

# Early Films of the Delta

Scenic river delta featured in many vintage films!

By Beth Ann Gallagher

In the days of hand-cranked movie cameras, the Delta and Rio Vista in particular became a hotbed of filmmaking. Assets that drew settlers and industry, like the Sacramento River and timeless small towns free of overdevelopment, made the area attractive as a background setting for movies. To save on production costs, California filmmakers used the broad and long river as a substitute for large, out-of-state rivers. Numerous early movies, from the silent era into the talkies, used the Sacramento River to portray the Mississippi. The steamships traveling between Sacramento, Stockton, and San Francisco abetted in the illusion. Here are the stories behind classic era films made in the Delta.

## Cameo Kirby

“Cameo Kirby” (1914) holds the honor of being the first silent film made in Rio Vista. The Fox Film feature was directed by Oscar Apfel and stars Dustin Farnum, who originated the role on the stage. New Orleansian Kirby, nicknamed for his lucky cameo ring, loses his family’s plantation to debts after his father dies. An encounter with a crooked gambler on a riverboat leads to more tragedy and trouble with the law. The majority of local filming took place on the waterfront. Fox would remake the movie twice, once in 1923 with cinema heartthrob John Gilbert and once in 1930 as a musical with J. Harold Murray. The remakes were shot closer to Sacramento. As with so many silent movies, film historians presume all film prints of the first “Cameo Kirby” have been lost.

## A Man of Sorrow

Fox Film’s need of lumber region scenes for “A Man of Sorrow” (1916) made Rio Vista an ideal location. It was common to transport lumber along the river. In the movie, a husband is tricked into believing his wife unfaithful, and he almost commits suicide by jumping off a pier. Motography magazine claims nearly all the inhabitants of the town participated in a mob scene. Motion Picture News says the movie company left behind a “large and imposing” monument constructed for filming as a gift because townspeople had become fond of it. Cast and crew, including director Oscar Apfel, were marooned in the area when flooding severely damaged San Francisco’s railroads. Film historians presume “A Man of Sorrow,” along with the studio’s only copies of silent films, were destroyed in the 1937 Fox vault fire.



## Jim Bludso

Two years into his directing career, Tod Browning arrived in Rio Vista to shoot what has been credited as his first feature, “Jim Bludso” (1917).



An adaptation of a stage drama based on a John Hay ballad, the film focuses on an engineer of a Mississippi River packet who returns home from the Civil War to discover his wife has abandoned him and their child. Dramatic sequences feature levee sabotage, a race between two boats, and hand-to-hand combat onboard a burning and sinking ship. Moving Picture World highlights Rio Vista’s “picturesque atmosphere” and the

cinematographer’s “unusual close-up views of the sinking vessel.” Browning would achieve everlasting fame with “Dracula” (1931) and cult classic “Freaks” (1932). Film historians presume “Jim Bludso” lost.

## Mark Twain Trilogy

Director William Desmond Taylor filmed the river scenes of his Mark Twain trilogy—“Tom Sawyer” (1917), “Huck and Tom” (1918), and “Huckleberry Finn” (1920)—in Rio Vista. He was so successful in making the Sacramento River look like the Mississippi River, Paramount let the assumption lie that viewers were truly seeing Hannibal, Missouri on the big screen. The

Tom Sawyer for the first two films, Jack Pickford, was a good actor who never fulfilled his potential, choosing partying over a serious career, to the chagrin of his much more famous sister Mary Pickford. Taylor’s talent and career would be overshadowed by his unsolved murder, which along with a rash of contemporary scandals led to morality clauses being inserted into Hollywood contracts. “Tom Sawyer” and “Huckleberry Finn” are available on disc for home viewing. “Huck and Tom” is likely lost.



## The Midlanders

Actress Bessie Love, best remembered for her early film work though her career lasted over six decades, plays one of her wholesome type roles in a melodrama she filmed in Rio Vista.



Heading her own movie production company, she brought “The Midlanders” (1920) to the town for exterior shooting. According to Exhibitors Herald, the cast and crew spent a “long period” filming in Rio Vista in the spring of 1920. In adapting the Charles Tenney Jackson novel of the same name set in the “middle west” and Louisiana swamps, Love placed “a special emphasis... on accurate and colorful location work.” So much so, cast and crew waited for bad weather to pass to be able to start filming. Validating

the expenses incurred by the delay, the result was “a set of very unusual outdoor scenes.” The majority of the feature is lost, but Australian filmmaker and preservationist Robert Hoskin shares the only surviving fragment on YouTube.

## The Volga Boatman

When Director Cecil B. DeMille needed a California-based stand-in for a famous Russian river, he brought “The Volga Boatmen” (1926) to Rio Vista. The movie tells the story of the romance between a princess and a peasant during the Revolution. William Boyd plays the male lead, and the role skyrocketed him to stardom overnight. Later he would go on to portray his best-known role, Hopalong Cassidy. An actress playing a supporting role in the DeMille production, Julia Faye, published a letter from the set in Picture-Play Magazine. She gushingly proclaims she “never had a more beautiful trip than going up the Sacramento River by starlight” and praises the Italian cuisine served by the mayor at his welcome party. The film survives for viewing today. Multiple home video companies sell it on disc.



## Huckleberry Finn

With the coming of sound, Mark Twain’s “Huckleberry Finn” (1931) was filmed once again in Rio Vista. This time Junior Durkin plays the titular role, and Jackie Coogan (Uncle Fester on “The Addams Family”) plays Tom Sawyer. The boys hit it off in real life and acted much like their onscreen counterparts. Screenland magazine relays their Fourth of July hijinks. Both boys worked on the holiday with no complaints, but once filming was done, they bought a bag of torpedoes and competed to see whose fireworks would explode the loudest. When director Norman Taurog and a crewman exited Hotel Rio Vista at the wrong time, the boys chased the men down Main Street and threw torpedoes at their feet. Hearing all the hubbub, locals lined up on the curbs to watch the show. This version of “Huckleberry Finn” is currently unavailable in an official release, but is occasionally offered through “grey market” sellers.

## The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

Only eight years passed before a new “The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn” (1939) was filmed! The Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer crew travelled up and down the Sacramento River selecting Rio Vista, Isleton, Ryde, Walnut Grove, and Hood as background settings. Rio Vista Museum curator Phil Pezzaglia says “filming took place near the Rio Vista Bridge” and “on the river where California Packing used to operate a plant on River Road.” Star Mickey Rooney was a known commodity and a draw to local children, who went to watch him perform. Director Richard Thorpe was unable to reign in Rooney, and one critic sniped the movie was “more Mickey than Huckleberry.” Judge for yourself! “The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn” is available for home viewing via streaming and disc.

## All the King's Men

The last classic era film to be shot in the Delta was “All the King's Men” (1949). Collinsville and Bird’s Landing were among the numerous small California towns selected by Columbia Pictures as locations, and the company hired many locals as actors. In this adaptation of the Robert Penn Warren novel, an honest man becomes corrupted as he rides his populist appeal into office. The name of his party and his state are never identified. The movie, directed by Robert Rossen, earned the Oscar for Best Picture, as well as garnering Oscars for leading man Broderick Crawford and supporting actress Mercedes McCambridge (in her screen debut). “All the King's Men” is available for home viewing via streaming and disc.

*The next installment of Films of the Delta will concentrate on modern movies, those made after 1965.*