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Blown Saves: The Fate of Baseball's Silent Cinema

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Over the past three decades, baseball films—motion pictures that take baseball and baseball players as their primary content—have served as the focus for a number of scholarly studies of the game and its place in American culture. Scholars including Gary Dickerson (1991), Howard Good (1997), Stephen Wood and David Pincus (2003), Marshall Most and Robert Rudd (2006), and others have found the intersection of the national pastime and Hollywood film a rich site for cultural analysis.¹ The game of baseball is said to embody the most fundamental and significant values and virtues of the nation. Films about baseball offer more than simple reflections of an idealized view of baseball. They are also reflections of an idealized view of American culture.

Cultural studies of American baseball cinema have focused primarily on films produced since the mid-twentieth century. While this surely reflects scholars' inclination to value recent cinematic artifacts which might better speak to contemporary society, it is also due to the challenges posed by obtaining motion pictures from earlier decades. Time and chemistry, combined with the economics and politics of film preservation, have left us a ragged patchwork of films from the first half of the twentieth century. As is the case with motion picture artifacts of all kinds produced before the widespread use of safety film, most baseball films of the silent era are lost, while others existed tenuously for decades in an original medium that made accessing them nearly impossible.

Yet the surviving baseball feature films of the early era exist in sufficient numbers to constitute a useable sample, one with the potential to tell us much about American culture, then and now. They are of consequence not simply because they can increase the data set available for cultural analysis. Of even greater significance is the two-decade period in which they were produced. At precisely the time when baseball was consolidating its primacy as the national

pastime, motion pictures established a primacy of their own, "becoming the most popular and influential medium of culture in the United States."² As did the game of baseball, motion pictures "developed during critical years of change in the social structure of American life when a new social order was emerging in the modern industrial city ... (and) the United States transformed itself into a predominantly urban industrial society."³ And just as the idealized view of baseball championed by its Progressive Era proponents emphasized the ballpark's ability to build a strong sense of community in an increasingly fragmented urban environment,⁴ "local theaters across the nation were instrumental in helping bring together their communities."⁵

The relationship of baseball and film was not just synchronous, it was symbiotic as well. Even as baseball constructed and promoted its ideology of an ideal game for an exceptional American nation, the emerging medium of moving pictures became perhaps its most ardent proponent. Produced during and immediately after the Progressive Era, baseball features of the silent era have much to tell us much about that defining time period. Baseball films of the twentieth century presented the player/protagonist as a model citizen in a burgeoning industrial society — as did the game itself — and this archetype is immersed in issues of community, class, race, and gender.

This paper summarizes research conducted by the author since 2009 to determine, to the extent possible, the fate of those baseball feature films made in the nitrate era⁶; which of them were lost and which still survive, in what form they exist, and where they are located? It is thus intended as both a definition of the sample of early baseball cinema available for study, and a prelude to potential historical and cultural analyses of baseball film.

The Nitrate Film Era

Given the prominent, even privileged status baseball began to assume at the outset of the twentieth century, it is no surprise pioneering filmmakers turned their cameras to the national pastime. Perhaps the first and certainly the oldest surviving depiction of the game is the Edison Company's 1898 Kinetoscope *The Ball Game*. A mere 30 seconds long, it shows players running from the batter's box to first base. Most of the commercial motion pictures made in the film industry's infancy were similarly brief scenes primarily intended for exhibition in nickelodeons. The sheer novelty of seeing glimpses of moving images would soon wear off and longer entertainments evolved to hold the interest of increasingly sagacious viewers. These were typically "one-reelers" (about 10 to 12 minutes long) intended for projection on a screen. They were often hurriedly performed stage plays, travelogues, newsreels or vaudeville acts filmed by a stationary camera. Popular baseball-related shorts featured

the game's stars with brief bits of game action (e.g., 1907's *Christy Mathewson and the New York National Team*).⁷ From their inception to the mid-1910s, commercial films rapidly grew longer and more technically sophisticated. By 1917, Hollywood was producing the feature-length narratives that would come to be called "Classic Hollywood."⁸

Film scholars hold these particular films— narrative, feature-length theatrical releases— in especial regard for several reasons. Narrative motion pictures (fictional or dramatized stories, as opposed to documentaries or actuality footage) allow film makers the widest range of artistic expression. The term "feature film" indicates the length, not the merit of a motion picture and is defined by the editors of the *American Film Institute Catalog of Feature Films* as "films of four reels or more, produced in the United States."⁹ As with novels in literature, feature-length films are more fully formed narratives and thus more substantial artifacts by virtue of their very length. Theatrical releases are films produced for wide distribution and exhibition in theaters (as opposed to those made expressly for television or other purposes). Restricting the study to theatrical releases permits the comparative assessment of like artifacts, including films' acceptance by mass audiences through box office receipts.

Of the roughly 120 narrative baseball feature films released to theaters since 1915, fully one-third were produced prior to 1938. Most were silent films. And like all motion pictures made before the widespread use of acetate safety film in the 1940s and 1950s, these baseball features were filmed on film stock made of cellulose nitrate plastic, commonly called nitrate film.

Nitrate film has made the study of pre-1950s cinema extraordinarily problematic. The medium of choice for still photography at the outset of the twentieth century, nitrate proved the only suitable medium for the first moving images. It was valued for its vivid images and rich, almost luminescent tones, attributable to its high silver content. But nitrate is also highly unstable, resulting in two troubling imperfections. First, it is in a perpetual state of decay and decomposes rather rapidly if not stored in near-ideal conditions (low humidity and low temperature). Severe decomposition can take place in as little as twenty years.¹⁰ Through simple neglect, much of America's early cinema simply congealed into a noxious, solid mass before disintegrating into a fine brown powder.¹¹

Second, nitrate film stock is highly flammable, even explosive in the right conditions. Its chemical composition is similar to guncotton, which is used in the manufacture of high explosives. It burns twenty times faster than wood, self-igniting in the right circumstances at temperatures as low as 106 degrees Fahrenheit and giving off toxic fumes as it burns.¹²

Tales of tragedies involving nitrate film are legion. Fires in nitrate film storage facilities destroyed entire collections of thousands of films (to say nothing of the loss of life). No major studio escaped the ravages of film vault fires.

As early as 1914, a fire at the Lubin Manufacturing Company's main movie studio led to the loss of hundreds of films (some of which had yet to be released), including actuality footage of the ambulance carrying a fatally wounded President William McKinley from the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo in 1901.¹³ A decade later, Paramount lost an estimated 185,000 feet of film shot from 1913 to 1924 in a fire at its East Coast Vault.¹⁴ In 1937, a fire wiped out forty-two individual vaults in the Fox Film Corporation's Little Ferry, New Jersey, film storage facility, destroying most of the negatives and fine-grain masters of its pre-1935 collection.¹⁵ Fox would experience subsequent losses from fire, as would RKO Pictures, in the 1950s.¹⁶

It was not uncommon practice for studios to store all distribution copies and negatives of films together in the same storage facility, in the process ensuring the thorough destruction of many film artifacts in a single vault fire. When a 1934 fire consumed 15 acres of the Warner Bros. Burbank studios, it took with it twenty years' worth of films not only from Warner Bros., but also from studios Warner had acquired, including Vitagraph and First National Films.¹⁷ The inventory destroyed in the fire from the First National collection might have contained the lost 1927 baseball feature *Babe Comes Home* starring Babe Ruth in his second starring role in a silent film. In 1965, MGM suffered a film vault explosion and fire that destroyed hundreds of silent films and early talkies from MGM and its predecessors, Metro Pictures, Goldwyn Pictures, and Louis B. Mayer Pictures.¹⁸ Possibly stored in a separate archive, the 1927 MGM baseball film *Slide, Kelly, Slide* may have survived.

Filmmakers and manufacturers of film stock were always acutely aware of the problematic nature of nitrate and their search for safer, more durable alternatives predates the Hollywood film studios. Efforts to develop a "safety film" usually focused on the cellulose acetate family of plastics.¹⁹ A diacetate film was marketed by Eastman Kodak in 1909. This early safety film proved to be too brittle, subject to breakage, prone to shrinking, and more expensive than nitrate film. A somewhat more practical polyester film was invented in 1941, but nitrate would eventually be supplanted by the triacetate base, developed in the late 1940s and in wide use by 1950.²⁰ The use of the far more stable acetate film types, along with heightened interest in older films as potential content for the newly emerging television industry, ensured the survival of most American films made after 1950. Every baseball feature film made since 1942 has survived and virtually all are commercially available.

The Politics of Preservation

The two inherent problems caused by the chemical instability of cellulose nitrate film — decomposition and volatility — combined to doom a significant

portion of the motion pictures made in the first half of the twentieth century. Yet, while most nitrate films were the victims of time, nature and neglect, others were victims of economics, culture, or politics. Many nitrate films were intentionally destroyed after their theatrical runs.

The intentional destruction of nitrate films took place for any number of reasons. As we have seen, the long-term storage of nitrate film poses tremendous risks. Studios did not find it convenient or cheap to store thousands of multi-reel motion pictures—negatives, masters, and copies—in facilities designed to minimize those risks.²¹ Lacking today's voracious digital media to absorb almost any film content available, studios at mid-century saw silent film storage vaults as combustible cost centers. Although the potential value of movies as content for the nascent medium of television was being recognized, it was believed silent films were a poor fit for televised programming. In 1948, Universal-International willfully destroyed virtually all of its remaining silent film inventory,²² including screen tests and trailers, ostensibly to recover the nitrate stock's silver content.²³ Universal's silent baseball feature *Hit and Run* (1924) somehow survived the purge. Another Universal baseball picture, *Trifling with Honor* (1923), apparently did not.

Modern audiences might have difficulty imagining the casual disposal of cellulose nitrate upon which a significant portion of the nation's cinematic heritage was stored. But another motivation for the destruction of nitrate-era films has a more contemporary ring: Piracy. Many studios pursued a policy of destroying the exhibition copies of their films, lest they find their way into a black market distribution system. Not only did pirating deny filmmakers the full profits of their works, pirated films also might compete with a studio's current releases for audience share. Films were routinely chopped to pieces with axes once a motion picture had completed its theatrical run.²⁴

It should be noted that not everyone associated with the motion picture industry was bent on destroying the films of the nitrate era. Efforts to preserve nitrate film from decay began not long after the first commercial films were made, but limited resources and copyright issues have always forced decisions about what was preserved and what was not.²⁵ As film preservationist Anthony Slide observes, "For every 'glamorous' restoration project, such as *A Star Is Born* or *Lawrence of Arabia*, there are literally hundreds of 'little' films, forgotten 'B' pictures, Westerns, and serials in desperate need of preservation."²⁶ To Slide's list might be added baseball films. Until *The Pride of the Yankees* was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Picture in 1942, baseball features were typically regarded as rather trivial entertainments—not the sort of "important pictures" one might expect to fare well in the triage that determined what was preserved and what might decay in a film vault.

Wins, Losses, No Decisions

Until recently, no one was certain just how many of the feature films of the nitrate era were lost. For decades, the widely accepted estimate among film preservationists was that 50 percent of all pre-1950s films and 75 percent of silent movies had been lost.²⁷ Those approximations were confirmed in a 2013 study commissioned by the National Film Preservation Board of the Library of Congress, which authoritatively reports the estimates to be accurate.²⁸

Baseball feature films have fared somewhat better in comparison to all motion pictures of the nitrate era, and to all silent films in particular. Of the forty-two baseball features produced on nitrate film from 1915 to 1950, at least twenty-eight are still in existence, a survival rate of 67 percent. However, this figure is somewhat misleading, skewed by the usually high number of baseball films produced in the final, “high-survival” years of the nitrate era (ten features released from 1942 to 1950). If instead, we look to the baseball film artifacts seldom analyzed by film scholars due to the difficulty of screening those features (i.e., the thirty-two baseball feature films produced between 1915 and 1937, which are the focus of this study), we find that at least eighteen are known to survive, a 55 percent survival rate. At least one and as many as three more baseball films of that era also exist, but either their condition or location is not definitively known. Including just one of those features in the total would raise the survival rate of pre-1940 baseball features to 59 percent, a rate significantly better than that of all motion pictures produced in the first half of the twentieth century.

The survival rate for silent-era baseball features is even more noteworthy. Twenty-five silent baseball features were produced from 1915 to 1928. Ten of these films are known to survive, a nearly 42 percent survival rate that is considerably better than the 25 percent rate of all silent movies. And as we shall see, the survival rates for nitrate baseball films in general and silent releases in particular might prove to be marginally higher at some point.

No ready explanation offers itself for why silent baseball features survive at a higher rate than other silent feature films. Historian and archivist David Pierce explains the capricious nature of film survival:

There is seemingly no rhyme or reason why certain films survived, as neither quality nor critical reputation determined their fates. The driving forces that retained and disposed of these films were typical of the industry that made them — economic, not artistic. With these factors working against them, plus the vulnerability of nitrate film stock to fire and deterioration, it is remarkable that any silent films survive.²⁹

While its survival rates may be comparatively better than those of other genres, the story of baseball’s silent cinema is not an entirely happy one. Given

the nature of nitrate film and the passage of time, a film of the silent era is presumed lost if there is no evidence of its preservation to date. While media reports of significant films resurfacing in places as unlikely as a New Hampshire barn³⁰ or a Norwegian mental institution³¹ give some hope, such discoveries are increasingly rare and seldom occur outside the carefully controlled environments of film archives. The eleven silent baseball features now considered lost are known to us only by references in paper archives. Such documents provide glimpses of what the films themselves might have offered, but little more. As the National Film Preservation Board's 2013 report on the preservation of silent films explains, "Extant advertising, still photos, and reviews can go only so far to communicate (a film's) effect. If we cannot view these films, we cannot accurately judge their purpose, their appeal and their import."³² Thus, we are left to speculate as to precisely what was lost, a process both tantalizing and frustrating to film scholars. One cannot help but wonder, for example, what the motion picture *As the World Rolls On* (1921) might have told us about both Negro League baseball and the racially segregated film industry of the 1920s. Produced for African American audiences, *As the World Rolls On* stars heavyweight boxing champion Jack Johnson as the mentor to a young athlete drifting into a life of crime. Jackson teaches him to box and play baseball and the young man goes on to play professionally for the Kansas City Monarchs of the Negro National League.

It is impossible to say with any certainty just how cinematic and baseball history would have benefited from the survival of the lost baseball features. Films like *Trifling with Honor* (1923), *Life's Greatest Game* (1924), and *Catch as Catch Can* (1927) might have told us more about the appeal of the melodrama—a Hollywood staple in the cinema of the 1920s—and how baseball provided a popular context for such films. The 1926 baseball Western *Out of the West* might have offered a better understanding of the early techniques of cinematic genre blending. The origins of attitudes about gambling in the game might be better understood through a film like Mike Donlin's *Right Off the Bat* (1915) which included a portrayal of gamblers attempting to fix the World Series five years before the Black Sox gambling scandal rocked baseball. And we might come to see some of the game's great players in a somewhat different light if not for the loss of the screen performances of baseball icons like Ty Cobb, who starred in *Somewhere in Georgia* (1916), John McGraw, who was featured in *Right Off the Bat*, and Babe Ruth playing the title character in *Babe Comes Home* (1927). Contemplating what insights the lost films of baseball cinema might have yielded is a difficult exercise to resist but ultimately an unproductive one.

Happily, a considerable number of the pre-1940 baseball motion pictures still exist for close examination. Many of the eighteen surviving films have been digitally restored. At least ten are commercially available and the rest can be viewed at various film archives across the country. It must be acknowledged

that these surviving films constitute a random sample of baseball's early cinema. Enough features have survived to provide breadth, with examples of a range of different productions—baseball comedies, melodramas, mysteries, even a baseball Western. What has been lost is depth.

The three oldest surviving silent baseball features were produced in 1917. The first to be released was *Shut Out in the Ninth*, a coming-of-age baseball comedy that might be regarded as an antecedent to later films like *The Bad News Bears* (1976) and *The Sandlot* (1993). The second 1917 release, *The Pinch Hitter*, introduced an even more enduring archetype—the baseball film protagonist as the naive bumpkin who becomes a baseball hero. The third baseball film of 1917, *One Touch of Nature*, is a romantic comedy that suggests baseball has the power to overcome class distinctions. *The Busher* (1919) established another staple of baseball cinema—the protagonist whose success in the minors and promotion to the big leagues goes to his head. The arrogant player must learn hard lessons in humility before achieving success on and off the field. It is a message about the role of the individual in baseball's ideology that would be repeated in dozens of baseball features, from *Casey at the Bat* (1927) to *Mr. 3000* (2004).

Released in 1920, *Headin' Home* marked Babe Ruth's film debut. The enduring impact the larger-than-life Ruth had not only on the game but on the larger culture is seen in later films, from the silent feature *Slide, Kelly, Slide* (1927) to the more contemporary *The Babe* (1992). However, the portrayal of the Bambino as shy and modest in *Headin' Home* defies the Ruthian stereotypes of later baseball films.

The surviving baseball films released between Ruth's 1920 feature *Headin' Home* and his lost 1927 film *Babe Comes Home* all share a unique distinction—each was an attempt to marry the already-established baseball genre with other film styles, as did the trio of lost 1920s baseball melodramas. These extant early experiments in genre-bending and blending included *Hit and Run* (1924), a Hoot Gibson Western with a decidedly baseball plot, the Hal Roach farce *The Battling Orioles* (1924) and a comedy tale of baseball players caught up in the Florida land boom, *The New Klondike* (1926). Combining the popular murder-mystery genre with baseball would produce two later films, the surviving feature *Death on the Diamond* (1934) and a film of undetermined fate, *Girls Can Play* (1937).

Casey at the Bat (1927) was the last of the surviving silent baseball feature films. A big-screen retelling of Ernest Lawrence Thayer's poem (with a twist to the poem's climax), the Wallace Beery comedy reflects the Ruthian influences of its silent predecessors. In contrast, the protagonist of *The Bush Leaguer* (1927) is the timid, bespectacled, absent-minded inventor Specs White who moonlights as a pitcher merely to finance his inventions. In an early attempt by Warner Bros. to incorporate a soundtrack, *The Bush Leaguer* was sent to

select theaters with a Vitaphone recording of music and sound effects. Two years later, the transitional film *Fast Company* was released in both a talking and a silent version, the latter for theaters that had yet to acquire a sound system. The comedy's hayseed-turned-hero screenplay was adapted from Ring Lardner and George M. Cohan's Broadway hit *Elmer the Great*. The new technology of fully synchronized movie sound made possible the Hollywood musical and baseball was the centerpiece of one of the first films of that genre. *They Learned About Women* (1930) featured vaudevillians Joseph T. Schenk and Gus Van as battery mates for the Blue Sox baseball club who moonlight as nightclub singers. As film replaced live vaudeville entertainment in the 1920s and 1930s, stage performers who were able made the move to the big screen, so it is not surprising that 1930's other baseball film, *Hot Curves*, featured vaudeville comedian Benny Rubin. Rubin plays catcher Benny Goldberg, signed by the Pittsburgh Cougars to attract more Jewish fans to the game. It is one of the first overt references to religion in baseball cinema and one of the last until 1989's *Bull Durham* and *Major League*.

Fireman, Save My Child (1932) was the first of three formulaic but very successful surviving baseball comedies starring Joe E. Brown (the others being *Elmer the Great* in 1933 and *Alibi Ike* in 1935). In all three of his baseball films, Brown plays a naive, egotistical, small-town ballplayer who is wronged in some way upon his arrival in the big leagues, disappears for a few games but returns in time to win the big game and the heart of his love interest. Brown brought star power to the role as one of the top-ten box office draws for the years 1932, 1935 and 1936.³³ Two years after Brown launched his baseball comedy franchise, the era of the baseball melodrama essentially came to an end with the release of *Swell Head* in 1935. The sorrowful tale of a ballplayer blinded after a beaming and his struggle to recover his sight and his true love, the film is almost all dialogue with only a smattering of baseball. Although later films such as *Fear Strikes Out* (1957) and *Bang the Drum Slowly* (1973) would touch on deep emotional themes, they would not approach the pronounced melodramatic overtones of films like *Swell Head*.

As noted previously, the precise fate of three baseball features produced in the nitrate era is difficult to ascertain. None of the three is in museum circulation. Although they are unavailable for close scholarly, no accounting of the baseball films of the early era would be complete without including them. One of the three, *The Pinch Hitter* (1925), was a barely altered remake of the extant 1917 melodrama of the same name. The only evidence for the existence of *The Pinch Hitter* is the brief notation "Survival status: Print exists" on the usually reliable Internet database, the Progressive Silent Film List (PSFL). No further information is given.³⁴ The film is not listed in any of the catalogs of the major archives of nitrate film — the Library of Congress Packard Campus for Audio-Visual Conservation located in Culpepper, Virginia, the George

Eastman House in Rochester, New York; the Museum of Modern Art's Celeste Bartos Film Preservation Center in Hamlin, Pennsylvania; or the UCLA Film and Television Archives. However, there are hundreds of film archives across the United States, housed in universities, corporations, government facilities, or held as private collections.³⁵ It is possible a print does exist in a smaller archive or a private collection. It is also possible the film has been confused with the 1917 feature of the same title.

The 1927 motion picture *Slide, Kelly, Slide* is yet another baseball morality play in which protagonist Jim Kelly must learn the importance of humility before he can be truly successful on and off the field. The film is notable for the major league players in the cast, including the venerable Mike Donlin, brothers Bob and Emil "Irish" Meusel, and Tony Lazzeri. As is the case with the 1925 version of *The Pinch Hitter*, the PSFL lists *Slide, Kelly, Slide*'s survival status as "Print exists"³⁶ but the title is not found in the indices of the major nitrate film archives. However, there is an important distinction between the two films. *Slide, Kelly, Slide* was a Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer production and MGM was the first major studio to make a concerted effort to duplicate every film in its vaults.³⁷ Unfortunately, MGM does not make the archive nor its titles available to the public. If MGM held a copy of *Slide, Kelly, Slide* when its preservation program began in 1960, a duplicate likely survives in the MGM vaults.

One more intriguing artifact of the nitrate era is stored in the Library of Congress' collection. *Girls Can Play* (1937) is the only feature film depiction of women playing baseball (or its derivative, softball) made prior to *A League of Their Own* in 1992.³⁸ *Girls Can Play* is a mystery centered on the murder of a softball team's catcher (played by nineteen-year-old Rita Hayworth). The film is still on nitrate material, housed in one of the 124 nitrate vaults on the Library's Packard Campus. Awaiting restoration and duplication, it is currently unavailable for screening. It is not publically known if it is a complete copy or what its condition might be. There is reason for optimism, however. The Library of Congress typically accepts only films in acceptable condition and stores them in an environment ideal for the preservation of nitrate. Should *Girls Can Play* be preserved and access copies made available, scholars will have access to every baseball feature film made after 1928.

Discussion

Cultural studies of baseball film have understandably focused on films of the late twentieth century and the twenty-first century. But the preservation and relatively recent availability of baseball features from the nitrate film era — and the silent era it subsumes — present scholars with the opportunity to analyze a set of unique cinematic artifacts. These early baseball films might be

dismissed as a collection of trifling entertainments—“B” pictures, genre-warping humbugs, low-brow comedies, and lachrymose melodramas. None has yet been included in the National Film Registry, the National Film Preservation Board’s list of “culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant films,”³⁹ nor is one likely to be included in the foreseeable future. However, it would be a mistake to regard them as insignificant cultural artifacts.

Before the coming of age of radio—and later, television—and long before the advent of digital media, motion pictures dominated mass-media entertainment. Films of the nitrate era had a cultural influence their more contemporary movie counterparts cannot match. In the mid-1920s, a population of 116 million Americans purchased 46 million movie tickets every week, five times the current per capita attendance rate.⁴⁰ Added to this significant saturation of popular culture is the critical time frame in which these films appeared. Written, produced and distributed during and immediately after the Progressive Era—a time of profound economic and social change—films of the nitrate era are an invaluable resource, even those regarded as “minor entertainments.” For as Steven Mintz and Randy Roberts have observed,

Movies—even bad movies—are important sociological and cultural documents.... From the beginning of the last century, films have recorded and even shaped American values, beliefs and behaviors.... Through their plots, their characters and their dramatization of moral issues, movies have captured the changing nature of American culture.⁴¹

Baseball’s cultural vision, emerging as it did during America’s Progressive Era, reflected the concerns and the conflicts of that era. In his history of the evolution of baseball’s ideology during the early years of the twentieth century, Steven Riess has observed the game of baseball was presented not simply as a form of entertainment, but as a contributor to both individual and national development. The ideology of baseball was designed to “provide the symbols, myths and legends society needed to bind its members together.”⁴² It assured a newly industrialized, urbanized society that traditional, small-town values could still be preserved and that those values could be passed on to American youth in large measure by the national pastime and its role models.⁴³ Baseball films played an important role in helping construct that ideological vision. Hollywood has by and large been enthusiastic and pure in reflecting an idealized image of the national pastime.⁴⁴ And while the baseball films of the nitrate era might have been modest productions, “often these (cultural) insights come in the smaller films, especially those dramas set in rural America where characters face the moral dilemmas that result from rapid cultural change.”⁴⁵ Baseball’s Progressive Era ideologists posited that the values and virtues of the game could address the economic and social dislocations of industrialization and urbanization. Baseball films of the silent era, the most influential instru-

ment of mass culture at the time, readily served the ideology. It would prove an enduring dimension of baseball cinema well into the twentieth century.

Any number of similar issues emerge in the baseball films of the nitrate era, including race, ethnicity, class, masculinity and femininity, national identity, individuality and community, and cultural mythologies. While many of these themes have been addressed in earlier comprehensive cultural analyses of the cinema of baseball, those studies predate the availability of the films of the Progressive Era, virtually all of which have only been readily obtainable within the last decade. Baseball features that capture the antecedents of the ideological undergirding of the national pastime can also capture society's sense of the way things ought to be, an idealized image of a game and an American culture as envisioned by its early twentieth century proponents.

Filmography

Narrative Baseball Feature Films 1915 to 1937

<i>Title</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Director</i>	<i>Studio</i>	<i>Status</i>
<i>Right Off the Bat</i>	1915	Hugh Reticker	Mike Donlin Productions Arrow Film Corp.	Presumed Lost
<i>Casey at the Bat</i>	1916	Lloyd Ingraham	Fine Arts/Triangle Corp.	Presumed Lost
<i>Somewhere in Georgia</i>	1916	George Ridgewell	Sunbeam Motion Pictures Corp.	Presumed Lost
<i>One Touch of Nature</i>	1917	Edward H. Griffith	Edison/K-E-S-E Service	Print in Lib. Of Congress LC Control No.: mp 73109300
<i>The Pinch Hitter</i>	1917	Victor L. Schertzinger	Triangle/Ince/ Kay-Bee	Print in UCLA Archive Inventory number: VA 12067 A
<i>Shut Out in the Ninth</i>	1917	Unknown	Thomas A. Edison, Inc.	Print in Lib. Of Congress LC Control No.: mp 73119900
<i>The Busher</i>	1919	Jerome Storm	Ince/ Famous Players-Lasky/ Paramount	Print in UCLA Archive Inventory number: VA12945 M
<i>Muggsy</i>	1919	Sherwood MacDonald	Triangle Film Corp.	Presumed Lost
<i>Headin' Home</i>	1920	R.A. Walsh or Lawrence Windom	Kessel & Baumann/ Yankee Photo Corp.	Commercially Available Kino Lorber Video
<i>As the World Rolls On</i>	1921	Unknown	Andlauer Productions/ Elk Photo Plays	Presumed Lost
<i>Trifling with Honor</i>	1923	Harry Pollard	Universal Pictures	Presumed Lost

<i>(Title)</i>	<i>(Year)</i>	<i>(Director)</i>	<i>(Studio)</i>	<i>(Status)</i>
<i>The Battling Orioles</i>	1924	Ted Wilde and Fred Guiol	Hal Roach Studios/ Pathé Exchange	Print in UCLA Archive Inventory number VA 12949 M
<i>Hit and Run</i>	1924	Edward Sedgwick	Universal Pictures	Print in George Eastman House
<i>Life's Greatest Game</i>	1924	Emory Johnson	Emory Johnson Productions	Presumed Lost
<i>The Pinch Hitter</i>	1925	Joseph Henaberry	Associated Exhibitors	Uncertain
<i>Out of the West</i>	1926	Robert DeLacy	Robertson-Cole Pictures	Presumed Lost
<i>The New Klondike</i>	1926	Lewis Milestone	Famous Players- Lasky/Paramount Pictures	Print in Lib. Of Congress LC CALL NUMBER: FGC 2415-2418
<i>Babe Comes Home</i>	1927	Wid Gunning	First National	Presumed Lost
<i>The Bush Leaguer</i>	1927	Howard Betherton	Warner Bros.	Print in UCLA Archive Inventory number M 1114589
<i>Casey at the Bat</i>	1927	Monte Brice	Famous Players- Lasky/Paramount Pictures	Print in Lib. Of Congress LC CALL NUMBER: FGC 2415-2418
<i>Catch as Catch Can</i>	1927	Charles Hutchison	Gotham Productions/ Lumas Film Corp.	Presumed Lost
<i>Slide, Kelly, Slide</i>	1927	Edward Sedgwick	Metro-Goldwyn Mayer	Uncertain
<i>Warming Up</i>	1928	Fred Newmeyer	Famous Players-Lasky Paramount Pictures	Presumed Lost
<i>Fast Company</i>	1929	A. Edward Sutherland	Famous Players-Lasky Paramount Pictures	Print in UCLA Archive Inventory number: M 3826
<i>Hot Curves</i>	1930	Norman Taurog	Tiffany Productions	Print in UCLA Archive Inventory number M113999
<i>They Learned About Women</i>	1930	Jack Conway and Sam Wood	Metro-Goldwyn Mayer	Print in Lib. Of Congress LC CALL NUMBER: FGE 1816-1821 (ref print)
<i>Fireman, Save My Child</i>	1932	Lloyd Bacon	Warner Bros.	Print in Lib. Of Congress Preservation materials only — no Call Number
<i>Elmer the Great</i>	1933	Mervyn Leroy	Warner Bros.	Commercially Available Turner Classic Movies
<i>Death on the Diamond</i>	1934	Edward Sedgwick	Metro-Goldwyn Mayer	Commercially Available Turner Classic Movies
<i>Alibi Ike</i>	1935	Ray Enright	Warner Bros.	Commercially Available Turner Classic Movies

(Title)	(Year) (Director)	(Studio)	(Status)
<i>Swell Head</i>	1935 Ben Stoloff	Columbia Pictures	Print in Lib. Of Congress LC CALL NUMBER: FEC 2083-2089
<i>Girls Can Play</i>	1937 Lambert Hillyer	Columbia Pictures	Print in Lib. Of Congress Nitrate Material Only Condition Uncertain

Notes

1. Gary Dickerson, *The Cinema of Baseball* (Westport, CT: Meckler, 1991); Howard Good, *Diamonds in the Dark* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 1997); Stephen C. Wood and J. David Pincus, eds. *Reel Baseball* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2003); and Marshall G. Most and Robert Rudd, *Stars, Stripes and Diamonds: American Culture and the Baseball Film* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006).

2. Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies* (New York: Vintage, 1994), 3.

3. *Ibid.*, 3.

4. J.R. Betts, *America's Sporting Heritage* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1974); Sut Jhally, "The Spectacle of Accumulation: Material and Cultural Factors in the Evolution of the Sports/Media Complex," *Insurgent Sociologist* 12, no. 3 (1984): 41-57; and Steven Riess, *Touching Base: Professional Baseball and American Culture in the Progressive Era*, rev. ed. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 5.

5. David Pierce, *The Survival of American Silent Feature Films: 1912-1929* (Washington, DC: Council on Library and Information Resources and the Library of Congress, September, 2013), 22.

6. The definition of a baseball film is not precise. This research employs a general application of Gary E. Dickerson's definition of baseball films from *The Cinema of Baseball* (Westport, CT: Meckler, 1991) as films in which the narrative is principally about baseball, and in which the principal characters are more than casually involved in the game of baseball in some way. Although subtle and subjective at times, the distinction between films which are principally about baseball, and those in which the game is played in one or two brief scenes, is important. There are hundreds of films in which people are seen playing baseball. This is not surprising, given the embeddedness of the game within American culture. This research centers on those narrative feature-length films produced for theatrical release which are primarily about baseball players and the game of baseball. It is from these films, in which baseball is the central focus, that baseball's cultural vision emerges most profoundly.

7. Marshall G. Most and Robert Rudd, *Stars, Stripes and Diamonds: American Culture and the Baseball Film* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006), 17-18.

8. Douglas Gomery, *Movie History: A Survey* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1991), 77.

9. Patricia King Hanson, ed., *The American Film Institute Catalog of Motion Pictures Produced in the United States, Feature Films, 1911-1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), xv.

10. Anthony Slide, *Nitrate Won't Wait: A History of Film Preservation in the United States* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1992), 1-3.

11. *The Film Preservation Guide* (San Francisco: National Film Preservation Foundation, 2004), 9.

12. Slide, 2-3.

13. "Vault and Nitrate Fires—A History," TCM.com. Archived from the original on June 15, 2009. http://fan.tcm.com/_Vault-and-Nitrate-Fires-A-History/blog/346284/66470.html.

14. "Where Did All the Silent Films Go? Tales of Fire, Destruction and Deterioration." Classic Film Haven, last modified on June 21, 2014. <https://classicfilmhaven.wordpress.com/2014/06/21/where-did-all-the-silent-films-go-ales-of-fire-destruction-and-deterioration/>.

15. Slide, 13.

16. "Vault and Nitrate Fires—A History."

17. Cass Warner Sperling and Cork Millner, *Hollywood Be Thy Name: The Warner Brothers Story* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998), 209–211.
18. “Vault and Nitrate Fires—A History.”
19. *The Film Preservation Guide*, 9.
20. Slide, 102.
21. A persistent Internet myth (found, among other places, on Wikipedia) claims that Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer purchased the defunct Tiffany Production’s film negative library and used the nitrate film stock to fuel the fire during the burning of Atlanta scenes in the 1939 epic *Gone with the Wind*. The unpredictable, toxic and fast-burning characteristics of nitrate, together with more reliable accounts of the pyrotechnic effects used in *Gone with the Wind*, would argue against it. Added evidence would be the continued existence of a copy of one of Tiffany’s last features, the baseball comedy *Hot Curves* (1930).
22. Pierce, 22.
23. “Vault and Nitrate Fires—A History.”
24. Slide, 4.
25. Janna Jones, *The Past Is a Moving Picture: Preserving the Twentieth Century on Film* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012).
26. Slide, 6.
27. *Ibid.*, 5.
28. James H. Billington, introduction to *The Survival of American Silent Feature Films: 1912–1929*, David Pierce (Washington, DC: Council on Library and Information Resources and the Library of Congress, September, 2013), viii.
29. Pierce, 21.
30. Kathy McCormack, “1913 Abraham Lincoln Film Found in New Hampshire Barn,” *USA Today*, last modified on April 13, 2010, http://usatoday.com/life/movies/news/2010-04-13-lincoln-film_N.htm.
31. Lisbeth Richter Larsen, “The Different Versions of ‘Jeanne D’arc,’” Carl Th. Dreyer—the Man and His Work. Last modified May 23, 2016, <http://english.carlthdreyer.dk/Films/La-Passion-de-Jeanne-dArc/Articles/De-forskellige-versioner.aspx>
32. Pierce, 15.
33. *International Motion Picture Almanac* (New York: Quigley, 1932, 1935, 1936).
34. “*The Pinch Hitter*.” The Progressive Silent Film List, last updated 20 June 2011. <http://www.silentera.com/PSFL/data/P/PinchHitter1925.html>. According to the PSFL website, the entry “Print exists” indicates “without supporting details, that we only know that a print has survived and have no information as to the condition of the print.”
35. Janna Jones, 27.
36. “*Slide, Kelly, Slide*.” The Progressive Silent Film List, last updated 17 October 2008. <http://www.silentera.com/PSFL/data/S/SlideKellySlide1927.html>.
37. Pierce, 6.
38. Also held on nitrate stock in the Library of Congress’ Packard facility is the 1937 comedy short *Gracie at the Bat* (also known by its working title of *Slide, Nellie, Slide*), starring comedian Andy Clyde as the manager of a women’s softball team.
39. “Film Registry,” Library of Congress, National Film Preservation Board, accessed May 4, 2016, <https://www.loc.gov/programs/national-film-preservation-board/film-registry/>.
40. Pierce, 11.
41. Steven Mintz and Randy Roberts, eds., introduction to *Hollywood’s America: Twentieth Century America Through Film* (Malden, MA: Blackwell), x.
42. Steven Riess, *Touching Base: Professional Baseball and American Culture in the Progressive Era*, rev. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 5.
43. *Ibid.*, 5.
44. Ronald Berman, *Sports in the Movies* (New York: Proteus, 1982), 54.
45. Pierce, 12.