



Jacksonville And The Movie Industry

Though originally centered around the Theater District of New York City, silent film production companies soon discovered New England winters too harsh for year-round filming. In the winter of 1908 cast and crew of the production company Kalem Players boarded a train for Jacksonville, bringing the fledgling industry south. Others would soon follow.

Lodging in a boarding house on Talleyrand Avenue in Jacksonville, the company came by boat across the St. Johns River to film their movies. Arriving with the Kalem Players, 20-year-old actress Gene Gauntier wrote their arrival was "epoch making, establishing as it did new artistic standards, particularly in atmosphere, and inaugurating the custom of traveling far and wide in search of effective and authentic backgrounds." Jacksonville and northeast Florida provided these authentic backgrounds splendidly, with sandy beaches, swamps and bayous, live oaks and Spanish moss, palm trees and old plantation homes. Further south historic St. Augustine offered quaint streets and homes, the ornate Ponce de Leon Hotel and the picturesque Ft. Castillo de San Marcos.

Between the years 1908 and 1916 more than 30 production companies filmed in Jacksonville and the city became known as the "Winter Film Capital of the World." A young Georgia boy named Oliver Hardy got his start in Jacksonville in the film "Outwitting Dad." In 1915 Metro Pictures started right here in Jacksonville and, through a series of mergers, later became Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer - or MGM - Studios.

But not everyone loved the new industry. Some found it scandalous; others found it a nuisance. The presence of movie companies in Jacksonville became a political issue in the 1916 mayoral race. John W. Martin, the city's newly-elected mayor echoed the sentiments of those who wished to see the movie industry gone. The welcome mat was rolled up. The industry packed their bags and moved to Hollywood, California, and the rest, as they say, is history.



Actress Gene Gauntier
Herman McEachin Collection




Roseland Boarding House, home to Kalem Players, Production company in Jacksonville
Herman McEachin Collection



Klutho Studios film crew, ca. 1915
State Library & Archives of Florida

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