Keaton in Cottage Grove: The great stone face.

TRACKING DOWN THE GENERAL

by Richard T. Jameson

This story first appeared in *Pacific Northwest* Magazine.

My friend Peter Hogue started it. I've no precise notion when or where. Sometime in the late '60s, certainly, when he was finishing up his doctorate in English at the University of Washington and I was pushing foreign movies and popcorn at the Edgemont Theatre in Edmonds. The Edgemont lobby may have been the place, or some other theater lobby, or a car traveling somewhere in between. At any rate, I'm confident Peter made a perfect Godardian *non sequitur* of it when he said, "You know, the *Texas* is still lying in the river somewhere near Cottage Grove."

The *Texas* was the woodburning locomotive Southern railroader Buster Keaton commandeered, in the classic Civil War adventure-comedy *The General*, to pursue his own beloved engine (the title character) — and also his lady love (Marion Mack) — when both were stolen by Yankee spies. Cottage Grove was the small southwest Oregon town whose environs, and miles of log-train tracks through virgin timberland, became the principal location for director Keaton's summer-of-1926 production. The *Texas* was lying in the river because, after "Johnnie Gray" (Keaton) used it to chase the stolen *General* to a Union Army camp near Chattanooga, the Northerners used it to chase him and the *General* back to Georgia; on home ground once more, Gray set fire to the wood-trestle Rock River Bridge, which collapsed under the *Texas'* ill-advised advance. The scene of the *Texas'* fall (which had to be coaxed along with a few discreet dynamite blasts) was the climax of this definitive chase movie, the costliest single shot of the silent-film era ($42,000) and, as it's turned out, one of the most indelible images in the history of the cinema.

I'm not sure either Peter or I ever said, "We ought to go down there someday and have a look." However, I'm reasonably confident the notion reposed in his daydreams as it did in mine, uneroded by two decades' worth of silting. When a *Pacific Northwest* editor proposed a story on film and the Northwest, I knew there was one place I simply had to visit. I could already see the pictures in the magazine: the brilliant, Matthew Brady-like clarity of the classic black-and-white still and, adjacent in dark, deeply saturated Kodachrome, a mossy island in mid-stream, machine and nature wrapped in secret glory.

"It isn't there anymore." Hogue talking again, this time on the phone from Chico, California, where he'd spent most of the intervening years teaching English and film at the state university. "They hauled it out after all — not long after the shoot, I understand." Actually, it was during the Second World War, when that much scrap metal, even historic, tourist-attracting scrap metal, was just too valuable to ignore. Gee. Still, the place was there. That mattered. Did he still want to go? "Of course I want to go!" So he got on the Amtrak heading north and I got on the highway heading south, and for a surprisingly balmy day and a half at the end of February, we knocked around the neighborhood where Buster Keaton made *The General*.

Cottage Grove (pop. 7,090) is also the neighborhood where Robert Aldrich shot the Depression-era hobo epic *Emperor of the North Pole* (shortened to *Emperor of the North* for advertising purposes when the original title was judged misleadingly Eskimo-pie) in 1973. Tramps Lee Marvin and Keith Carradine tilted with vicious train boss Ernest Borgnine over some of the same rails Keaton had traveled, though Aldrich favored the more emphatically Northwest-gusty high country for his violent purposes. Rob Reiner selected other photogenic corners of the Cottage Grove wilds for his recent boyhood adventure *Stand By Me* (1986); however, the town site was somewhere else (Brownsville) and Reiner's own railroad-bridge scene was the product of trick photography (which Keaton's

emphatically was not). In between modern-day Cottage Grove supplied many of the non-university settings for John Landis' *National Lampoons' Animal House* (1976), including the main street across which the groty-est of collegiate buccaneers, John Belushi, made his ruinous swing.

The locals remember those films, and everybody knows about *The General,* which the city government shows twice a year. Yet surprisingly little is made of the fact that a movie which regularly places high on international polls of the greatest films of all time was shot in the vicinity. We expected to find a wall-size blowup of the train wreck dominating the Chamber of Commerce offices, the Cottage Grove Historical Museum or both. There was none. Inquiries as to just where Keaton built and burned his bridge met with responses ranging from "I, uh, really don't know" to "Out Row River Road somewhere." Till, that is, we were directed to the home of a lady named Donna Allen, who's normally to be found at the museum but had grudgingly taken the weekend off to nurse injuries from a kitchen fall.

"Culp Creek!" she promptly chirped. "Right across from the post office. Whole town went out to watch. Made a day's picnic — that's the way it turned out. That Buster, he was concentrating so hard, he never cracked a smile. Everything had to be just right that day.

"The rest of the time, though, he was always kidding. He had this big dog, big as a small horse. And if there was one person, just one person, in the lobby of the hotel, why, he'd ride that dog up the stairs, just to get a laugh!"

The Cottage Grove Hotel remains, though only as a collection of shops and galleries; the original lobby and stairs, everything but the old pager, are gone. But Donna Allen remembered that summer when Cottage Grove became a northern outpost of Hollywood; remembered the baseball games Keaton would start up on the spur of the moment; remembered the way the girls used to turn out in their finest to be seen.

She directed us to the creekside several blocks away, where Keaton had erected the false fronts of his "Marietta, Georgia" main street, and where now a modest condominium stands. After checking to be sure that "those girls" at the museum had taken proper care of us, she bade up good day — doubtlessly wondering why we, like "those English TV people" (Kevin Brownlow and David Gill) who had come through a couple of years earlier to gather material for the splendid three-part documentary *Buster Keaton: A Hard Act to Follow,* were so interested in an old-time movie.

Culp Creek was 15 miles farther south. It was late on our second and last day when we started driving there. Taking an alternate leg of the Row River Road that we hadn't traveled before, we passed through a still largely unspoiled valley which a few split-rail fences and the judicious avoidance of power lines could turn back into the piney, 1860s Georgia-Tennessee landscape Keaton had evoked so persuasively. The road ran parallel to railroad tracks for awhile. "Looks like enough space along those flats," Peter mused, "for the Confederate Army to change into the Union Army while Buster chops wood in the foreground —" "— and the camera truck rolls right along here." Could be, could be.

The post office at Culp Creek is the back end of a postal truck, or maybe an old postal railway car, sunk semipermantly into the earth of the village surrounding it. We drove on past a ways, pulling off the road a couple of places to scope out the stream running alongside. The water was low, the banks winter-brown and inhospitable to clambering. We drove back past the post office, parking near the entrance to the Bohemia Mill. Getting as close to the creek's edge as the crumbling bank would permit, we leaned out, left arms hooked around separate tree trunks, to look south along the stream toward the narrow mill bridge. There was more clutter blocking up the streambed — nothing locomotive, to be sure — but when you filtered out the miscellaneous patches of scrub and the dim, smoky rumble of the mill . . . and by the way, wasn't that smoke from the mill blowing in the same direction as the gunpowder smoke in the post-trainwreck battle scene?

I went back to the car and got a film magazine out of the backseat. The Shot was reproduced in it big and clear. We held the magazine between us. "Look at the tree line," Hogue said. My gaze tilted up from the photograph to the scene before me. The tree lines matched. They'd matched for 60 years, and for a moment those 60 years had never been. There wasn't anything to say, and neither one of us was fool enough to try saying it.

This must be the place: The chase scene to end all chase scenes, in the Oregon of the old South.

(Buster Keaton's The General *is one of his most beloved films and is often featured at theatre organ events. We felt our readers might enjoy this story of how the film was made. Ed.)*