

HISTORICAL NOTES by D. John Turner

ERNEST OUIMET: FILMMAKER AND DISTRIBUTOR



On the set of *Why Get Married?* in Hollywood. (1. to r.) Paul Cazeneuve, director (with cap), Georges Benoit, cameraman (next to camera) and Ouimet (pointing).

Ernest Ouimet is best known as an exhibitor and his name is automatically linked to the Ouimetoscope and the period 1906-1907. But he was also an active filmmaker as well as being a distributor, and he remained active on the Montreal scene right up to 1936.

In 1908 Ouimet acquired a camera and established his own developing and printing facilities in the basement of the Ouimetoscope. His purpose was to record local events and to get them onto the screen of his theatre as quickly as possible as an added attraction. His first "scoop" was undoubtedly the visit to Quebec of the Prince of Wales for the ter-centenary celebrations in 1908.

In 1909 Pathé started to make newsreels and they were widely shown. Ouimet showed them too, but with his own material carefully intercut to add a local flavour. However in 1910, while filming Quebec's Eucharistic Congress, Ouimet contracted dysentery. It was almost four years before he was completely cured, during which period he gradually abandoned his business activities, rented out the Ouimetoscope – which had by now become a grind house in an attempt to counter fierce competition – and left his Montreal residence to return to the place of his birth, Laval.

In 1914 Pathé, a French company, established studios at Fort Lee, New Jersey, and asked Ouimet to be their representative, at first in Eastern Canada, and then for the whole country. In 1915 Ouimet established Specialty Film Import, Limited, for this purpose and the first film he handled for Pathé was *The Perils Of Pauline*

with Pearl White, probably the most famous of all the serials.

Specialty quickly established itself, with offices across the country, as one of the most energetic and aggressive distributors in Canada. His deal with Pathé precluded any exhibition activities but his newsreel cameramen expanded their activities to cover the whole of Canada and were second to none, particularly in the rapidity with which their work reached audiences. Indeed when the Prince of Wales (he seems to have been some kind of a favourite in those days!) visited Toronto in August of 1919, scenes shot as late as 5 p.m. by Ouimet's ace cameraman Bert Mason were on the screen that same night. By 1920 Ouimet had established a combined news service – British Canadian Pathé News – which used footage from England and the U.S. as well as his own cameramen's efforts. Specialty was also releasing one British feature each week. But by 1921 things were not going so well for the company – stiff competition from the big Hollywood studios seems to have been the main problem – and Ouimet allowed it to be absorbed by another Canadian distributor, Regal.

It was at this point that Ouimet was approached by a group of Montreal businessmen who had taken it into their heads to make a feature film. Ouimet agreed to head up the project and Laval Photoplays, Limited, was duly incorporated in February 1922 with a subscribed capital of \$60,000, if the company's first report is to be believed.

With his usual panache Ouimet took off for Hollywood, rented an office, and later a studio, and put Paul Cazeneuve under contract. Cazeneuve, a Montrealer and an old friend of Ouimet, had been both a director and an actor in the theatre for many years before moving to Hollywood where he was now directing, acting, and writing for the motion pictures.

At first Ouimet announced a production of *Faust*. However, the film which eventually appeared almost two years later was called *Why Get Married?*, a more contemporary, not to say commercial, title than *Faust*.

The story concerned a married woman's attempts to progress in the

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