



Episode 704, Story 2: Lubin Photos

Tukufu: Our next story examines century old photos that may have captured the dawn of American movie-making – nearly 3000 miles from Hollywood. At the turn of the 20th century, curious city dwellers across the country gathered in dark, crowded rooms to witness something astounding. As lights dimmed, they stood agape at the sight that flickered before them... photographs that moved. Into these early days of experimentation by entrepreneurs seeking fame and fortune walked one visionary immigrant with dreams of becoming the king of American movies. Now, Billie Rooney from Branford, Florida, has a pair of photo albums that may reveal how this film pioneer staked a claim in the city of brotherly love. Billie has asked to meet me at my office at the University of Pennsylvania. So what brings you all the way up to Philadelphia?

Billie: I have some old photo albums. Inside it says the Lubin's film company, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. It shows that there was a silent film era production company here in Philadelphia. It has pictures of the plant; it has pictures of the actors, the owners.

Tukufu: So, where did you get these photo albums?

Billie: My uncle's mother-in-law was married to Herbert Lubin. And these were some of his personal effects. I believe there are pictures of him in his western garb with his horse.

Tukufu: Billie says the photos were discovered by her father when a family home was razed to build a highway. I've lived here for 26, 27 years and I've never heard of this place.

Billie: I would like to know what happened to the company. It seemed to be such a thriving, successful, business for its day. I'd also like to know if Herbert was in fact an actor, and was he famous?

Tukufu: Alright, let me get busy and see what I can find out. Lubin's studio stock. Here we have the film vault. Oh, and look at this, the cutting room. There's lots of head shots of what look like actors... here's the president of the company. Mr. Siegmund Lubin. The other volume – "Betzwood Ranch" appears to be of an enormous farm or estate. There are lots of guys on horseback, dressed in western gear. Imagine that, cowboys in Philadelphia. I wonder if Billie's



relative was related to the studio boss? Lubin is a fairly common Jewish name. He's listed here at the assistant publicity manager. But was he an actor? Maybe he's just a cowboy on this humongous ranch. I need to find out more about the Lubin film company. How important was this company in the film business? I'm headed to the filmmakers' cooperative in New York City, to meet film archivists and historians Jon Gartenberg and Jeff Capp. How're you guys doin'? Jeff describes the images in one of the albums as a "whose who" of up-and-coming actors and directors of the day.

Jeff: This is major talent. Edgar Jones, Evelyn Nesbitt-Thaw, and this here is Marie Dressler. This has got to be from the teens. In the early 30's she was about the biggest star in Hollywood.

Tukufu: Who was this Siegmund Lubin?

Jon: Siegmund Lubin was an early film pioneer. He came over from Germany, and he set up an optician shop in Philadelphia.

Tukufu: Jon explains how the immigrant found himself at the center of the new film industry, located on the east coast.

Jon: Before Hollywood started there was the invention of motion pictures in the 1890's which was basically based around New York. So you had studios like Vitagraph and Edison in New York. And Vitagraph built this studio in Brooklyn and S&A was in Chicago and Lubin, who was an early film pioneer set up shop in Philly.

Tukufu: So you're telling me that Philadelphia was part of the birth of film?

Jon: Absolutely, because he started in the 1890's with his whole film business. So he was really a big part of what went on. And he was actually like the first Jewish movie pioneer, even 15 years before Goldwyn and other people got in the business.

Tukufu: Really?

Jon: Yeah.



Tukufu: The city of brotherly love exposed the optician to some cutting edge technological developments.

Jon: Philadelphia's a real center of sort of scientific activity. So he sees, for example, the motion experiments that Eadweard Muybridge does for the University of Pennsylvania. He's familiar with lenses, and he decided to get into the movie business.

Tukufu: Jon says the faces in this album also represent a new development in cinema— the birth of the movie star.

Jon: Around 1910 or so stars became to be known in the cinema. Spectators in the theatre were starting to recognize who are these stars and they wanted to see them in the movies.

Tukufu: The appetite for celebrity was fed by Lubin's increasingly complex operation.

Jon: He did everything from shooting movies, distributing movies, building theatres to show movies.

Tukufu: Jon explains that Lubin's integrated operation and economies of scale made his films faster and cheaper to produce than his competitors.

Jon: Lubin would also copy films that other companies made and put them out as his own. It's very rough and tumble. Everybody wanted to get in the business and everybody wanted to make money.

Tukufu: But Lubin wasn't the only filmmaker fighting for an edge.

Jon: Edison was trying to control everything by controlling the patents on all the cameras and the projectors.

Tukufu: Eventually, Jon says, Lubin, Thomas Edison, and other film pioneers joined forces and created the Motion Picture Patents Company.



Jon: Basically what they said is, look we're all fighting with each other, we're all losing a lot of money, so let's just all get together and let's control the business ourselves.

Tukufu: So they created a monopoly?

Jon: Yes.

Tukufu: But what about the mysterious farm scenes in our album – and guys decked out in cowboy gear? What about this one, “from the Betzwood Ranch”? Jon explains that in 1912, – running out of space -- Lubin bought Betzwood, a sprawling suburban estate belonging to a local brewer.

Jon: He started building around 1912 and by 1914 it was like the most advanced studio of all the film companies in the United States.

Tukufu: Betzwood became the movie lot for scores of westerns. Jeff and Jon are staggered that such a record of the Lubin studios has been found. A fire in 1914 destroyed most of Lubin's early films.

Jeff: In some instances these still photographs may be the only record that exists of some of these productions.

Tukufu: I'm particularly interested in Herbert Lubin.

Jon: Well, I've never heard of him and it's very hard to tell from this book. I don't recognize him as a name and you know... you know actors pretty well.

Jeff: Yeah, and no I... I don't think that it's even certain that he was an actor.

Tukufu: To get a better sense of Lubin's work and maybe a glimpse of Billie's relative they suggest I track down some of Lubin's remaining films. Montgomery County Community College in Pennsylvania has a handful of surviving reels that were donated to their moving picture collection.



"*In the Service of State*". "*The Exile*", oh, let's check that out. These westerns are elaborate spectacles. Again and again, the old Betzwood ranch is transformed. Try to imagine that they were shooting this on the east coast. Somehow they were able to recreate the western feel. I'm impressed. But although the scenes are often spectacularly staged -- the acting appears fairly shallow -- almost comical. As if the acting were filler to get to the next shoot out or chase scene. I'm hoping that I'll be able to catch a glimpse of Herbert Lubin in one of these films. There's a lot of cowboys in here. It's just not clear enough. I can't really tell if it's Herbert Lubin or not. Maybe I'll get lucky and see his name in the credits. Unfortunately, what happens with these films is they deteriorate from the ends and so the first thing to go is often the credits. "*Sweeter Than Revenge*". Let's check this out. Reel after reel of Philadelphia cowboys. But no clear match to Herbert. What happened to this extraordinary film empire? Joseph Eckhardt is a biographer of Siegmund Lubin. He's asked to meet me at a location that he says is somehow important to my investigation. So where are we?

Joe: You're at the Betzwood studio. Right over here behind you, that's was where the western village was. This was once the biggest movie studio in the world.

Tukufu: It's now an unassuming office park. Joe brings me inside what used to be Lubin's film processing plant.

Joe: It took 200 employees to run this plant and you can tell perhaps by the size of it why -- why it would.

Tukufu: Developing, editing, and printing of Lubin's films could all be centralized within this giant facility. Okay. So the Betzwood ranch was the center of the operation?

Joe: It - it was the keystone of Lubin's whole empire, yes.

Tukufu: So everything flowed in here and out?

Joe: And out, yes. Out and all over the world. Anything shot in Jacksonville, Los Angeles and the southwest or in Philadelphia ended up being processed right here and then sent out to Russia, China, Germany, you name it.



Tukufu: Joe has spent several decades studying Siegmund Lubin, and he's never seen a collection of photos like Billie's.

Joe: Absolutely amazing that this has survived.

Tukufu: Joe says that Lubin's Betzwood operation turned out much more than just westerns.

Joe: They staged civil war battles here. They built and burned several towns. The processing plant was, turning out 6 million feet of film a week. This was the biggest film empire in the world at that time.

Tukufu: How did Billie's relative fit into this empire?

Joe: Herbert Lubin was Siegmund Lubin's nephew. Uhh, he was from Berlin and Siegmund Lubin brought his nephew over in May of 1914 to get him out of Germany.

Tukufu: One month later, Archduke Ferdinand of Austria was assassinated. The great blaze of the First World War was ignited.

Joe: They knew that a war was about to erupt and he probably saved Herbert's life, quite literally. Herbert was plunked down in the middle of the Betzwood studio.

Tukufu: Was Herbert Lubin in any of his uncle's films?

Joe: Well I have some other films with me that might answer your question. This film was made in 1907. It's called "*the Silver King*". Now you see that man there at the far left end?

Tukufu: Yeah.

Joe: At the racetrack? That's Siegmund Lubin.

Tukufu: That's Siegmund Lubin? So he was in his own films?



Joe: Lubin was the first of the filmmakers to appear in his own films. And he's not the only member of the family to end up in films either. Now in this particular film, you have to watch, there's a little girl who comes in here to rescue a station master. That's Lubin's daughter.

Tukufu: So this was a family business?

Joe: Yes.

Tukufu: Joe interviewed former studio employees. They told him that Siegmund's habit of putting family members in his movies extended to his nephew, Herbert.

Joe: I talked to two different people who had worked at the studios in those days and they both told me the same thing. Herbert used to ride in the posses. In those days you couldn't make a western without chasing somebody. So Herbert was frequently in those chase scenes.

Tukufu: Billie will be happy to hear that – but what happened to this enormous operation?

Joe: Well, that's a good question. Lubin ran into an unending series of problems starting in 1914.

Tukufu: Joe explains that the fire in the film vault was the first disaster.

Joe: Two months later the First World War, ahh, began. Lubin, more than any other early filmmaker depended on the international markets for his profits. And they were gone overnight.

Tukufu: Lubin's role in the filmmaker's monopoly with Edison and others also hurt him.

Joe: The Federal Government sued the patents company as a illegal trust. And they won.

Tukufu: But Joe tells me that it was the constantly evolving style of movies that sealed Lubin's fate. To illustrate, he shows me a copy of the Lubin film "*A Partner To Providence*". Look at that! Wow! Joe tells me how a train wreck of sorts had also derailed the Lubin studios. I can't wait to



tell Billie. This was a fantastic story to investigate. I explain that although the films don't survive, her relative had almost certainly played a bit part in Lubin movies.

Billie: It's exciting. I had no idea. It adds a little flavor to our family history.

Tukufu: Her albums capture a moment at the height of Siegmund Lubin's career, in 1916 fire and war crippled his business, but Joe revealed what had driven the final nail in the studio's coffin.

Joe: It cost them \$35,000 to stage that scene. You have this one spectacular event that occurs. The rest of the film was fairly mediocre in terms of the story, in terms of the action, the directing, and that was the problem.

Tukufu: Joe explains how just as his business was teetering on the brink, a new film was released that was everything Lubin's films were not.

Joe: In the early months of 1915 D. W. Griffith released his famous film "*The Birth Of A Nation*". And that changed the rules of movie making over night. The acting was top notch proved what the cinema could become. By 1916 the Lubin company folded he went bankrupt. And in 1923 he died.

Tukufu: I've lived in Philadelphia for years and I had no idea of the role of this city in the birth of film in the United States. And these photo albums are an essential and important part of that valuable history.

Billie: I feel really grateful that my dad had the foresight to save them rather than that piece of history being lost.

Tukufu: So, what do you want to do with your photo albums now?

Billie: I would like to see them placed somewhere where the public could have access to them. Where they'd remain a part of history.



Tukufu: During the course of my investigation I found several people here in Philadelphia who are just extremely interested in helping you do just that.

Billie: That's great.

Tukufu: Thank you very much.