventually stretched out over two years, resulting in endless expenditures and poor-quality footage, much of which had to be reshot after the production returned to Hollywood. During the shoot in Italy, the Goldwyn company, which had originated

the project, was purchased by Metro Pictures Corporation, and after one more merger, the newly formed Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) company took over the production in 1924. MGM replaced much of *Ben-Hur*'s cast and crew and sent over Fred Niblo as the new director and Ramon Novarro as the new star, but little of the footage shot on location in Italy was used in the final cut of the film.

*Ben-Hur* has been much written about, and accounts differ on why the decision was made to shoot it on location in Italy. Kevin Brownlow's classic account in *The Parade's Gone By* attributes the decision to June Mathis, the film's initial screenwriter and one of the most powerful figures in Hollywood in 1922 when the project was initiated.<sup>72</sup> However, as a recent article by Thomas J. Slater argues, "Mathis became a scapegoat for her failed production of *Ben-Hur*."<sup>73</sup> While in Italy, Mathis was sidelined (she was not even allowed on the set), and she was fired from the production when MGM took over. Moreover, archival records indicate that the Goldwyn company originally thought it would be cheaper to film on location in Europe than at home in the studio. The producer J. J. Cohn discussed in an oral history many years later what happened after his initial location scouting trip in Europe: "I came back, and I said, 'There are only two ways,' and I was inexperienced, I was a kid almost, then, and I said, 'Make the picture one of two ways. Let it be made in a hurry, in Vienna, or some such place for 300 thousand, 400 thousand, or spend a million two [\$1.2 million] here [in California]."<sup>74</sup> A page in the MGM *Ben-Hur* archival materials itemizes numerous early production developments in June 1922, including these two items listed one after the other:

Made budget at studio for American production—\$1,500,000, conservatively \$1,300,000.

Numerous wires regarding producing abroad and possibility of picture being made in Italy for \$500,000.<sup>75</sup>

Whatever the reason for going on location (and there seem to have been multiple factors), the Italian shoot quickly spiraled out of control and became an unmitigated disaster. Even after Mathis was fired and Niblo was put in charge, the shoot continued to suffer from technical problems and an ongoing Italian labor dispute, which resulted in months of shooting delays, which were logged into the daily production records. A cable from Niblo to Louis B. Mayer soon after his arrival in late June captures some of the desperation on the shoot: "Condition serious must rush work before November rain; no sets or lights available before August 1st. 200 reels film wasted; bad photography terrible action; send Seitz Gaudio or Edeson quick; also best miniature and trick effect cameraman available."<sup>76</sup> Between August 13 and December 9, 1924, almost every entry in the daily production records contains some "reason for delay" logged into the account, ranging from "fascisti trouble" to "set not satisfactory" to "big delay on account of power off owing to outbreak of fire" to "generators not working," along with

many public holidays listed.<sup>77</sup> In short, the American studio personnel could not gain control over the Italian labor force, and the studio did not want to give up on the money it had already invested in the production. The cast and crew were not recalled to Los Angeles until January 1925. In the end, only a few scenes from the two-year Italian shoot that ended up in the final film convey an authentic sense of place—the sea battle in particular, although the difficulties encountered during the shooting of that sequence necessitated the use of miniature models. The film’s most famous sequence, the chariot race, was shot on a specially built outdoor set near the MGM studio lot in Culver City in spring 1925.

*Ben-Hur* became a huge hit and ended up grossing millions of dollars worldwide. But millions had been spent on the film’s runaway location shoot in Italy, and the most noteworthy scene had been shot on a Hollywood set. While location shooting was a necessary tool for the silent era’s style of realism, in the end, it seems that authenticity of place often functioned as just another spectacle, easily rivaled by other cinematic tricks such as action sequences and special effects. *Ben-Hur*’s crowning, excessive, and even ironic example of cinematic location seems an appropriate place to end this account of location shooting in the silent era. As *Ben-Hur* demonstrates, within the studio system, realistic spectacle often proved easier to achieve on the back lot than in the authentic location. When distant location shoots were undertaken for specialty features, the effort and difficulty involved became a part of the film’s publicity, marketing strategy, and legend.

By the mid-1920s, Hollywood had regularized methods of production in which believable locations could be most efficiently recreated locally or just a little farther afield. In subsequent decades, new technologies for representing locations were developed and new styles of realism emerged, but the basic idea of using artifice to enhance nature and render “realistic” locations remained the bedrock of the Hollywood mode of production throughout the studio era. Although audiences have understood all along that filmmakers use technology to produce “equipment-free” images of cinematic location, audiences also quickly became familiar with repressing that knowledge. Indeed, of all the location shooting practices established in the silent era, one of the most important may have been an audience practice: the pleasure of playing along with artifice in the service of realism.

#### NOTES

For their help obtaining research materials and tracking down countless tips for this chapter, I would like to thank Ned Comstock at the USC Cinematic Arts Library and the staff of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences’ Margaret Herrick Library. *Epigraphs*: David S. Hulfish, *Cyclopedia of Motion-Picture Work: A General Reference Work* (Chicago: American Technical Society, 1911), 7; Cecil B. DeMille, “First Experiences before the Camera,” *New York Dramatic Mirror*, January 14, 1914, quoted in Simon Louvish, *Cecil B. DeMille: A Life in Art* (New York: St. Martin’s, 2007), 66–67.

1. Scott Eyman, *Empire of Dreams: The Epic Life of Cecil B. DeMille* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010), 69. Robert S. Birchard writes, “Stories in the trade paper *Moving Picture World* told of the Lasky company’s travels to Utah, Arizona, and Wyoming in search of authentic scenery, but DeMille and company never left Southern California.” Birchard, *Cecil B. DeMille’s Hollywood* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2004), 8.
2. For a useful account of place substitution in a very different context (the 2007 film *The Kite Runner*), see Mark B. Sandberg, “Location, ‘Location’: On the Plausibility of Place Substitution,” in *Silent Cinema and the Politics of Space*, ed. Jennifer M. Bean, Anupama Kapse, and Laura Horak (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 23–46.
3. Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,” trans. Edmund Jephcott and Harry Zohn, in “*The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility*” and *Other Writings on Media* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 35.
4. Brian R. Jacobson, *Studios before the System: Architecture, Technology, and the Emergence of Cinematic Space* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 99.
5. Jacobson has traced the development of early glass-walled film studios, which began in France with Georges Méliès’s glass-and-iron studio in 1897. In the United Kingdom, R. W. Paul built a glass studio in 1898, followed by G. A. Smith in 1899 and Cecil Hepworth in 1900. Edwin S. Porter built the first American glass-and-iron studio in 1901, and Ferdinand Zecca built a glass studio for Pathé in France in 1902. Jacobson, *Studios before the System*, 68.
6. Hulfish, *Cyclopedia of Motion-Picture Work*, 35.
7. This film, like all Edison’s early output, was deposited as a paper print for copyright purposes at the Library of Congress, which is why we have the remarkable ability to view it today at [www.loc.gov/item/00694124](http://www.loc.gov/item/00694124).
8. *Buffalo Courier*, June 7, 1896, 10, quoted in Charles Musser, *Edison Motion Pictures, 1890–1900: An Annotated Filmography* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997), 203.
9. American Mutoscope & Biograph Company, *Picture Catalogue* (New York: AM&B, 1902).
10. Thomas Bedding, “Photographing Outdoor Subjects,” *Moving Picture World*, May 22, 1909, 666.
11. AM&B, *Picture Catalogue*, 189.
12. *Waterfall in the Catskills* is available for viewing on the Library of Congress website at [www.loc.gov/item/00694329/](http://www.loc.gov/item/00694329/).
13. See Jennifer Lynn Peterson, *Education in the School of Dreams: Travelogues and Early Nonfiction Film* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).
14. *How It Feels to Be Run Over* can be readily found on YouTube, for example at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=m6F1VAPzvK](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m6F1VAPzvK).
15. H. Kent Webster, “Little Stories of Great Films,” *Nickelodeon*, August 15, 1910, 96.
16. Thomas Bedding, “The Modern Way in Moving Picture Making,” *Moving Picture World*, March 27, 1909, 360.
17. *Execution of Czolgosz with Panorama of Auburn Prison* is available for viewing on the Library of Congress website at [www.loc.gov/item/00694362/](http://www.loc.gov/item/00694362/).
18. Charles Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 320.
19. *European Rest Cure* is available for viewing on the Library of Congress website at [www.loc.gov/item/00694197/](http://www.loc.gov/item/00694197/).
20. *The Great Train Robbery*, Edison promotional pamphlet no. 201, 1903.
21. Scott Simmon, *The Invention of the Western Film: A Cultural History of the Genre’s First Half-Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 15.
22. Tom Gunning, *D. W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film: The Early Years at Biograph* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 70.
23. *The Country Doctor* can be readily found on YouTube, for example at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=ks2e22FeNhq](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ks2e22FeNhq).

24. Gunning, *D. W. Griffith*, 215.
25. Harry C. Carr, "Looking Backward with Ben," *Photoplay*, December 1918, 61.
26. For the definitive account of Essanay, see David Kiehn, *Broncho Billy and the Essanay Film Company* (Berkeley, CA: Farwell Books, 2003).
27. Kiehn, *Broncho Billy*, 302–6. A print of *The Mexican's Faith* is held at the National Film and Television Archive in London, and a print of *Aviation at Los Angeles, California* is held at the George Eastman House.
28. Eileen Bowser, *The Transformation of Cinema: 1907–1915* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 149.
29. Ad for *The Lad from Old Ireland* in *Film Index*, November 12, 1910, 34.
30. Today, *A Lad from Old Ireland* is sometimes said to be the first American film shot on location in a foreign country. However, this claim, like many "firsts," is off base, not only because of the many scenic films shot on location around the world since the 1890s but because even in the realm of fiction film production, this claim is untrue. Among the many scenic films shot on location since the 1890s, we might separate out a subcategory of films showing tourists, such as *Tourists Starting for Canton* (Edison, 1898), made when traveling American camera operators filmed English tourists abroad. See the entry for this title in Musser, *Edison Motion Pictures*.
31. Ad for *Between Love and Honor* in *Film Index*, July 19, 1910, 32.
32. IMP advertisement, *Moving Picture World*, January 21, 1911, 168; "Of Interest to the Trade," *Nickelodeon*, February 4, 1911, 140.
33. "The 'IMP' Company Invades Cuba," *Moving Picture World*, January 21, 1911, 146.
34. Other scenic and educational releases by Kalem shot on this same trip include *Egyptian Sports*, *Ancient Temples of Egypt, from Jerusalem to the Dead Sea*, *The Ancient Port of Jaffa*, and *Along the River Nile*. For a filmography of travelogues released in the United States between 1910 and 1914, see Jennifer Peterson, "World Pictures: Travelogue Films and the Lure of the Exotic, 1890–1920" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1999), appendix A, table 1.
35. Photo of Kalem's portable "Airdome" studio in Jerusalem in *Moving Picture World*, July 6, 1912. Also see Jacobson, *Studios before the System*, 175–76, for a brief description and another photo of Kalem's "Airdome" studio. The term "airdome" was also used to describe open-air theaters in this period. One writer in *Motography* explained, "An airdome is simply an outdoor moving picture show that is run on practically the same lines as the old summer garden, and is therefore essentially a fair-weather show." John B. Rathbun, "Motion Picture Making and Exhibiting," *Motography*, July 26, 1913, 70. See also Hulfish, *Cyclopedia of Motion-Picture Work*, 31.
36. John J. McGowan, "The 'O'Kalems' and the 'El Kalems,'" in *J. P. McGowan: Biography of a Hollywood Pioneer* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2005), 33–56.
37. "In the Motion Picture Swim," *Los Angeles Times*, February 1, 1910, 14.
38. "Jesse L. Lasky Returns from Coast," *Moving Picture World*, December 12, 1914, 1501.
39. Photo of "Lasky and De Mille Prospecting for Locations," in *Moving Picture World*, December 12, 1914, 1501. This photo is reproduced in Jacobson, *Studios before the System*, 186.
40. The 1914 version of *Cameo Kirby* appears to be lost; John Ford directed a 1923 version, which does not make much use of landscape or location.
41. Further research is needed on Lasky's lease of this particular movie ranch, for it may have been temporary or it may have been merely apocryphal. Lasky eventually came to own two other, more famous movie ranches in the San Fernando Valley and the Santa Monica Mountains, neither of which contains a six-thousand-foot mountain.
42. Lou Strohm, "The Location Man: What You Must Know to Become One," in *Opportunities in the Motion Picture Industry* (Los Angeles: Photoplay Research Society, 1922), 86.
43. See for example John Bengston, *Silent Echoes: Discovering Early Hollywood through the Films of Buster Keaton* (Santa Monica, CA: Santa Monica Press, 2000); and Bengston, *Silent Traces: Discovering Early Hollywood through the Films of Charlie Chaplin* (Santa Monica, CA: Santa Monica Press, 2006).

44. Mark Shiel, *Hollywood Cinema and the Real Los Angeles* (London: Reaktion Books, 2012), 85.

45. See for example this online article, which uses one archival source but interprets it incorrectly: Zelda Roland, “Studio Labor and the Origins of Hollywood’s Thirty-Mile Zone, or TMZ,” KCET website, March 10, 2016, [www.kcet.org/shows/lost-la/studio-labor-and-the-origins-of-hollywoods-thirty-mile-zone-or-tmz](http://www.kcet.org/shows/lost-la/studio-labor-and-the-origins-of-hollywoods-thirty-mile-zone-or-tmz).

46. “The rules establish a normal working day of eight hours. . . . Other rules . . . define the Los Angeles studio zone as all territory within a radius of six miles from the intersection of 5th and Rossmore Sts., Los Angeles.” “Discover NRA Rules on Extras Already Approved,” *Motion Picture Daily*, October 4, 1934, 6.

47. California Film Commission, “Locations: Studio Zones, Permit Offices & Fees,” accessed July 25, 2018, <http://film.ca.gov/locations/studio-zones/>.

48. “Los Angeles Film Brevities,” *Moving Picture World*, March 3, 1917, 1365 (noncapitalization of “avenue” in the original).

49. “Biggest Industry of Southern California,” *Moving Picture World*, March 10, 1917, 1608.

50. “West Coast Studios,” *Motion Picture News*, March 31, 1917, 2004.

51. “Little Whisperings from Everywhere in Playerdom,” *Motion Picture Magazine*, May 1917, 124.

52. “Citizens Protest. Oppose ‘Movie’ Zone,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 15, 1917, 6.

53. For example, in a *Photoplay* story from 1927, Carl Laemmle is shown with some chickens at his “model chicken ranch at Universal City, in the heart of the studio zone.” The story is meant to present a humorous contrast, thus demonstrating that barnyard animals have no place in the glamorous world now conjured up by the term “studio zone.” Terry Ramsaye, “Little Journeys to the Homes of Famous Film Magnates,” *Photoplay*, June 1927, 33.

54. Homer Croy, *How Motion Pictures Are Made* (New York: Harper, 1918), 120–21.

55. “Lasky Studio Has New Location Director,” *Motion Picture News*, January 15, 1921, 716; Fred Schader, “Coast Film Notes,” *Variety*, June 24, 1921, 35.

56. Strohm, “Location Man,” 86.

57. Surviving location photos from the Fox Film Corporation Picture Background Stills Collection at UCLA (from the post–World War II era) have been organized by the studio into general categories such as “Cabins—Mountains,” “Desert Mountains and Trees,” “Residential backyards” and “Skyline Roof Tops.” Some specific locations are also listed, such as “African Homes” and “Ottawa—snow”; but the categories are not systematic, and the collection is probably not representative of all the materials at the location manager’s disposal. Moreover, these Fox location photos are from the 1950s (although I was able to positively identify at least one location still from a 1945 production). Nonetheless, it seems likely that similar categorizations were in use well before that time. Collection of Motion Picture Background Stills, 1950–1960, Collection 1188, Fox Film Corporation, UCLA Special Collections, UCLA Library, Los Angeles, CA.

58. H. M. Ayres, “The Unsung Location Man,” *Hollywood Vagabond*, September 22, 1927, 8.

59. In addition to Moore, Lawton, and Harris, ten other members are named in this article. Ayres, “Unsung Location Man,” 9. A listing in the 1928 *Film Daily Yearbook* lists four officers, twelve members, and two honorary members. *Film Daily Yearbook, 1928* (New York: John Alicoate, 1928), 524.

60. Ayres, “Unsung Location Man,” 8. According to this article, the Location Managers’ Association also fostered “a spirit of camaraderie” that resulted in the sharing of locations between managers at different studios, established a system for charitable payments to help persuade owners of “finer locations” to allow the use of their properties, and held frequent banquets for public officials to straighten out misunderstandings and pave the way for future location shoots (8–9).

61. Jacobson, *Studios before the System*, chap. 5, “Studios beyond the Studio,” 168–200.

62. Croy, *How Motion Pictures Are Made*, 135.
63. Strohm, "Location Man," 86.
64. J. C. Jessen, "In and Out of West Coast Studios," *Motion Picture News*, March 10, 1917, 1539.
65. Fanya Grahame, "Efficiency of Columbia's Transportation Department Is Tested by Many Simultaneous Locations," *Motion Picture Studio Insider* 1, no. 1 (1935): 47.
66. Ayres, "Unsung Location Man," 8.
67. Philip K. Scheuer, "California Towns Get Rich as Hollywood 'Locations,'" *Los Angeles Times*, October 13, 1935, A1.
68. Numerous trade-press stories describe this series. See for example "Rothacker 'Outdoors' by Exhibitors' Mutual," *Motion Picture News*, December 14, 1918, 3555.
69. Strohm, "Location Man," 86–87.
70. Another of these California-as-the-world maps was published in the *Los Angeles Times* in 1934. See "Around the World in California," *Los Angeles Times*, March 4, 1934.
71. "'Doubles' Found for Locations in Many Places," *Los Angeles Times*, January 26, 1930.
72. Kevin Brownlow, "The Heroic Fiasco—*Ben-Hur*," in *The Parade's Gone By* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 389.
73. Thomas J. Slater, "June Mathis's *Ben-Hur*: A Tale of Corporate Change and the Decline of Women's Influence in Hollywood," in *Bigger than "Ben-Hur": The Book, Its Adaptations, and Their Audiences*, ed. Barbara Ryan and Milette Shamir (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2016), 119.
74. Rudy Behlmer, "Oral History with J. J. (Joe) Cohn" (1987), unpublished manuscript, 51–52, *Ben-Hur* Production Information, MGM Collection, University of Southern California Special Collections, USC Libraries, Los Angeles, CA (hereafter MGM Collection).
75. Studio record itemizing early production developments in June 1922, n.p., MGM Collection.
76. Fred Niblo to Louis B. Mayer, cable, July 4, 1924, MGM Collection.
77. Days in Production, August 13–December 9, 1924, n.p., MGM Collection.