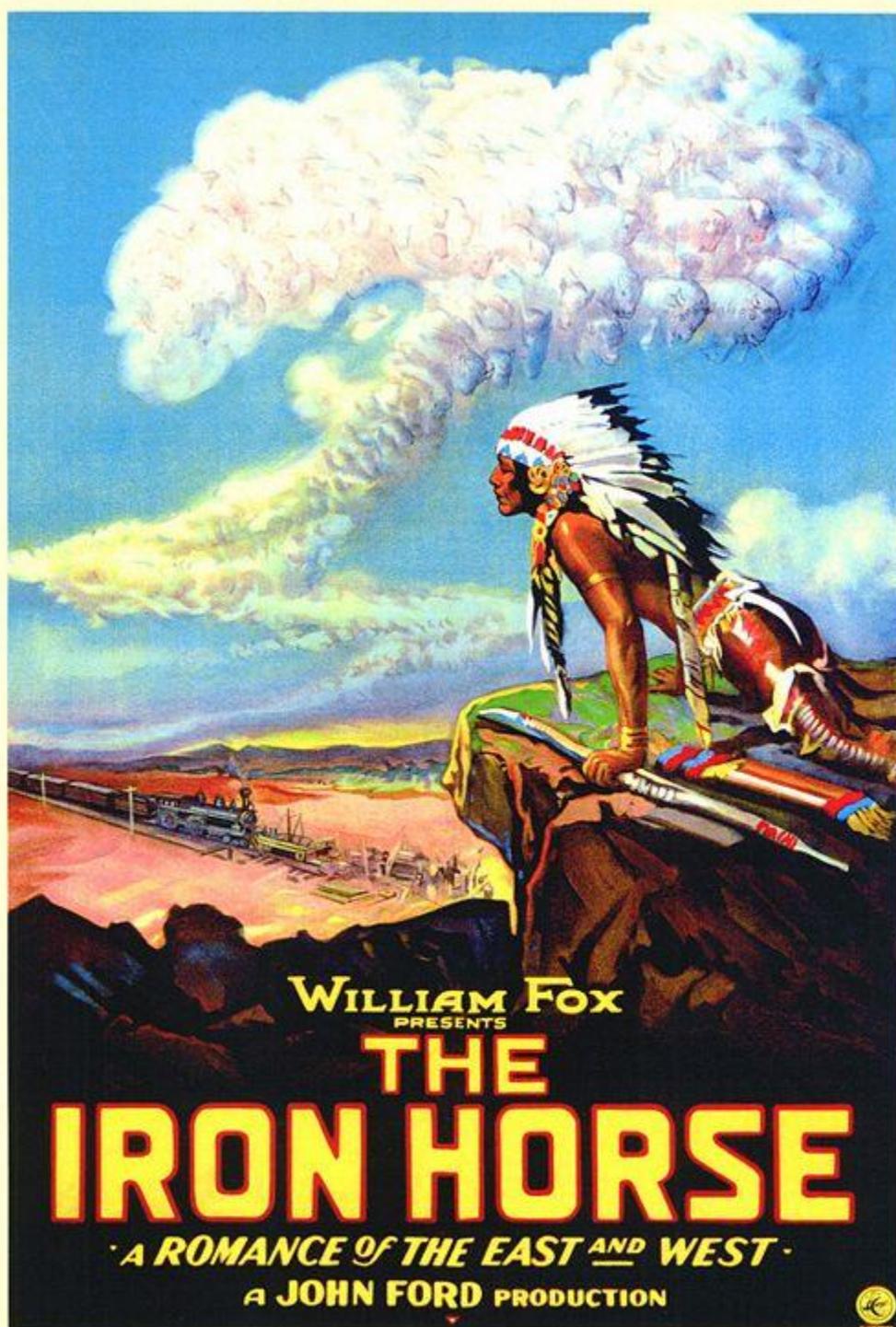


The Iron Horse



Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill

Produced and directed by *John Ford*. Written by *Charles Kenyon and John Russell* with dialogue boards and captions by *Charles Darnton*. Cinematography by *George Schneiderman*. Original 1924 Music by *Emo Rapee*. Edited by *Hettie Gray Baker*. Costumes and art direction uncredited. 1924 Presenter *William Fox*.

1995 Restoration version: Producers *Kevin Brownlow and David Grill*. Music: 1974 version *John Lanchberry*. 1995 version: *Christopher Callendo*.

Cinematic length: 150 minutes in the USA. 133 minutes in the international version. Distributed by Fox Film Corporation. Cinematic release: August 1924 DVD release different dates 2007. Check for ratings. Rating 85%.

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Written Without Prejudice

Cast

- *George O'Brien* - Davy Brandon
- *Madge Bellamy* - Miriam Marsh
- *Charles Edward Bull* - Abraham Lincoln
- *Cyril Chadwick* - Peter Jesson
- *Will Walling* - Thomas Marsh
- *Francis Powers* - Sergeant Slattery
- *J. Farrell MacDonald* - Corporal Casey
- *Jim Welch* - Private Schultz/Mackay
- *George Waggner* - Col. William F. 'Buffalo Bill' Cody
- *Fred Kohler* - Deroux/Bauman
- *James A. Marcus* - Judge Haller
- *Gladys Hulette* - Ruby
- *Chief John Big Tree* - Cheyenne Chief
- *Jean Arthur* – Reporter
- *George Brent* - Railwayman
- *Danny Borzage* -Minor Player
- *Delbert Mann* - Charles Crocker

Review

In 1923 Paramount studios had a big hit with *The Covered Wagon*, an epic western, so William Fox of Twentieth Century Fox fame wanted in: with *The Iron Horse* he got his hit. The film had a similar theme to *The Covered Wagon*, of pioneers travelling westward; *The Iron Horse* financially gained a similar reward. Costing a then massive and unexpected \$280,000, the film made over ten times that, bringing in three million dollars. Both cost and profit were unexpectedly large, especially when considering the purchase power of the dollar in the 1920s.

The topic was to be the building of the railway line that would cross America, uniting the Pacific coast with the east. Fox wisely chose John Ford to produce and direct, although as a director this would be his first large, big budget film. Ford knew and loved the railways, the outdoors and the stories of the American west. More importantly by 1924 he had spent nearly a decade working his way up from being an extra for D.W. Griffith, to being a prop man, a stuntman, an assistant director for his brother Francis and eventually a director of small films. With a resume like this he knew films inside out and had an eye for stories, settings, locales and talented performers before starting on *The Iron Horse*. When it came to the visual aspects of cinema many would acclaim him as a genius. Such acclamations usually focus on his use of landscapes through longshots, true enough, but other aspects of his visual talent often pass with less notice. Look at the establishing shots of the wintry scenes set in Springfield, the use of lighting and framing in the final fight between Brandon and Derroux and the restrained use of facial expressions throughout the film, but particularly those of Lincoln, which subtly understate. Although some of his work from the 1930s to the late 1950s became marred by sentimentality, overdone hearty humour, super-patriotism, ham-fisted points and contrived-resolutions, those flaws do not emerge in this work.

Although the epic story of the struggle to build the line dominates with the film, Ford also has a human interest aspect and these emerge together at the film's start. In Springfield Illinois c1850 Brandon senior (curiously uncredited and perhaps George O'Brien) talks with two men about his



Two scenes of railroad building. Top: The portable saloon/courthouse. Bottom putting down the rails. Note the armed cavalryman, at the ready for Indian attacks.



The three biggest stars of The Iron Horse George O'Brien, Madge Bellamy and the train itself.

dream of linking America by a transcontinental railroad. Thomas Marsh (Will Walling) is skeptical but a quiet, thoughtful Abraham Lincoln (Charles Edward Bull) explains that great things come from such dreamers. While the men talk Marsh's daughter Miriam and Brandon's son David happily play in the snow before the Brandon's journey begins. That journey ends tragically when an Indian warband led by a white renegade named Deroux (alias Bauman, played by Fred Kohler) kill Brandon senior and loot the camp, unknowingly leaving David Brandon alive in hiding.

Years have passed, it is now 1862 and Thomas Marsh has become an enthusiast for the transcontinental railway line, visiting the white house to successfully lobby President Lincoln for the scheme. Miriam has to remind Lincoln of how they once met, but then he smiles in recognition, which vanishes with his first glance at her fiancé Peter Jesson (Cyril Chadwick) a man few would trust. Ford directs this scene with a subtle restraint rare in silent films outside 1920s Russia and Hitchcock's work.

The next scenes which focus on the building of the railway westwards also literally put David Brandon (George O'Brien), now a scout, in the picture as he has inherited his father's vision of the great railway line. He soon meets up with the top people in the railway's advance west, the Marshs, Jesson and Deroux, who now works for the railway, goes by the name Bauman and is not recognised by Brandon, who never saw his face, only his mangled hand, which Deroux conceals.

Although *The Iron Horse* has several scenes set in offices where planning details and problems are worked out by those in charge, more scenes show the actual laborers and surveyors putting the lines down, good. Ford rightly focuses of the unknown thousands who toiled through extremes of blazing heat and freezing winters, endured near starvation and Indian attacks. They wear tattered, dirty clothes, are unshaven and gripe about the cold and lack of good food. He credits the Chinese laborers with their important construction role and used several of the actual surviving Chinese railroad builders in the film. Ironically to film the scenes of the railway line being built Ford actually built a small railway line and the harsh conditions of the 1860s railway builders were unintentionally replicated with accommodation in tents and the cinematic village. That village was reconstructed every time the setting changed as the railway supposedly advanced. Although much of the story was set in Wyoming, much of the filming took place in Nevada. Ford was amongst the first directors to actually use Amerindians in film scenes and as a reminder that they were people dying in battle, not automations, he had a pet dog pitifully whining over his dead Indian master.



After the Indian attack. Ruby the dance hall girl lies badly wounded

The film ends with a recreation of the completion of the line, when the eastward heading line meeting the westward line at Promontory Point in May 1869. David and Miriam also meet there and unite. As in the first scenes where the personal and the romantic dream are entwined so at the end they flower. The film captions claim that the two locomotives used were the ones from the official celebration, others dispute that, but does it matter? The very last scene does have a filmmaker's self-conscious moment: n the dignitaries are photographed before the trains. THIS IS Ford and Fox commemorating in 1924 the 1869 commemoration.

Everybody celebrates and the film itself is a celebration of an American triumph.



John Ford 1890?1895? -1973