

# A Trip Down Market Street

By David Kiehn

On April 14, 1906, a Market Street cable car approached the Ferry Building with Harry Miles aboard cranking a movie camera for 12 minutes as he documented a typical day along San Francisco's busiest thoroughfare. The landscape he filmed would change dramatically only four days later when the city was rocked by an earthquake, followed by a raging fire that lasted three days, destroying nearly everything in sight. But "A Trip Down Market Street," the movie that captured this lost moment in time, was safely on a train for the east coast office of the Miles Brothers film company, and would soon be seen by attentive audiences all across the country.

Harry Miles was the senior partner, with brothers Herbert, Earl and Joe, of the Miles Brothers, a pioneering film production and distribution company, the first with offices on both coasts. In 1902, they were associated with the American Mutoscope and Biograph Company in New York, but in 1905 moved across the street to 10 East 14<sup>th</sup> Street, and in San Francisco added to their office on 116 Turk Street by outfitting an old Knights of Columbus drill hall at 1139 Market Street into a state-of-the-art studio. Their first big independent film project was shooting the "Battling" Nelson-Jimmy Britt prize fight in Colma, California on September 9, 1905, scheduled to go 45 rounds.

The challenge for this fight film was not to miss an instant of each 3-minute round. To this end, Harry modified three movie cameras to hold 1000-foot film magazines, when most cameras of the day only held 200 feet at a time. He also ordered 20,000 of film so that enough raw stock would be on hand to record the whole fight. As it turned out, the fight only lasted 18 rounds, when Nelson scored a knockout, so less than half the film stock was used. What to do with the rest?

To take advantage of their cameras' extra film capacity, the Miles Brothers filmed "A Trip Down Mount Tamalpais" (1906), in Mill Valley, California, setting up two cameras to record the 8-minute descent in a gravity car. It was so successful they set their sights on San Francisco's Market Street. They first put a camera on a tripod in an automobile, but the cobblestones on the street created a continuous vibration that blurred the images, so, at the end of March,



*A Western Union messenger looks over his shoulder at the motion picture camera mounted on a United Railroads cable car as automobiles and horse-drawn carts flank the rails. Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.*

1906, they requested the use of a cable car from the United Railroads, owner of the Market Street line, and it was granted.

The camera was rigged on a cable car at 8<sup>th</sup> Street, near the Miles Brothers studio. Just after 3 o'clock on that sunny Saturday afternoon, the hand cranked camera recorded the journey to the Ferry Building, the 180-degree rotation on a turntable to face Market Street, and the dramatic ending of newsboys waving at the camera.

The first thing one notices in the film is the chaotic movement of traffic: drays, automobiles, sightseeing trolleys, horse-drawn wagons and bicycles weave, dodge and barely miss each other with seeming casualness, and pedestrians show no fear. The camera draws the attention of the crowds on the street as it passes by them, provoking stares of curiosity. The automobiles are fewer in number than at first glance, since many of them drive by, circle around, and drive by again. One car, driven by Jay Anway, identified by license plate number 4867, circles six times.

License plates were issued in California beginning in 1905, so many of the vehicles' owners are identifiable. The White Sewing Machine Company, located at 1878 Market Street, owned a car with license plate number 6. The highest number seen, 5057, was a Knox automobile issued in February 1906 to the Reliance Auto Company on Fulton Street. George Middleton of the Middleton Motor Car Company on Van Ness Avenue owned an Autocar with number 3221; in 1914, Middleton would be part of the California Motion Picture Corporation in San

Rafael making feature films with his wife Beatriz Michelena.

The Miles Brothers advertised their two films as made especially for the briefly-popular Hale's Tour theaters, which were outfitted like a railroad coach to show scenic films, however, the demand for San Francisco motion pictures before and after the quake was so strong that the Miles Brothers packaged a two-hour program with a lecturer to show in theaters across the country. One published account claims that \$30,000 was made on these road show exhibitions, but it wasn't all profit for the company. Herbert Miles stated they lost \$80,000 on their burned out Market Street studio.

The destruction of the studio was a setback for film production in California, and it was the first of several losses for the Miles Brothers. They would never rebuild their studio; instead they operated their business out of a house at 790 Turk Street. Harry Miles would die from a seventh-floor fall from an apartment in New York City in 1908. The Miles Brothers film exchanges operating out of New York, Boston and San Francisco would fall victim to the Motion Picture Patents Company in 1910, shut down and forced into bankruptcy. The brothers went their own ways, with Earl in San Francisco making advertising, industrial and educational films. Joe Miles opened a film storage company and a stock footage library. Herbert Miles became involved with the independent film movement, forming the Republic Film Company in 1911. In the 1920s Herbert was dealing in educational films, by the 1930s he was in advertising.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.*

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