

Thomas Dixon story would make great movie

RALEIGH — What does a poor boy from the Cleveland County seat of Shelby have to do with the world's richest and most famous moviemakers? Nothing, directly. But if it hadn't been for North Carolina's astonishing Thomas Dixon and his talent for cooking up a good story and preying on the raw emotions of Southerners half a century after the Civil War, the film industry in Hollywood might not be in an absolute up-roar these days.

Jack Betts



You may have seen the news item datelined Hollywood: Steven Spielberg had just won the Directors Guild of America's Lifetime Achievement Award. It was an honor that until last fall was named for the groundbreaking filmmaker D.W. Griffith, who in 1915 released a movie based on a book written by Dixon. That silent movie, "The Birth of a Nation," is famous and infamous.

It is famous because Griffith, until then an unknown filmmaker, invented cinematic techniques that revolutionized the industry. And it is infamous because its storyline, based on Dixon's novel "The Clansman," inflamed passions, aroused racial hatreds, fostered racial stereotypes, glorified the Ku Klux Klan and launched a series of debates that are no closer to conclusion today than at the outset of this century.

In Hollywood, the board of the Directors Guild of America quietly decided last fall to retire the award named for D.W. Griffith because his early work was so objectionable to many Americans who regard the content as incomprehensibly racist. But members of the guild no doubt were surprised that many critics, even acknowledging the obnoxious content of "The Birth of a Nation," believed it was an absurd act of polit-

Author of 'The Clansman' led storybook life

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ical correctness to abolish an award named for a pioneer in filmmaking technique.

"Griffith was a great artist, but he wouldn't be the first nor the last great artist to be racist," notes New York Press black film critic Armond White. "It's ridiculous to rewrite history that way."

What an irony, given that Dixon got the idea for "The Clansman" — a post Civil War novel set in South Carolina that carried on his general theme of black degeneracy during Reconstruction — when he decided to rewrite some history himself.

He had already demonstrated a talent for writing and for theatrics. Born at the close of the Civil War and having grown up in hard times in Shelby, he was an admirer of his uncle, a local leader in the Ku Klux Klan. He attended Wake Forest College, earning high honors and a scholarship to Johns Hopkins in Baltimore, where he became friends with fellow student Woodrow Wilson. He set out to be an actor, but after a bad New York experience came back to Shelby to read law. At age 20 he was elected to the N.C. General Assembly, where he sponsored two notable bills — one giving pensions to Confederate soldiers, and the other creating what would one day become N.C. State University at Raleigh. He didn't like law practice, though, and turned to preaching — where he made a meteoric rise from Goldsboro to prominent pulpits in Boston and New York City.

Despite his racial inclinations he was known as a social, economic and political reformer. Dixon quickly became famous and rich for his spirited and engaging lectures across the county. He earned thousands of dollars per night on a cross-country schedule of lectures on a variety of subjects. His was a household name, appearing in practically every newspaper in the country on a regular basis.

Shortly after the turn of the century, Dixon was in New York attending a performance of Harriet Beecher Stowe's "Uncle Tom's Cabin." He was so incensed by its portrayal of the South — a libel, he thought — that he resolved to write a book answering the play. He wound up producing three novels that constituted a plea for exclusion of the Negro from society and for reunion of the North and South. His works inspired

Margaret Mitchell, who later wrote "Gone With the Wind."

His post-Civil War novels made him a fortune, which he lost in the crash of 1907. He rebuilt his career, turning his novels into popular plays, and searched for a company that would use his screenplay of "The Clansman" for a movie. He finally found a taker in impecunious short-film maker D.W. Griffith. It took years to shoot the film, partly because World War I was on and it was hard to get enough white sheets and horses for the actors who would portray the KKK riding to the rescue of white folks.

The resulting film was "The Birth of a Nation," controversial even before its release because of its provocative nature. He prevailed upon his old friend, by now President Woodrow Wilson, to allow the film to be shown at the White House, which helped legitimize its screening elsewhere.

He also persuaded the U.S. Supreme Court — the chief justice had been a KKK member and wanted to see it only after hearing of the pro-KKK content — and members of Congress to watch it, which quelled objections to the movie's screening. The controversy about the movie never subsided, but Griffith's reputation as an innovative filmmaker was assured.

In his later years, Dixon repudiated the KKK for the motley lot that it had become. His own fortunes continued to rise and fall; he sank a fortune into a resort development in western North Carolina where he hoped artists, scientists, philosophers and writers would come to recharge their batteries and renew their energies. He called it Wildacres, and though it failed in the crash of the 1920s, today under the Charlotte-based Blumenthal Foundation's management it has become a leading retreat for conferences, leadership programs and an array of creative initiatives.

Dixon, who died in Raleigh in 1946, was among the most interesting North Carolinians of his time, but the story of his varied interests, notable and ignoble achievements and high-profile careers has been all but forgotten. That story would make a heck of a movie.

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