If it can be said that the Rocket locomotive is more like a co-star than a prop in Buster Keaton’s Our Hospitality (1923), then the gentleman’s hobby-horse surely merits the status of supporting player. That self-propelled mode of transportation makes only a brief appearance in the film, as Buster’s character glides with effortless kicks down the dusty streets of early New York City. Nevertheless, the sight of Keaton astride this forerunner of the bicycle brings several laughs and leaves a lasting impression.

Several biographers record the fact that Keaton gave the replica hobby-horse that appears in Our Hospitality to the Smithsonian Institution in 1924, but the circumstances of his unusual donation have been left obscure. In 2010, while attending a conference in Florida, I broached the subject with my friend and colleague Paul F. Johnston, Curator in the Division of Work and Industry at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History. Dr. Johnston was kind enough to search the accession files upon his return to

Vergil E. Noble works as an archaeologist for the National Park Service in Lincoln, Nebraska. His previous two articles for the Chronicle concerned the complex family history of Buster Keaton’s mother, Myra Cutler Keaton.

Buster Keaton’s hobby-horse today. (Courtesy of National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution)

Washington and provided me with copies of relevant documents.¹

I later communicated with Associate Curator Jane Rogers, Division of Culture and the Arts, who provided current information on the hobby-horse. She also was extremely helpful in making arrangements for its retrieval from a special Smithsonian curatorial facility and the production of a new digital photograph, published here for the first time.

While some questions are still unanswered, my inquiries and additional research into the subject shed new light on this interesting footnote to the film and Keaton’s biography.

Originally released close on the heels of Keaton’s episodic first independent feature, Three Ages (1923), Our Hospitality is a wonderful period piece that parodies the storied feud between the Hatfield and McCoy families (though the film spans the period 1810 to 1830, several decades earlier than the actual backcountry blood-war). Much like Keaton’s later masterpiece, The General (1926), which was also drawn from true events, the picture has garnered much-deserved praise for the lavish attention to historical detail in the staging of every scene.

The most interesting prop employed in Our Hospitality is the truly splendid steam locomotive fabricated by the Keaton studios and inspired by its namesake, Robert Stephenson’s Rocket, which was built in 1829 at Newcastle upon Tyne for England’s Liverpool and Manchester Railway. Similar locomotives were imported to the United States from England after 1830, and their manufacture in the U.S. soon followed. Indeed, as Buster
Curator Paul E. Garber on the Keaton hobby-horse after its delivery to the Smithsonian in 1924. (Underwood and Underwood, Washington, D.C., author's collection)

Keaton acknowledged when interviewed on this subject, the engine and especially the cars assembled for the film also incorporate key attributes from the fourth train built in America, the legendary DeWitt Clinton, which began operating in 1831 on New York’s Mohawk and Hudson Railroad.

The ultimate fate of Keaton’s Rocket is unrecorded. When it later appeared in Al St. John’s short, The Iron Mule (1925), the reproduction train was already badly deteriorated from exposure to the elements, so relegation to the scrapheap soon thereafter seems likely.

Faring better and surviving to this day, thanks to preservation at the Smithsonian Institution, was the gentleman’s hobby-horse from Our Hospitality.

Known in Europe as the draisine (so named for Karl Drais von Sauerbronn, the German who invented it in 1817), the pedal-less precursor of the bicycle and its immediate successors came to be known by many other names. Denis Johnson, a British cartwright, began production of an improved version he called the “pedestrian curriole” or “velocipede” after 1818. However, much simpler terms like the “hobby-horse” or “dandy horse” quickly caught on with the public, many of whom viewed such vehicles with derision as foppish contrivances.

By the summer of 1819, riding a hobby-horse had become something of a mania among well-to-do young gentlemen, and even daring young ladies, throughout England. The craze then quickly spread to America, where hobby-horses appeared with alarming frequency in major cities of the eastern seaboard. Indeed, it was not long before the speedy contraptions and their riders came to be seen as menaces to safety, careening with apparent abandon down city streets and sidewalks. Anticipating the negative reactions to skateboarding in our own time, many communities on both sides of the Atlantic banned the operation of hobby-horses from public byways, which limited their popularity and hastened their demise.

Some have argued that Keaton staged the principal narrative of Our Hospitality in the 1830s partly to take comedic advantage of the mechanical oddities in use at that time. Unquestionably, the challenges of early train travel are humorously exploited and entirely appropriate to the period. The appearance of a gentleman’s hobby-horse in the film, on the other hand, is arguably anachronistic, since that short-lived fad had become passé within a few years of its introduction to America. Yet Keaton’s character, Willie McKay, is no avant-garde dandy. His rather haughty use of a vehicle that was once the plaything of the smart set, but had become by then outmoded, should perhaps be seen instead as fitting Willie’s humble station in life and consistent with his dreams of advancement.

Whether Keaton intended such subtle nuances, or was simply going after laughs by means of the odd-looking hobby-horse, there is no disputing the great pains that were taken in its faithful reproduction. Indeed, upon the film’s release in late November of 1923, this was apparent to noted authorities on historic technology at the Smithsonian Institution. Accordingly, the Keaton studio would soon receive what must have been a most surprising
letter from W. deC. Ravenel, Administrative Assistant to the museum's Secretary.

Ravenel's letter of December 7, 1923, addressed generically to "Buster Keaton Studios, 1205 Lillian Way, Hollywood" (a street address that does not exist), expressed the pleasure of several museum staffers who witnessed Our Hospitality when it opened in Washington. Noting that the Curator of Mechanical Technology, Carl W. Mitman, was then mounting a major exhibit on the development of transportation, Ravenel applauded the "very accurate" reproduction hobby-horse. Moreover, because the Smithsonian had nothing to represent that particular form of vehicle, on behalf of the institution he politely solicited a donation of the replica, assuring great appreciation for compliance with the request.

Three weeks later, on December 29, business manager Lou Anger answered Ravenel on Buster Keaton Productions letterhead. Expressing regret for the tardy reply, "due to Mr. Keaton's absence from the city," Anger wrote that Mr. Keaton had indicated that he would be glad to donate the vehicle to the Smithsonian "upon its return to the studio from an exhibition in another city." This suggests that the hobby-horse was then being used to promote the film in theaters during premier engagements.

More than six weeks passed before another letter was sent to the Smithsonian, this time from press agent Harry Brand on the Los Angeles letterhead of Joseph M. Schenck Motion Picture Enterprises. Dated February 18, 1924, Brand's letter was received in Washington on the 23rd. The body reads: "We are expressing to you to-day a replica of the 'hobby horse' vehicle used in the Buster Keaton picture, Our Hospitality." Buster Keaton is keenly elated over your very kind letter of December 7th, and this reproduction is presented by him to the Smithsonian Institution." Before passing the letter on for filing, Ravenel penciled a brief request near the top, "Please let me see my letter. R," so that he might refresh his memory before dictating a reply.

His reply of February 28, written to Buster Keaton himself (and this time at the correct Lillian Way address), gratefully acknowledges receipt of the hobby-horse and states that the reproduction "fills an important place in the series of specimens in the National Museum illustrating the history of the development of land transportation." Ravenel astutely perceived Keaton's fondness for intricate contraptions and, in conclusion, notes that he is sending under separate cover two Smithsonian bulletins cataloguing the mechanical engineering and watercraft collections of the museum. Apparently he was referring to Bulletin 119 (1922) and Bulletin 127 (1923), both compiled by Curator Mitman. The former publication focused on motors, locomotives, and self-propelled vehicles, whereas the latter dealt with all manner of aquatic transportation.

The acquisition of Keaton's hobby-horse was recorded for posterity in a press release copyrighted and distributed by the firm of Underwood and Underwood (a major producer of stereographic images and, after 1910, a pioneer in news photography), dated February 27, 1924. I found this picture quite fortuitously on eBay and immediately purchased it from the seller, a gallery in Texas that had acquired it with hundreds of others from The Detroit News files.

In the delightful image, legendary Curator Paul E. Garber suggests a propulsion kick on the sidewalk outside the Smithsonian's "Castle" building. The caption snipe pasted to the back of the print describes the vehicle as "an 1818 model bicycle called at the time a 'pedestrian currice' or 'hobby horse,'" and further explains that it was built for Buster Keaton, the "well known comedian." Surprisingly, however, the caption also claims that the hobby-horse was assembled "according to plans submitted by the Smithsonian Institution and was so perfect that it has been permanently placed in the museum."

Although it might have been reasonable for the Keaton studio to seek such authoritative assistance in the design of authentic-looking props for Our Hospitality, nothing in the acquisition correspondence even hints at the Smithsonian's prior involvement with manufacture of the reproduction. Moreover, studio staff presumably could have acquired adequate drawings and specifications from a number of institutions in southern California. It seems likely, then, that the writer of the photo caption simply got the facts of the matter wrong when describing the picture from notes, resulting in that spurious claim being repeated in newspapers across the country (a stamp on the back indicates The Detroit News printed the news photo on March 13, 1924).

In any case, the hobby-horse was accessioned by the Smithsonian's Transportation Collection and apparently was installed at the national museum as part of Mitman's transportation history exhibit, where it remained for many years. Although it is not clear how long it was on view in Washington, in 1972 the hobby-horse was transferred to the Franklin Institute, a major science museum in Philadelphia, by terms of a loan agreement. Described only as a "modern facsimile of an 1818 velocipede," the object's value for insurance purposes was estimated at $300 (reflecting the replacement cost for a run-of-the-mill replica, since its associative value as a point.
relic of the silent-film era was not taken into consideration at the time).

The hobby-horse was exhibited in Philadelphia for almost 14 years. When the object was returned to the Smithsonian on March 13, 1986, curators at the museum apparently began to reconsider its classification in the museum catalogue. The Smithsonian, it seems, had acquired a genuine hobby-horse two decades earlier, in 1964, filling the gap in their transportation collections that the reproduction was meant to fill only temporarily. Moreover, by the 1980s, the reproduction’s unique association with the early film industry and a major artist of the screen had come to be clearly recognized. Accordingly, it was now viewed as historically significant in its own right, and on March 24, 1987, it was transferred from the Division of Transportation to the Division of Community Life (later the Division of Music, Sports, and Entertainment; now the Division of Culture and the Arts). At last, Keaton’s hobby-horse found its proper place of repose in the national collections.

Long before then, of course, the Smithsonian had grown from a single museum—the original 19th-century “Castle” building where Keaton’s hobby-horse was received in 1924—to more than a dozen museums devoted to varied facets of American cultural and natural history. Furthermore, the diverse collections are now so vast that it is no longer possible to store them properly in the public museum buildings. For that reason, the precious Keaton donation is now kept under highly controlled conditions at one of several “off-site” curatorial facilities maintained by the Smithsonian collections staff.

Except for a brief loan to the Suntory Museum in Japan, the hobby-horse from Our Hospitality has not been on public view for a quarter-century, and it has never been shown as a tribute to the unique artistry of Buster Keaton. While his many fans may well rejoice in the fact that historians now acknowledge his Smithsonian gift as a true national treasure, we also long for the opportunity to see it exhibited in proper context. Let us hope that the time will come soon.

1 Much of the pertinent correspondence subsequently has been posted online by museum staffers at http://blog.photography.si.edu/2010/05/04/buster-keaton-donation-to-smithsonian/.
2 The actual studio address was 1025 Lillian Way, Los Angeles, but the Post Office apparently was skilled at making deliveries to intended recipients in those simpler days.
3 Paul Garber (1899-1992) joined the Smithsonian in 1920 and was later instrumental in creation of its National Air and Space Museum. In recognition of Garber’s many accomplishments, the museum’s preservation, restoration, and storage facility in Suitland, Maryland, bears his name.

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Paulette Dubost
1910 - 2011

The Chronicle is sorry to report the passing of Paulette Dubost, who died in France on September 21, 2001, just two weeks away from her 101st birthday.

A veteran of almost 200 movies, Dubost worked with luminaries including Max Ophüls, Jean Renoir, Preston Sturges, Louis Malle, Marcel Carné and Jacques Tournier and is perhaps best known for her role as the flirtatious Lisette in Renoir’s La Règle du Jeu (1939).

To Damfinos, however, Dubost will always be treasured as the leading lady who wins a rare and wonderful smile from Keaton at the end of Le Roi des Champs-Elysées (1934).

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We’re on Facebook!

Go to http://facebook.com
Type in “Buster Keaton”

And look for this image!

Wanted – Your Buster Moments

Tell us a story! The Keaton Chronicle is starting a new semi-regular column that is all about you! We want to hear about how you discovered Buster, stumbled upon your favorite piece of Busterabilia, your reaction to a memorable screening of one of Buster’s movies, or even a special moment from one of the conventions!

We’re looking for stories of about 300 to 500 words. Please send them to Patty at moviegirl1926@yahoo.com. If you’ve got any (or choose to take any) high-resolution (300 dpi) photographs to accompany your story, we would love to see those, too.

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Mark Your Calendars!

The 18th Annual International Buster Keaton Convention will be held on October 5 & 6, 2012, in Muskegon, Michigan.
Our Hospitality: Ultimate Edition

The Art of Buster Keaton

and printing artifacts for clues, especially since the 16mm was printed through the smaller aperture for sound movies, cropping off height and width.

This short version has puzzled the scholars who have studied it. As the narrator explains, “The theory most agreed upon by the film historians who have examined the print is that this 49-minute version was a work print created by Keaton during the editing process. It suggests that he first assembled the film with careful attention to the dramatic story line, making sure the story functioned on an emotional level before he embellished it with peripheral comedy sequences. The mystery of Hospitality’s origin may never be solved.” I think I can solve it.

First, I cannot imagine how it could be physically possible to assemble a movie initially as an abridgment and then pad it out to full length. Second, as soon as I started watching the Blu-ray I noticed that this could not have been Buster’s cut, for after the opening credits the first thing we see on screen is a title card that reads, “Here young McKay was raised by his aunt…” That’s as bad as starting a story with the word “Meanwhile.” It makes no sense. “Here.” Where’s “Here”? The entire establishing sequence was obviously deleted. Let’s do some exploring.

Metro’s annual sales convention, held at the Hotel Astor in Manhattan, NY, in June 1923 and covered in the trade press (Variety June 14, 1923, p. 20), announced Buster’s three upcoming projects: Three Ages for a September 1923 release, an untitled project for November 1923, and another untitled project for March 1924. All were promoted as five-reelers, and various Loew’s exhibitors bid on them with the understanding that they would be five-reelers. Three Ages was indeed five (originally—later six) and Sherlock Jr. was five, as well, but the November 1923 release, Our Hospitality, didn’t fit the mold.

Among the shareholders of Buster Keaton Productions were Marcus Loew’s two sons and Joe Schenck’s brother Nicholas of Metro. (Buster himself was never a shareholder.) They were surely worried when they learned of Buster’s rough-cut. It was too long. I surmise that, to protect themselves, they brought the movie into line. They had a lab make a duplicate of the rough cut and took it to the editors of their choice to chop it down to the contractual five reels.

Those anonymous editors stripped the film to its bare bones. To force-fit it into five reels, they restructured the prologue as a flashback and deleted many comedy bits that did not directly drive the story line. Because this short rough cut was only a trial version, there was no need yet to reshoot the titles, which is why the above title was retained with its original wording. Had the studio gone ahead with the five-reel version, you can be sure that this and any other titles that no longer worked would have been rewritten.

But the shareholders relented. Seeing that this five-reel abomination was devoid of any entertainment value and would never earn back its investment, they gave in, probably at Joe Schenck’s urging more than for any other reason, and allowed Buster to continue refining his own cut of the movie, which he eventually got down to the definitive seven reels. Metro/Loew’s must have issued letters of explanation to the exhibitors who had bid on the property.

There’s also another bit of evidence, not directly related but nonetheless tantalizing. Buster must have test-screened a slightly

See BluRay, Page 6

Ranjit Sandhu has been a van driver, typesetter, carnival concessionaire, dishwasher, projectionist, busboy, stage hand, lecturer, copy editor, curmudgeon, graphic designer and janitor, but has never been a mime, clown, or puppeteer; the only things worth being. He’s spent decades writing a book on Gore Vidal’s Caligula. Any Damfinos fluent in Italian/French are encouraged to get in touch to assist with the concluding chapter.

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The KEATON CHRONICLE

Page 5
Letters to the Editor

Roscoe’s Raw Deal

I was flipping through issues of Photoplay on archive.org and came across this article. Usually this column, called Speaking of Pictures by James R. Quirk, is a scattering of different subjects, but this time he devoted the whole page to a single subject.

From Photoplay, Volume XXVIII, No. 3, August 1925, column: Speaking of Pictures by James R. Quirk:

“I would like to see Roscoe Arbuckle come back to the screen.

More than that, I believe that the vast majority of the people of the United States, if they would stop to consider the matter, will share that desire with me.

The American nation prides itself upon its spirit of fair play. We like the whole world to look upon America as the place where every man gets a square deal.

Are you sure that Roscoe Arbuckle is getting one today?

I’m not.

Now that time has given us a fair perspective, let us consider the whole thing.

The unfortunate accident that happened in San Francisco some years ago is regrettable. But Roscoe Arbuckle was tried by a jury of his peers and acquitted of all guilt in the matter. And no man since time began was ever tried under more adverse circumstances.

In the first place, his trial took place in a city violently prejudiced against motion picture people, because San Francisco had been unable to attract the movie colony away from Los Angeles—and the rivalry between the two cities is proverbial.

The press of the city both led and reflected this attitude.

I do not think that any fair-minded historian would deny the bitterness in the attitude of the press.

It was the first great screen scandal, which added to its news value. I actually believe, and some of the best legal minds in the country have agreed with me in this, that if the accident to Virginia Rappe had happened in a hotel party given by someone whose name was unknown to the public, or the newspapers, that affair would have ended with the coroner’s inquest.

Also, the time has arrived when some things can be commented upon that have previously been kept quiet. Because of the unfortunate nature of the accident, and the immediately hostile tone of the San Francisco press, it was impossible to secure witnesses, who might have provided many important facts in Arbuckle’s defense.

There was a natural reluctance on the part of people to involve themselves in a sensational case.

But that is a very human weakness. It would have been a heroic soul, who, at that time, rushed in to sacrifice itself to save a man being daily painted by the press as an unnatural monster.

Here, too, is a tremendously important point to consider. The victim of the accident was dead. A great criminal lawyer, who had tried seventy-seven murder cases, once told me that it was impossible to bring out the truth about a dead woman before an American jury—if the facts reflected her character.

That is a fine sentiment, but it may be mistaken chivalry. It is hard to say anything against the character of one who is dead, but I believe charity can go too far when to defend the reputation of the dead we bury the innocent living.

Roscoe Arbuckle owes two hundred thousand dollars. He hasn’t taken advantage of bankruptcy, as so many of our upright business citizens do. He’s been working quietly and steadily behind the scenes as an obscure “gag” man, and devoting the greater part of his earnings to paying the debts incumbent upon his trial—his defense in a trial in which he was acquitted.

He has lived a decent, orderly existence, as everybody knows. He has suffered greatly—very greatly, in many ways. But if ever a man has by his life evidenced good faith, Arbuckle has done it since his disaster.

Arbuckle made clean pictures always. He was never guilty of vulgarity. Children could see them with safety. Aside from his screen personality, there isn’t a better comedy director in the world. I hold that he is today entitled to a chance to earn the money which his talents are worth, in order that he may pay off the debt incurred in defending himself.

My plea is for fair play.

It is up to the fair-minded and church-going American public to demonstrate that spirit of fair play embodied in our Constitution—and more than that, their belief in the teachings of the Man of Jerusalem.

The folks who are against everything from evolution to Sunday movies will welcome this opportunity to write letters against Roscoe Arbuckle. Having no business of their own to mind they devote themselves to expressing “public opinion.” They influence our legislation because they talk loudest. They smugly set themselves up as censors of your most private affairs—and let you let them get away with it. So it is up to you, if you agree with this plea for a square deal, to exert yourself.

If you feel as I do, I suggest that you write to Will Hays and say so. His address is 522 Fifth Avenue, New York City.”

I found a couple other articles of interest that mentioned him; this first one is about the premiere night of “The Lost World”:

The outstanding feature of the evening was the reception given to Roscoe Arbuckle, when Bert Lytell, as master of ceremonies, introduced him. A roar of real applause shook the house and testified a little to the feeling of the people for this inhabitant of another sort of “lost world.”

This one is a letter written to the magazine, Volume XXIX, August 1925:

“A Complaint Against the Small but Organized Minority” (Bennington, Vt.)

From time to time you graciously publish letters from some of us who desire Roscoe Arbuckle’s return to the screen quite as much because of the principle of fair-dealing involved as because we want his pictures. Yesterday I received a letter from one of the leading producers who states that although the majority of the American public like to see Arbuckle films, they do not create a great enough demand for them, so are compelled to bow to the small but organized minority. Can one of his pictures be released so picture patrons can have their lawful right to a voice in the matter, through the box-office, which never says one thing when it means another?

M.E.K.”

— via email

Paisley Parker

BluRay, from Page 5

longer version at one time, for some data from a longer version filtered into the press kits, which contained the names of some characters who are not identified by name in the seven-reel final cut.

EDITOR’S NOTE: The Chronicle published Patricia Eliot Tobias and David Macleod’s articles on Paul E. Gierucki’s find in Volume 17, Issue 2 (Spring 2009): So What’s All The Fuss About Hospitality?

Get Well Soon

All of us at The Keaton Chronicle send our best wishes for a speedy recovery to Damfino Membership Co-Director Tim Hart. You’re in our thoughts, Tim.
Searching For Buster
By JOHN BENGTSON
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Buster Takes the Plunge

Production stills from Our Hospitality (1923) show that Keaton’s mechanical waterfall set was built over a “T” shaped pool. As confirmed by the Sanborn Fire Insurance maps, at the time several Hollywood studios had large rectangular tanks on their backlots for filming water scenes, including the Chaplin Studio and the Hal Roach Studios, but only the former Robert Brunton Studios, now the site of Paramount, had a pool shown to be “T” shaped. I also rightly suspected that Buster’s high dive stunt concluding Hard Luck (1921) was filmed at this “T” shaped pool. For that scene they disguised the “leg” of the pool with a brick design on a paper cover, making the pool appear rectangular. The diving board was built across from the paper, allowing Buster to dive through it, into the pool’s “leg,” and appear to be diving into brick.

Over the years I have scrutinized dozens of vintage aerial photos of the Brunton/Paramount Studios looking for signs of this pool, but to no avail. When www.hollywoodphotographs.com upgraded the browsing resolution of its photos for sale however, I finally found several clear views of this elusive pool, as shown here. If you search “United Studios in Hollywood” at the site, and enlarge the photo (STU-118-1) twice, you’ll see another clear view of the pool, by the fence in the lower left corner.

The pool stood within what is now the NE corner of Windsor Boulevard and Melrose Avenue, the southern entrance to Paramount, only a few blocks away from Eleanor and Lillian Way, where the Keaton Studio stood.

John Bengtson is the author of film location books about Buster Keaton, Charlie Chaplin, and now, with his latest work Silent Visions in print, about Harold Lloyd. Read John’s blog at http://SilentLocations.WordPress.com

The pool, and studio barn behind it, appear in this aerial view and in this pose from Hard Luck. Melrose runs east in the aerial view.

The pool was located to the right of the Paramount south gate on Melrose.
Our Hospitality
©1923, Renewed 1951
on VHS ©1995, on DVD ©1999, on BluRay ©2011

Sharing Keaton:
The Rights and Wrongs of Copyrights

By David B. Pearson

I think that everybody reading this is a fan of Buster Keaton. We do love his films, and we want to share them with everybody we can. It's natural. We love introducing Buster to family, friends, neighbors and co-workers.

But being a fan doesn't mean one need be a saphead. Private showings are one thing. Public showings are another.

Some people have gotten the idea that it's okay to show copyrighted films in public as long as one doesn't charge money—which I guess is the same kind of logic that reasons it's okay to rob a bank as long as one doesn't spend the money.

It just isn't true. That's exactly the type of actions those copyright notices on the DVD boxes are meant to stop!

In Buster's case much of his best silent work is no longer copyrighted, meaning it's in the "public domain" because the original copyrights have run out. All the Arbuckle Comique films are in the public domain. So are all of Buster's short films, as are Thé General, College, and Steamboat Bill Jr.

The rest of the silent films are copyrighted. Three Ages, Our Hospitality, Sherlock Jr., The Navigator, Seven Chances, Go West, and Battling Butler are owned by Douris UK, the successors to The Rohauer Collection. The Cameraman, Spite Marriage, as well as five of the seven M-G-M talkies, are owned by Warners. Parlor, Bedroom & Bath and Speak Easily are in the public domain. All of Buster's Educational and Columbia shorts are still copyrighted, and so are the vast majority of Buster's later sound films.

However, simply because a film is in the public domain—like, for example, Cops or One Week—does not give one the right to take the KINO DVD version of the films, rent a room with a big TV, and sell tickets. Besides the original film copyrights, other copyrights exist such as the musical score, possible color tinting, the editing, and alternate footage. New film intertitles, and even how the film is framed can also factor into new copyrights for otherwise public domain films. This applies not only for KINO, but all producers, including public domain DVD or VHS vendors. In fact, in the absolute sense, the only way one can be certain of having a public domain film free of all copyrights is to strike one off one's own 35mm nitrate film print of a known public domain film—and how many people have their own 35mm print of The General (or even My Wife's Relations) lying around?

In conclusion, if one wants to show a Buster film in public, and one isn't sure if it's legal—DON'T DO IT! It's best to ask around first, and to ask somebody who knows.

David B. Pearson is a starving Mississippi-based graphic designer who happens to have created and maintains Silent-Movies.com. He is also currently working on a book on silent comedy, or a book on advanced Baccarat strategy, depending on his mood.