

# Funny Business

Silent Comedies and Cartoons

Tuesday, May 14, 2013

Grand Illusion Cinema

The Sprocket Society  
Seattle, WA

## Alice Comedies

### *Alice Rattled by Rats*

Released November 15, 1925  
M.J. Winkler Productions

Directed and written by Walt Disney. Animated by Ub Iwerks, Rollin Ham Hamilton, Thurston Harper, Hugh Harman, & Rudolf Ising. Produced by Margaret J. Winkler

With Margie Gay as Alice.

Music and effects soundtrack added by Raytone Productions, 1930



Left to protect Alice's house, Julius the cat soon falls into a vat of home-brew liquor in the basement and drinks himself into oblivion. The rats, free to play, entertain themselves by dancing, playing phonograph records, cavorting with the player piano, and using the bathtub for a swimming pool. Soon the party gets completely out of control. (Why Alice was brewing alcohol in her basement remains an open question.)

“Speaking of his studio in later years, Disney was fond of saying that ‘it all started with a little mouse’ – but in fact the foundation was laid in 1924 by a little girl.”  
– Merritt & Kaufman, *Walt in Wonderland*

Young Walt Disney broke into the movie business in Kansas City, as an illustrator for a company that produced glass slides and advertising shorts for theaters. Along with his buddy Fred Harman, he struck out on his own, hoping to jump-start their new company with a partly-animated comical short called *Laugh-O-Grams*, produced for the influential local theater owner, Frank L. Newman. This was successful enough that they were able to secure funding to hire additional animators, including now-legendary pioneers Ubbe “Ub” Iwerks, Hugh Harman, Rudolph Ising, and Friz Freleng. Seven fairy tale cartoons were produced in 1922, but the sudden bankruptcy of their distributor left the young studio on the brink of ruin. A local dentist then offered Disney \$500 to produce a live action short on dental hygiene. This last scrap of cash was used to help pay for a film called *Alice's Wonderland*, just as the Laugh-O-Gram company collapsed in its own bankruptcy in 1923.

Disney's *Alice* film “borrowed” an idea from Max and Dave Fleischer's highly successful Koko the Clown cartoons, which blended animation into live action scenes. But what Disney did was to take a live action actor (the young Virginia Davis) and place her in an otherwise all-animated world. While this first *Alice* film could not be sold into distribution because it was tangled in the bankruptcy, Disney used it as a demonstration reel. He caught the interest of prominent cartoon distributor Margaret J. Winkler, who agreed to bankroll new *Alice* films. After relocating to Hollywood, Disney assembled a new studio, brought his old animators and Virginia Davis out from Kansas, and produced what proved to be a successful series of 56 cartoons made between 1924 and 1927. Earlier films used a great deal of live action, with often impressive results, but the cost and time required soon led to reducing this aspect to little more than bookend segments at the start and finish, such as we see in tonight's film.

When the *Alice* series was cancelled, Disney followed up with the popular (and all-animated) Oswald the Lucky Rabbit cartoons. However, this ended bitterly when Winkler's company stole the character and even most of Disney's animators. This led Disney to create Mickey Mouse, who debuted in the first successful sound cartoon, *Steamboat Willie* (1928), which in turn transformed the animation business and left the competition (including Winkler) in the dust.

*Alice Rattled by Rats* was the 25<sup>th</sup> *Alice* Comedy to be made. Today, 40 of the films are known to survive, although many are in shortened form.

Margie Gay was the second actress to play Alice, first appearing in *Alice Solves the Puzzle* (1925). She replaced the original Alice when a dispute over pay led to the departure of blonde ringletted Virginia Davis. Born in 1920, Margie had a very different look from Davis, with her dark bobbed hair in the style of Louise Brooks. She played Alice for most of the remaining series, appeared in a total of 31 Alice Comedies, ending with *Alice's Auto Race* (1927). Lois Hardwick played Alice for the remaining 10 films. Dawn O'Day (aka Anne Shirley) played Alice only once, in *Alice's Egg Plant* (1925).

Although music is a central theme in tonight's Alice film and others, there is no record that cue sheets or other music was ever sent out with any of Disney's silent cartoons. The soundtrack for tonight's print was added circa 1930 by Raytone Talking Pictures. Owner W. Ray Johnston bought the rights to about a dozen of the 1925 Alice shorts from the Winkler company. Raytone hurriedly added synchronized music and sound effects tracks and re-released them to theaters, cashing in on Disney's growing reputation. Raytone was originally Rayart Productions, but renamed when the company retooled for sound. It ceased to exist in 1931, when it merged with Alfred J. Weiss's Sono Art-World Wide Pictures to form the new low budget film company, Monogram Pictures.

Margaret J. Winkler was one of the most important animation producer/distributors of the silent era. Starting as secretary and assistant to Harry Warner at Warner Brothers, she left in 1921 and established her own distribution company. Within a year she had signed both the Fleischer brothers (Koko the Clown) and Pat Sullivan (Felix the Cat), cementing her status as the top animation distributor in the world. After marrying Charles B. Mintz, she eventually retired and the business was taken over by her husband. Mintz's hardball style led to the departure of their banner clients, and Disney came along at a perfect time to help fill the void. In the end, of course, Mintz drove Disney off as well. Mintz kept thing going until 1939, when the company was absorbed by Columbia Pictures and renamed Screen Gems.

### **Alice Comedies: Related Resources**

Ray Pointer, "The Alice Story" (Inkwell Images, ca. 2007) – Essay surveying the history of the Alice films. Online at <http://www.inkwellimagesink.com/pages/articles/AliceStory.shtml>

Russell Merritt & J. B. Kaufman, *Walt in Wonderland: The Silent Films of Walt Disney* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000) – The first book to focus on Disney's silent-era work, from the early days in Kansas City to the advent of Mickey Mouse. Profusely illustrated, with detailed filmography.

Michael Barrier, *The Animated Man: A Life of Walt Disney* (University of California Press, 2007) – A detailed yet highly readable biography, drawing on decades of original research and interviews, that takes a realistic and non-adulatory measure of Disney's career and complex personality. Includes an excellent account of the early years.

David Gerstein, "Lost Laugh-O-Grams Found – And Shown," *Ramapith Prehistoric Pop Culture Blog* (Oct. 14, 2010) <http://ramapithblog.blogspot.com/2010/10/lost-laugh-o-grams-foundand-shown.html> – Account of discovering and restoring the last of the three lost Laugh-O-Gram films.

*Disney Rarities: Celebrated Shorts, 1920s-1960s* (Buena Vista Home Entertainment, 2005) 2-DVD set – Includes seven Alice films, plus other rare cartoons and shorts, from the Disney vaults. Part of the Walt Disney Treasures series, packaged in metal cases.

*Alice in Cartoonland (revised edition)* (Inkwell Images, 2007) DVD – Includes 10 Alice cartoons, many of which are the most complete (and uncensored) versions available on home video. Uses less video processing than the VCI disc, below. Originally released in 2000. Via [www.inkwellimagesink.com](http://www.inkwellimagesink.com)

*Alice in Cartoonland* (VCI, 2007) DVD – Fairly widely-available, and mastered (somewhat poorly) from 35mm prints of (sometimes shortened) sound versions produced in the early 1930s by Raytone Pictures, with added music and sound effects. Ten cartoons: six that are also on the Inkwell Images disc, plus four that are not.

## Our Gang – Hal Roach’s Rascals *Fire Fighters*

Retitled as *Fire Works* (edited TV version)

Released October 8, 1922

Hal Roach Studios / Pathé Exchange

Directed by Robert F. McGowan & Tom McNamara.  
Written by Hal Roach, Robert F. McGowan, & Tom McNamara. Titles by H.M. Walker & Tom McNamara (illustrator). Production supervisor: Charles Parrot. Produced by Hal Roach.

*The Gang*: Allen Hoskins, Betsy Ann Hisle, Elmo Billings, Ernie Morrison, George Warde, Jackie Condon, Monty O’Grady, Peggy Cartwright, and Richard Billings. *Also with*: Charles Stevenson, Joseph Morrison, George Rowe.



*Musical accompaniment*: selections from *The Beau Hunks*, *Little Rascals Music* (Koch Screen, 1994). Original compositions by LeRoy (Roy) Shield, as transcribed and arranged by Piet Schreuders.

The gang discovers a large boiler tank used as a still for moonshine, and use it to form their own fire department. Building a horse-drawn steam-engine truck, a hook-and-ladder truck and a dog-powered vehicle to carry the chief, they set up base in an old barn as the Goat Alley Fire Department. When their lookout thinks steam from a kettle on a stove is a fire, they rush out to deal with it, spraying the strange-smelling “water” on the “fire.” A police officer investigates, the bootlegger winds up getting arrested...but not until the animals drink pools of liquor and run around drunk!

“Hal Roach and his casting directors had an unfaltering ability to find just the right kids to add to the mix year after year, a talent evident not only in his choice of the ‘stars’ but even in the lesser spotlighted youngsters. The best gang members possessed a distinctive face, a knack for doing takes and doubletakes, and a remarkable facility for taking a tomato in the face without blinking an eye.”  
– Walter Kerr, *The Silent Clowns*

*Fire Fighters* was the second Our Gang comedy to be released, preceded by *One Terrible Day* the month before (only half of which survives). This particular print is a shortened version (shorn of about five minutes and a number of intertitles), produced for television and released under the awful series title, *Those Lovable Scalawags and Their Gang*. The basic story line of the gang starting their own fire department would be recycled in *The Fourth Alarm* (1926) and the sound short *Hook and Ladder* (1932).

Created by producer Hal Roach who, legend has it, was inspired by watching a group of children play outside his office window, the Our Gang comedy series lasted for 22 years – one of the longest and most successful in film history. Roach’s central idea was to depict kids behaving more or less as they actually do, but with a touch of fantastical imagination and supra-real resourcefulness that allowed them to do things like, say, build a fire department, a locomotive, or a taxi service out of stuff found in an alley. Children’s films that weren’t entirely childish, the Our Gang comedies were popular with audiences of all ages, rivaling even Roach’s smash-hit Laurel and Hardy releases.

In creating the series, Roach worked closely with director Robert McGowan and Tom McNamara, who drew the newspaper comic strips *Us Boys* and *The Sandlot League* and had broken into movies as a writer for Paramount. Their “gang” was intended to reflect general group dynamics and encapsulate the word of a child: a leader and his sidekick, the tag-along younger kid, a girl, a bully, etc.

Initially, the series was built around Ernie “Sunshine Sammy” Morrison (“Booker T. Bacon” in tonight’s film). He had started working at Roach’s studio as a member of the stock company used in

Harold Lloyd's "Lonesome Luke" comedies. Morrison's talents stood out on the screen, and in 1920 Roach signed him to a two-year contract, intending to feature him in his own series of short comedies. That idea was ultimately vetoed by the distributor, not due to racism but based on the conviction that "kid pictures" were box office poison. Roach was reduced to using Morrison as a supporting player in a series of one-reelers starring Snub Pollard (replacing the "Lonesome Luke" series when the increasingly popular Lloyd graduated to two-reelers). Our Gang provided Roach with an opportunity to try again.

In tonight's film, Morrison and his family are very much at the center of the story. But what is most remarkable – especially for 1922 – is that this is not a "race" film; black kids and white kids all run around and play together as equals. This was groundbreaking if not outright radical for the time. While white characters would move to the fore and despite occasional descents into outright racial "humor," black characters remained accepted central members of the Our Gang formula until the end.

(Morrison left the movies in 1924 to work in vaudeville, where he shared bills with acts like Abbott and Costello and Jack Benny. In the 1940s he returned to the cinema as "Scruno" in the original East Side Kids, appearing in a dozen of those feature films and in a few other roles. After a stint in the Army near the end of World War II, Morrison retired from acting and worked for 30 years in the aircraft industry. In 1974, he made a cameo appearance on the hit sitcom, *Good Times*. He died in 1989.)

Our Gang easily survived the transition to sound and various cast changes over the years as actors aged out, remaining as popular as ever. Less easy were changes in the Depression-era movie business, including a declining market for short subjects. In 1936, the Our Gang films were reduced to one reel each; a feature film released the same year, *General Spanky*, failed at the box office. With profit margins declining, and his studio in mounting financial trouble, Roach sold the rights and actor contracts to MGM for a pittance. At its new home the series declined in quality, becoming increasingly stiff, insipid and moralistic. After another six years, it was finally cancelled in 1944.

In 1949, Roach exercised an option and was able to buy back the rights to the 1922-1938 films, on condition that he not use the Our Gang name. Harkening to his original idea, he rechristened them The Little Rascals. New theatrical runs did fairly well, but their true second life came in TV; unlike most others in Hollywood Roach embraced the new medium and helped pioneer TV syndication. Roach ultimately sold the "Little Rascal" shorts to Monogram Pictures; they later wound up with King World Features, which eventually became part of CBS. The MGM library was bought by Ted Turner 1986.

### **Our Gang: Related Resources**

Our Gang Wiki (web site) <http://ourgang.wikia.com/> – Extensive, well-done web site covers the entire history of the series, the actors/characters, and related topics. An overview, "Our Gang – A History," can be found at [http://ourgang.wikia.com/wiki/Our\\_Gang\\_-\\_A\\_History](http://ourgang.wikia.com/wiki/Our_Gang_-_A_History)

Leonard Maltin & Richard W. Bann, *The Little Rascals: The Life and Times of Our Gang* (Three Rivers Press, 1992) (rev. ed.) – Probably the best and most complete book on the subject, based on extensive research, interviews with surviving cast and crew, and viewings of nearly every surviving film. Originally published as *Our Gang: The Life and Times of the Little Rascals* (Crown, 1977).

The Lucky Corner (web site) <http://theluckycorner.com/> – An exhaustive filmography of all 221 Our Gang films, compiled from various sources, down to amazingly small details.

*The Little Rascals: The Complete Collection* (Genius Products/RHI Entertainment, 2008) 8-DVD box set – Includes all of the sound comedies from 1929-1938 (though some are abridged or have replacement soundtracks). Also includes three of the silent shorts, plus various extras.

*Hal Roach's Rascals* (Alpha Video, 2007) DVD – Low-budget disc with eight silent-era Our Gang comedies spanning 1923 and 1928, including *Dogs of War* with guest star Harold Lloyd.

*Our Gang Gold: The Little Rascals Silent Shorts*, vols. 1 and 2 (GI Studios, 2012) DVD-R – Low-budget indie releases with five and six shorts (respectively), in generally complete versions.

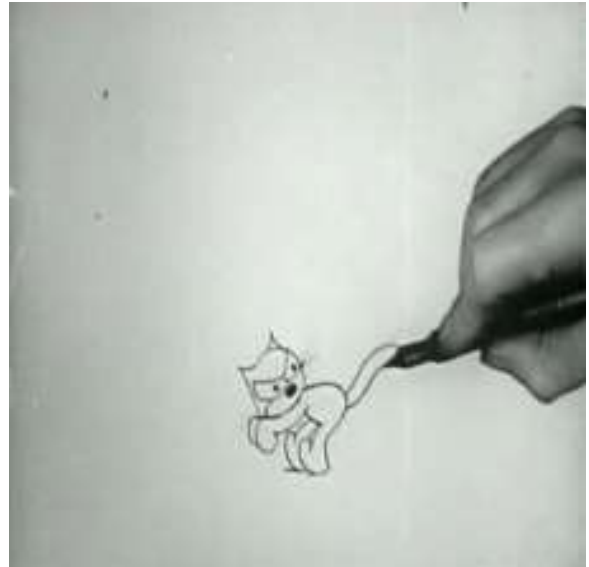
## Felix the Cat *Comicalamities*

Aka *Felix Meets Calamity Jane*

Released April 1, 1928  
Pat Sullivan Studios / Educational Pictures  
(Educational Film Exchanges, Inc.)

Animated by Otto Messmer. Directed by Pat Sullivan [sic].  
Produced by Jacques Kopfstein.

With music and effects soundtrack, possibly added by  
Copley Pictures ca. 1929-1930 or by parties unknown for  
TV syndication in the 1950s.



Felix's artist draws him uninked, whereupon a bootblack is needed to blacken him in. The artist draws Felix a girlfriend, but she is ugly and must be redrawn pretty. Felix travels under the ocean to the oyster beds to please her with a chain of pearls, but in the end she throws him over anyway... and he tears her up.

“Felix the Cat was not the most lucrative silent animated series, nor the longest-running, nor the product of the largest studio. Nevertheless, it is the quintessential cartoon of the 1920s.”

– Donald Crafton, *Before Mickey: The Animated Film 1898-1928*

In this film, animator Otto Messmer and his crew borrow the Fleischer brothers' gimmick of the animator's hand appearing and drawing the characters, who in turn interact with the unseen artist. This degree of copycatting (pardon the pun) was unusual for a series known for its originality. No matter: in the spring of 1928 the Felix cartoons were at the very peak of their artistic excellence and worldwide popularity. Sadly, all of that would change within a matter of months.

While Pat Sullivan claimed sole credit for Felix, in reality he had very little to do with any of the creative work after the initial film. He was the entrepreneur, the business man. Actually, Otto Messmer was the man behind the cat, the creative genius who made it all possible. With his studio of crackerjack artists – including Joe Oriolo, Bill Nolan, Raoul Barré, Al Eugster, Hal Walker and others over the years – Messmer created some of the best animation of the silent era but never received credit until film historians unearthed the tale in the 1950s and '60s. Sullivan got the screen credit, but it was Messmer who actually all the work directing, writing, animating, and shaping each film.

“Otto was all-round,” Al Eugster later recalled. “[The script] just came out of Otto's head and it never seemed to get on paper somehow. ...He probably made notes, but there was no, what we call, a formal script. ...The animator would just discuss it with him on an individual basis and would pick up this scene or sequence and go ahead and animate it.”

Introduced in 1919, Felix had no name until the third film. He was mischievous, plucky, and he always landing on top. The quality of animation was also ahead of most of the competition. Felix's adventures and soaring popularity allowed Messmer's crew “to indulge in flights of fancy, rendered by his animators in images verging on modernist abstractions. ...Messmer delighted in this aspect of his cartoons,” writes animation historian, Donald Crafton. Earl Hurd's popular character “Bobby Bumps was beautifully drawn, but plain,” Messmer explained later. “Hurd was content to show him climbing up on a roof. Me, I would have him jump off or fly or something. Then people would say, ‘You can't do that.’”

It was exactly this super-reality, and Felix's cockiness, that audiences loved. He became a genuine cultural icon known the world over, spawning a pioneering onslaught of product tie-ins: dolls, toys, pencils, even cigarettes were sold with his face. In 1923, a comic strip was introduced, eventually reaching 250 newspapers worldwide. There were hit songs (both records and sheet music), he was a military mascot, and Lindberg took a Felix doll along as a good luck charm for his famous trans-Atlantic flight. In 1927 he was the first Macy's Thanksgiving parade balloon, and a Felix doll was among the first images ever broadcast over television in 1928.

Despite Felix's soaring popularity and impressive artistry, Pat Sullivan's mismanagement – complicated by alcoholism and constant womanizing – proved to be the series' doom. When *The Jazz Singer* was released in 1927, spurring Hollywood's rapid conversion to sound, distributor Educational Pictures pressed Sullivan to make "talkie" cartoons. But he steadfastly resisted and, for a short time, he could take refuge in the fact no other cartoon studios were making the move yet.

This changed in the fall of 1928. In September, Paul Terry released a sync sound cartoon called *Dinnertime*, but it didn't catch fire. Then came Disney's smash hit *Steamboat Willie* in November. (A few weeks later Disney poached several animators from the Sullivan studio. He even tried to recruit Messmer himself, who declined.) When Sullivan still refused to retool for sound their distributor, Educational Pictures, let the contract expire. Layoffs followed and for months the studio was dark.

Eventually a new contract was secured with Copley Pictures, but naturally they required sound. The penny-pinching Sullivan used a cheap post-synchronization studio, clumsily adding sound after the cartoon was made. Some of the earlier cartoons got the same treatment and were rereleased. Literally an afterthought, the results were shabby when compared to the carefully planned and executed work of Disney, the Fleischer brothers, and others. Only a dozen or so new Felix cartoons were made. By early 1931, it was all over. Within two years Sullivan was dead, having drunk himself to death.

The rights to the character remained in legal limbo for several years. In 1936, the Van Buren studio obtained the rights and made just three color cartoons for RKO. Between 1958-1961, a dumbed-down TV cartoon series aired on ABC. In 1988 the Oriolo-animated feature *Felix the Cat, the Movie* was released, and a CBS series ran in 1996.

Sullivan had promised to leave Messmer the copyright and trademark upon his death, but he either lied or just never did the paperwork. Eventually Messmer was able to pry two week's pay from the estate: just \$400. After Sullivan's death, Messmer received animation job offers from a number of studios, but for various reasons (including the lack of rights to Felix) nothing much came of it. King Features let him continue drawing the newspaper strip, which he did for years to come. But his main job in his last years was designing mammoth, complex animated lighting displays in Times Square called the Leigh-EPOK Spectacular. In later years, film scholars and retrospectives at venues like the Whitney Museum honored his work on the 180 original Felix cartoons.

Otto Messmer died in 1983, at the age of 91. His obituary in the *New York Times* proclaimed for all to see that he had "Created 'Felix the Cat'," and was twice as long as Sullivan's had been.

### **Felix the Cat: Related Resources**

John Canemaker, *Felix: The Twisted Tale of the World's Most Famous Cat* (Pantheon Books, 1991) – Lavishly illustrated throughout. The "biography" of Felix, written by a highly respected animation historian who is also a respected animator and documentarian.

The Classic Felix the Cat Page (web site) <http://felix.goldenagecartoons.com/> – This no-frills fan site offers a number of interesting documents, images and links, including production art, original comic strips, popular songs, etc.

*Pat Sullivan/Otto Messmer*, volumes 1-4 (Cartoons on Film, n.d.) DVD-R – Each volume includes about eight silent Felix cartoons. Produced by collector and cartoon restorationist, Tom Stathes. Available individually or as a set, direct from <http://cartoonsonfilm.com/>



## Billy Bevan

### *Super-Hooper-Dyne Lizzies*

Released June 14, 1925  
Mack Sennett Comedies / Pathé Exchange

Directed by Del Lord. Written by Frank Capra, Felix Adler, Al (A.H.) Giebler, and Jefferson Moffitt. Produced by Mack Sennett. Production supervisor: John A. Waldron. Photographed by George Spear & George Unholz. Special effects photography by Ernie Crockett. Edited by William Hornbeck.

With Billy Bevan, Andy Clyde, Lillian Knight, and John J. Richardson.



Piano score added by Blackhawk Films, artist unknown.

An eccentric inventor, Burbank Watts, has thought of a way that automobiles can run on radio waves, without gasoline. His plans put him in conflict with T. Potter Doam, the owner of an oil company who is also pursuing the inventor's daughter. This rival begins to scheme against the inventor, and it is left up to the inventor's hired man to try to stop him.

“One of the strangest films produced by Mack Sennett, or any comedy studio... The whole enterprise seems to be prepared with a kind of warped precognition of Salvador Dali-[Luis] Bunuel's surrealist movies...”

– Simon Louvish, *Keystone: The Life and Clowns of Mack Sennett*

Though little remembered today, Billy Bevan was one of the most popular and prolific stars on the Mack Sennett lot in the later 1920s, appearing in more than 110 films for that studio alone. Born in New South Wales, Australia, as a child he toured the world with the comic opera troupe Pollard's Lilliputians, winding up in Vancouver, BC. After a period doing theater and American vaudeville, he made his film debut with Pathe Lehrman's Keystone splinter company, L-KO, in 1916. Bevan moved around to Strand, Fox Sunshine and Century Comedies before joining Mack Sennett in 1919, where he quickly became identified with his brush mustache, derby hat, and breezy personality.

Within a couple years Bevan had established his screen persona. “A Chaplinesque clown with a small walrus mustache,” writes Simon Louvish, “he often played a layabout but, unlike Chaplin's tramp, gave the impression of a gentleman of leisure fallen on hard times; or took the role of a middle-class busybody, a dispenser of disastrous advice.”

Bevan's films were classic Sennett slapstick, packed full of madness, gags, chases, crazy stunts, and general mayhem. Some of his finer and better known films for Sennett include *Circus Today* (1926), *Wandering Willies* (1926), *The Best Man* (1928), and *Be Reasonable* (1921).

Bevan appeared in Sennett's first talkie, *The Lion's Roar* (1929), and continued to work for him for a time, but soon established himself playing character and bit parts in dozens of feature films for various studios around Hollywood, often as a Cockney or London bobby. He can be seen in Ernst Lubitsch's *Cluny Brown* (1946), Hitchcock's *Rebecca* (1940) and *Suspicion* (1941), *The Long Voyage Home* (1940), *The Lost Patrol* (1934), *Dracula's Daughter* (1936), *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1941), *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1945) and countless other films. He retired in 1950 to his beloved citrus and avocado ranch. He died in 1957.

Later during his tenure working for Sennett, Bevan was frequently teamed up with Andy Clyde, a Scottish actor who came to work at the Sennett studio in 1920 at the suggestion of his friend, James



Finlayson. He was adept at stage makeup, especially fake facial hair, which gave him the ability to play an unusual range of characters. But he hit upon an old man character with a grey mustache that seemed to click, and he used this and variations on it for most of his career in short comedies. He stayed with Sennett well after the conversion to sound, long after the A-list talent had left for better-paying pastures. After a brief stint with Educational Pictures, in 1934 he signed with Columbia Pictures where he made dozens of comedy shorts until 1956, outlasting every comedian at the studio except The Three Stooges. He also did side work as a character actor in low budget features, including turns as one of Hopalong Cassidy's later comic sidekicks (after Gabby Hayes and Britt Wood had departed). Leaving movies in 1956, Clyde continued to work in television mostly playing similar comic and grizzled-western-coots in guest roles. He landed steady work in several notable series, including *The Real McCoys*, *No Time for Sergeants*, and perhaps most famously *Lassie*, where he played the eccentric farmer and nature lover, Cully Wilson. Clyde was still working when he died in 1967, at the age of 75.

### **Mack Sennett & Billy Bevan: Related Resources**

Simon Louvish, *Keystone: The Life and Clowns of Mack Sennett* (Faber and Faber, 2003) – An excellent, lively yet scholarly history of Sennett and his legendary studio, liberally peppered with quotes from original correspondence, press coverage, scenarios, and other primary sources.

*Forgotten Funnymen: Billy Bevan*, volumes 1 and 2 (Alpha Video, 2012) DVD – Low-budget DVDs of 16mm prints. Each disc features four to five Bevan two-reelers, from 1922-1928.

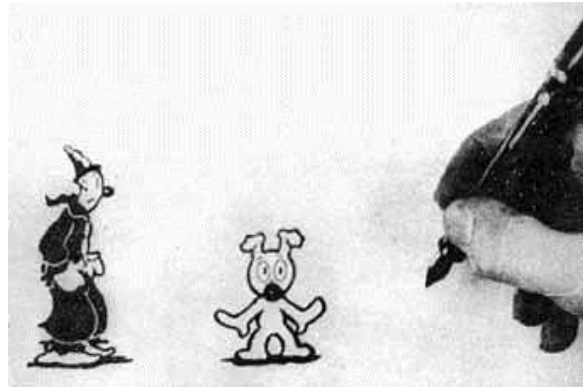
## **Inkwell Imps** *KoKo the Kop*

Retitled as *Koko and the Cop*

Released October 1, 1927  
Inkwell Studios / Paramount Pictures

Directed by Dave Fleischer. Produced by Alfred Weiss.

With music soundtrack compiled by Winston Sharples, added in 1950 by Stuart Productions for TV distribution.



KoKo is a policeman who tangles with Fitz the Dog, who's intent on stealing a bone. Surrealism ensues.

“Max [and Dave] Fleischer’s cartoons were unique. In the silent era they sparkled with innovative ideas and technical wizardry... [Their] cartoons of the late 1920s...can stand alongside the best animated cartoons ever made...”

– Leonard Maltin, *Of Mice and Magic: A History of Animated Cartoons*

Koko the Clown was the second most popular cartoon series of the time, rivaled only by Felix the Cat. But in terms of sheer artistry and inventiveness, the rascally clown surpassed the wily feline.

This film was made during a trying period for the Fleischer studio. Their effort to control their own destiny and start their own distributorship, Red Seal Pictures, had ended badly. This led to an equally troubled and short-lived partnership with Alfred J. Weiss, a money man with a tendency toward larceny. In the end the Fleischers sued Weiss and won, severing their relationship with him. In 1929, Paramount stepped in and saved the company, but on condition that it retain 51% of the stock. This made Paramount the owner of the Fleischer studio, which would ultimately have dire consequences in the

1940s. The legal details of all of this juggling of companies and financial interests over the years led to slight variations in Koko's name – at various times he was Koko, Ko-Ko, and KoKo.

By whatever name, Koko the Clown came about as a result of a 1919 experiment in a whole new way of animating. Brothers Max and Dave Fleischer invented a technique they called “rotoscoping.” The idea was to film a real person moving about. That was then projected onto the back of a light-table and traced as a guide, frame by frame, using celluloid sheets. As a proof of concept for their invention, Max filmed Dave cavorting about in a clown costume on their New York tenement rooftop, then rotoscoped that footage. The resulting films landed them a patent, and a contract to produce more clown cartoons for the Bray Studios.

During WWI, they worked on a series of rotoscoped training films for the Army. After the war, everything they learned informed their new commercial films. Max served as producer (and often appeared in the Koko films), Dave directed, and other brothers chipped in on various tasks around the studio. Hiring and nurturing some of the best artists in the business, their technical prowess and East-coast sensibility made Koko very popular, and resulted in some of the best cartoons ever made.

In the mid-1920s, years before Disney's *Steamboat Willie*, they teamed with Lee De Forest for a number of PhonoFilms, using a pioneering sound-on-film process later adapted by Fox. These included Koko cartoons with musical tracks, and the wistfully animated *Song Car-Tune* sing-alongs that introduced the “bouncing ball.”

As the silent era closed the Fleischers developed a new character, the irrepressible flapper Betty Boop, and Koko faded into occasional guest appearances. Their later sound cartoons include some of the most revered and influential in history, including Popeye and their stunning Superman series, as well as the Color Classics series and two features that, while beautifully rendered, failed to capture the old spark. The box office failure of the second feature, *Mr. Bug Goes to Town* (1941), resulted in Paramount seizing full control of the studio and the ouster of the Fleischer brothers themselves.

Dave went on to head Columbia's animation unit from 1942-1944; following that he worked for Universal until his retirement in 1967. During his career Dave received five Oscar nominations, including for *Popeye the Sailor Meets Sinbad the Sailor* (1936) and *Superman* (1941). Max's son, Richard, went on to be a director himself, helming some 60 feature films.

### **Koko the Clown: Related Resources**

Ray Pointer, “Finding Ko-Ko” (Inkwell Images web site, n.d.) – The man behind the Inkwell Images DVD releases describes his efforts to find and rescue aging and neglected prints of Koko films. Online at <http://www.inkwellimagesink.com/pages/articles/findingKoKo.shtml>

Leslie Cabarga, *The Fleischer Story* (Nostalgia Press, 1976; rev. ed. Da Capo Press, 1988) – Not especially well-written, and some of the research is iffy. Nevertheless, it is the best single book about the Fleischer brothers and is *profusely* illustrated with rare photos and art.

Richard Fleischer, *Out of the Inkwell: Max Fleischer and the Animation Revolution* (University of Kentucky Press, 2005) – A short and informal biography written by Max's son Richard, providing a sympathetic overview of Max's career, and the shabby treatment he received at the hands of Paramount.

*Max Fleischer's Famous Out of the Inkwell* (Inkwell Images, Morley, MI) DVDs volumes 1-4, 1919-1927 – A “bonus edition” combines all 4 volumes. Each disc includes around 7 or so cartoons. Good transfers, and some rare films. Highly recommended. <http://www.inkwellimagesink.com/>

*Ko-Ko Song Car-Tunes* (Inkwell Images) DVD – Documentary plus anthology about the Fleischers' groundbreaking sound cartoons made for DeForest Phonofilm between 1924-1927. The original “follow the bouncing ball” sing-alongs, several include Koko. Sources include impossibly rare prints, many of them tinted. Essential viewing.

## Laurel & Hardy *Liberty*

Released January 25, 1929  
Hal Roach Studios / Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer

Directed by Leo McCarey. Photographed by George Stephens. Story by Leo McCarey, titles by H.M. Walker. Edited by Richard Currier & William Terhune. Produced by Hal Roach.

With Stan Laurel, Oliver Hardy, James Finlayson, Jean Harlow, and Jack Hill.

Music soundtrack added by Blackhawk Films. Originally released in silent and music-and-sound-effects versions.



Laurel and Hardy are two convicts who escape from prison. They make the mistake of putting on each other's pants while changing clothes in the getaway car, and spend the remainder of the film trying to rectify the situation. They attempt to switch trousers in an alley, inside a taxi, behind a fish market and finally in the elevator of an unfinished skyscraper. Naturally, Ollie leans against the 'up' switch and before they know it, they find themselves dangling precariously atop the girders. A young Jean Harlow makes a cameo appearance.

"An unusual and skilful excursion into the building-climbing comedy-thrill domain of Harold Lloyd, *Liberty* has some of Laurel & Hardy's funniest material."  
– William K. Everson, *The Complete Films of Laurel and Hardy*

"[I]t flows from one frantic incident to the next as smoothly as a beer river through your grandmother's paisley shawl. Masterfully constructed and executed, *Liberty* is one of the team's very best shorts."  
– John Larrabee, *Laurel and Hardy Central*

*Liberty* was Laurel and Hardy's only venture into the "thrill comedy" style popularized most famously by Harold Lloyd, partly due to their middle age. The skyscraper in this film's hair-raising climactic sequence was actually a set built atop the Western Costume Company building, which happened to have a good view of downtown Los Angeles. As crew member Thomas Benton Roberts later recalled, "We had three stories of supposedly steel structure...actually it was all made out of wood. The roof of the building was 150 feet, and we were working three stories above that."

At one point, Stan got a bit panicky about safety. Ollie tried to assuage his fears. As director Leo McCarey remembered it, "He said, 'Look, there's nothing to worry about.' There was a platform below him, and Babe [Ollie] said to Stan, 'I'm going to show you that it's perfectly safe,' and he jumped. Well, it wasn't safe."

Roberts elaborated on the story. "The studio had sent some [weak] sugar pine down to make a safety platform for them. I had complained about that, but I wasn't the head stand-by on the company, so I could only carry out orders. When Babe jumped down, the sugar pine, of course, broke. But I had a safety net below that – and that saved him." Falling only 20 feet instead of 200, Ollie suffered some minor bruises but quickly got back to work. The crew spent close to 12 days on the structure doing primary shooting, plus five days of retakes later – all without another incident.

Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy were only two years into their partner act, but the duo were already major stars and they were at their creative zenith. Laurel (born Arthur Stanley Jefferson in 1890) had

started in British music halls, joining Fred Karno's troupe in 1910, where he worked with Charlie Chaplin. Moving to the US in 1912, where he adopted his final stage name, his first film appearance was in 1917. He made comedies with various studios including Essanay, then eventually settled in at the Hal Roach studio. By 1926 he was also directing, writing, and working as a gag man.

Hardy (born Norvell Hardy in 1892) first got into the business as a ticket taker and projectionist in his Georgia hometown. In 1913 he left town, hired on with the Lubin studio, and made his first film appearance the following year. He signed with Roach in 1924, but wasn't paired with Stan until 1927.

Unlike many, they not only gracefully made the transition to sound but became even bigger stars as a result. As arguably the greatest partner act in movie history, they made 107 films together, including 32 silent shorts and 23 feature films. Their last film together was released in 1951.

### **Laurel & Hardy: Related Resources**

Randy Skretvedt, *Laurel and Hardy: The Magic Behind the Movies* (Past Times Publishing Co., 1994 [rev.ed.]; orig. Moonstone Press, 1987) – Widely regarded as among the best books about the comedy team. A chronological survey of their films, drawing upon production records, original scripts, family scrapbooks, interviews with 60 surviving friends and colleagues, and even legal depositions.

John McCabe, *Laurel and Hardy* (Bonanza Books, 1983; orig. W.H. Allen/Dutton, 1975) w/ filmography by Richard W. Bann, designed by Al Kilgore – McCabe, founder and “Exhausted Ruler” of the Sons of the Desert fan club, is regarded as the foremost chronicler of the duo's career; his 1961 bio *Mr. Laurel and Mr. Hardy* being credited with elevating them to the critical respect they deserve. This is regarded as his best work.

Simon Louvish, *Stan and Ollie: The Roots of Comedy – The Double Life of Laurel and Hardy* (Faber & Faber, 2001 / St. Martin's Press, 2002)

Laurel and Hardy Preservation Fund, UCLA Film & Television Archive – Info and donation link at <http://www.cinema.ucla.edu/support/laurel-and-hardy> The first systematic effort to preserve and restore every surviving negative of the Laurel and Hardy films. Please consider a donation of *any* size.

Richard W. Bann, “Another Fine Mess: Laurel and Hardy's Legacy” (UCLA Film & Television Archive, n.d.) – Online at <http://www.cinema.ucla.edu/support/another-fine-mess-laurel-hardys-legacy> Explains the tortured history of the Laurel and Hardy film prints and negatives, the cuts and changes made over the decades, and the need for a serious preservation and restoration effort. Bann is a professional restorationist who has helped save many films produced by the Hal Roach Studios.

*Laurel & Hardy – Early Silent Classics*, volumes 1-4 (Alpha Video, 2005) box set or solo – Low-budget discs with poor transfers, but each including four to seven rare shorts of the boys in their pre-team days, 1917-1926, when they were individually paired with other comics, plus a few of Laurel's early solo efforts. Vol. 3 is a notable exception, including some of Laurel's home movie footage, 1931's sound all-star turn *The Stolen Jools*, and a curious 1943 Pete Smith novelty about wood products, of all things. Vol. 1 also includes *Lucky Dog* (1917), which happened to star both Laurel and Hardy, 10 years before they formally teamed up.

*The Lost Films of Laurel and Hardy: The Complete Collection*, volumes 1-9 (Image Entertainment, 1998-1999) VHS & DVD – The silent films of Laurel and Hardy remain very difficult to find on home video. This series (never issued as a box set) presented many titles, mastered from original (and unrestored) 35mm prints. (Also included are a number of their pre-team films, including several of Ollie's appearances with Charley Chase.) Sadly all of these discs are out of print and individual volumes now fetch high prices on the collector market. Thankfully, they can be rented from Scarecrow Video.

## Additional Sources and Suggested Reading

- Walter Kerr, *The Silent Clowns* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1975; Da Capo Press, 1990) – An excellent entry point to the world of silent comedy. Lavishly illustrated, learned but approachable, it is considered one of the standard books on the subject.
- Glenn Mitchell, *A-Z of Silent Film Comedy: An Illustrated Companion* (Batsford, 1998) – This deceptively slim book is perhaps the best single reference on the subject, with entries on famous and obscure actors, directors, writers, series, studios, and even topical subjects. It is also notable for being one of the few works in English to discuss non-American artists and films.
- Kalton LaHue, *World of Laughter: The Motion Picture Comedy Short, 1910-1930* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1966) – A studio-by-studio history.
- Kalton LaHue & Samuel Gill, *Clown Princes and Court Jesters: Some Great Comics of the Silent Screen* (A.S. Barnes, 1970) – Over 50 mini-biographies of silent comedians, including many lesser-known ones. Still highly regarded, despite its age.
- Richard Lewis Ward, *A History of the Hal Roach Studios* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2005) – The first history of the independent studio from 1914 to its closure in 1960. Includes extensive filmography, synopses, an appendix on their TV series, detailed end notes and bibliography.
- William K. Everson, *The Films of Hal Roach* (Museum of Modern Art [NYC] / New York Graphic Society, 1971) – Issued in conjunction with the 1969 MOMA screening series, *A tribute to Hal Roach: four decades of distinguished contribution to comedy*.
- Donald Crafton, *Before Mickey: The Animated Film 1898-1928* (MIT Press, 1982; University of Chicago Press, 1993) – Profusely illustrated. Considered the authoritative history of silent-era animation.
- Leonard Maltin, *Of Mice and Magic: A History of American Animated Cartoons* (Plume/Penguin Books, 1994. Prior editions in 1980 and 1987.) – Say what you will about him as a critic, Maltin knows his animation history, and he tells it splendidly in this book. Covers both silent and sound eras, through the end of the theatrical short cartoon era.
- E.G. Lutz, *Animated Cartoons: How They Are Made, Their Origin and Development* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1920; numerous reprintings, including Horney Press 2009, Cornell University Library 2009, and Applewood Books 1998) – The book that famously inspired Walt Disney and many others.

## Home Video

- Tom Stathes' Cartoons on Film – A highly respected indie DVD imprint offering many anthologies of silent-era cartoons, including Bobby Bumps, the Bray studios, Paul Terry's Farmer Al Falfa, Mutt & Jeff, Felix the Cat, Walt Disney, and more. Order direct via <http://cartoonsonfilm.com/>
- Slapstick Encyclopedia* (Kino Video, 2002; reissued by Image Entertainment, 2012) 5 DVD set, originally a VHS box set (2000) – Ten excellent volumes on five discs survey the history of American slapstick movies from 1909 to 1927. Recently reissued in a book-like package.
- SlapHappy* (Fishigan Films, 2001-2003) TV series/DVD – An excellent PBS series of 30 half-hour documentaries on the history of silent slapstick comedy, with hundreds of high-quality rare clips. Collected on 10 DVDs. Info and purchase via <http://slaphappycomedies.com/>
- American Slapstick* (Image Entertainment, 2006) and *American Slapstick Vol. 2* (All Day Entertainment, 2008) 3-DVD sets – Each collects hours of classic silent-era comedy shorts. Readily available.



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