

The Chechahcos

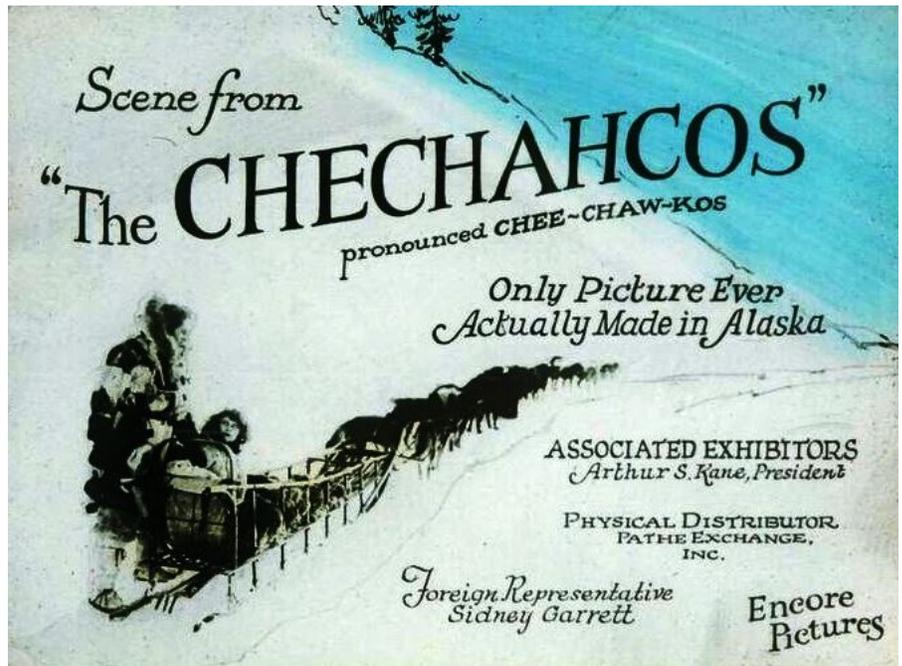
By Chris Beheim

Film distribution giant Associated Exhibitors was confident that they had a sure-fire hit when they purchased "The Cheechakos" from the Alaska Moving Pictures Corporation in March 1924. So impressed were they with independent writer/director Louis Moomaw's tale of the Klondike gold rush that they asked him to make four more feature films. The advertising campaign for "The Cheechakos" would equal those for "The Covered Wagon" and "The Hunchback of Notre Dame" — two of 1923's top grossing films. A Broadway premiere in the prestigious Capitol Theatre was planned for May.

After changing the spelling to "The Chechahcos," Associated Exhibitors launched full-page teaser ads in trade publications and planned for the movie to be "road-showed" in large theaters with live orchestras, a marketing technique reserved for only a few premium feature films.

In April 1924, Associated Exhibitors took the "The Chechahcos" to Washington, D.C. for a private screening at the Interior Department. (The late President Warren Harding, who visited the cast and crew on location during his ill-fated Alaska tour the previous summer, had requested that the first showing be at the White House). Portland's newspaper, "The Oregonian," reported that government officials who viewed the film formally requested that it be placed in the Washington archives—an honor previously extended to only one other movie.

Associated Exhibitors spared no expense in promoting the film. A 16-page section featuring marketing strategies for "The Chechahcos" was placed in "Exhibitors Trade Weekly," with tie-ins to products ranging from Borden's Condensed Milk to Sterno Canned Heat. The film was touted as "the greatest money-getting production ever made" and "both a Broadway and Main Street box-office bet." An elaborate preview for over 800 critics and other invited guests took place at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel in New York. Invitations contained an Alaskan gold nugget. The evening featured dinner, dancing, and the Paul Whiteman Orchestra. One of Broadway's top electrical engineers added special lighting effects to en-



A lantern slide used to promote the film to theater patrons.

hance the action on the screen. Pathé was selected as distributor, and the first full-length motion picture filmed entirely in Alaska was destined for worldwide showing.

Movies about the far north were popular in the silent era, but were typically filmed in California—much to the chagrin of Alaskans. When George Edward Lewis announced in 1922 his plans for a "stupendous motion picture production to be photographed in Alaska", the project quickly gained the support of citizens across the Territory of Alaska. Lewis organized the Alaska Moving Pictures Corporation in the tiny town of Seward, Alaska and began to sell shares of stock. The local newspaper predicted that the movie would be "one the greatest advertising schemes for the Territory that has ever been offered".

Austin "Cap" Lathrop, one of Alaska's wealthiest entrepreneurs and theaters owners, joined Lewis in raising capital to produce a motion picture that would introduce audiences to the real Alaska and "reproduce accurately the early days of the Alaskan territory." The enterprise quickly gained support throughout the Territory. Lathrop became president of the corporation, with Lewis as production manager. In November 1922, construction began in Anchorage on one of the largest buildings in the Territory, the Alaska Moving Pictures Corporation movie studio.

Lewis' business partner, Lewis Moomaw of the Portland-based film company American Lifeograph, was writer/director. The cast and crew arrived in

Anchorage on March 15, 1923. Principal males William Dills, Albert Van Antwerp, and Alexis Luce were accomplished stage actors, but the cast lacked movie experience. Only leading lady Eva Gordon was the exception. The ingenue role went to George Edward Lewis' step-daughter, Gladys Johnson. All were greeted by 1,000 Anchorage residents—half of the town's population. The company rode the train to the new Mount McKinley National Park (now Denali) where most of the sled dog mushing scenes were filmed. Harry Karstens, the park's first superintendent, drove the park's working sled dog team as a stunt double. An Army Signal Corps dog team also appeared in the film. The rustic Mount McKinley Hotel served as the exterior of the wealthy miners' home.

The cast and crew spent three months filming in the Anchorage area. A group of 250 Anchorage residents traveled 66 miles by rail to Bartlett Glacier, where they scaled a mountain for the spectacular scene of the 1898 gold rush at Chilkoot Pass. An "Anchorage Daily Times" headline proclaimed it "a correct reproduction of historic stampede" and the "Most Remarkable Historic Film Ever Recorded."

The mining hamlet of Girdwood, 40 miles south of Anchorage by rail, substituted for far away Skagway, Alaska. Giant radium flares and rockets provided illumination for the scenes filmed at night. The shipboard scenes were filmed on the SS Alameda. All other interior scenes were filmed in the Anchorage studio, including the dance hall scene and the burning of the prosperous mining town.

The cast and crew sailed to Cordova, Alaska where they took the Copper River & Northwest Railroad to filming locations on Childs Glacier, Abercrombie Rapids, and Eyak Lake. Famous Alaskan artist Sydney Laurence painted artwork for the intertitles, which were written by well-known screenwriter Harvey Gates.

After private screenings in Los Angeles, Portland, and Seattle, the official premier of "The Cheechakos" took place in Anchorage's Empress Theatre on December 11, 1923. After screenings before packed houses in theaters across Alaska, the film had a successful holiday run in Portland, Oregon. Alaska Moving Pictures Corporation then took the film to New York City and sold it to Associated Exhibitors.

"The Chechahcos" never achieved the box office success that Associated Exhibitors had envisioned. The road show was cancelled and the New York premiere was moved to the smallest theater on Broadway. Despite "glowing criticisms" reprinted in

full-page "Film Daily" advertisements and projected on a giant screen placed above the theatre marquee, the expected crowds never materialized. After a short Broadway run, "The Chechahcos" was shown around the country and abroad for two years before fading into obscurity. Cap Lathrop and the Alaskan stockholders never saw a return on their investment.

The Alaska Moving Pictures Corporation successfully introduced audiences to the real Alaska. The spectacular Alaskan scenery and the hundreds of Alaskans who appeared as extras provided authenticity. The producers also exercised artistic license. The climactic dogsled chase shifts between three different locations hundreds of miles apart—all within a few seconds. The stereotyped Native American character was portrayed by a Caucasian. Artificial snow was used for the fire scene filmed in June.

"The Cheechakos" was essentially forgotten until 2000, when University of Alaska, Fairbanks archivists restored the film through a grant from the National Film Preservation Foundation. The film was selected for preservation in the National Film Registry in 2003. "The Cheechakos" came back to life as an official event of Anchorage's Centennial Celebration. Because no score was found during the restoration, the Anchorage Fine Arts Society commissioned musicologist Eric Beheim to create a historically accurate orchestral score for the film. On July 17, 2015, the Anchorage Symphony Orchestra debuted the new score at a screening of the film before an enthusiastic audience of 2,000 at the Alaska Center for the Performing Arts. This sold-out performance was undoubtedly the type of deluxe presentation that Associated Exhibitors envisioned for "The Cheechakos" when they purchased it 91 years earlier.

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

Chris Beheim serves on the boards of the Anchorage Symphony and the Anchorage Fine Arts Society. He discovered "The Cheechakos" after accompanying numerous films as a clarinetist in the orchestra's silent film series. Utilizing his investigative skills honed as the supervisor (now retired) of the Alaska Scientific Crime Detection Laboratory, he conducted extensive research on the history of the film, and commissioned a new orchestral score to replace the lost original. This work led to the reintroduction of the film during Anchorage's 2015 Centennial Celebration.