

The Iron Horse

By David Kiehn

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Under the best of conditions, the grueling, day-to-day pace of feature film production is exhausting. Factor in the hazards and pressure of shooting on a difficult location, and the shoot extracts an incalculable toll on the mind and body. Even if this stress is not evident on the screen, it still leaves indelible scars on those who lived through it. After filming on the barren desert flats of Nevada during the dead of winter for the epic western “The Iron Horse” (1924), property man Lefty Hough simply stated: “There was real suffering on that picture. It was hard, tough, awfully primitive conditions. Christ, it was cold.”

Considering the circumstances, skilled leadership was crucial, which is why William Fox, president of the Fox Film Corporation, chose John Ford to direct the picture. At the time only 29, Jack Ford—as he was then credited on the screen—had already directed more than 50 films, mostly westerns, with some of the genre’s most popular actors: Harry Carey, Buck Jones, Hoot Gibson, and Tom Mix. Before becoming a director, he had worked in almost every capacity under the watchful eye of his accomplished older brother, director and actor Francis Ford who first employed him at the Universal Film Company in 1914. When William Fox suggested the credit “Directed by John Ford” for “Cameo Kirby” (1923), Ford’s first big-budget production, which starred John Gilbert, he demonstrated the respect he already had for Ford as work began on “The Iron Horse.”

Before location shooting began, production staff rented 20 railroad sleeper cars from the Al G. Barnes Circus to house the company of 300 cast and crew. They used additional railcars to store equipment and materials for laying a mile of track and building two western town sets, plus appropriate props, wardrobe, and provisions. In November 1923, they found a location with a railroad spur track to park the long line



This frame enlargement shows a crew working feverishly to finish the track as a locomotive bears down on them. Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.

of cars at Dodge, Nevada, about 50 miles east of Reno on the Pyramid Indian Reservation, and recruited some 300 Paiute Indians from the reservation for the film. Many of them doubled as Chinese extras, who were in short supply in the vicinity.

On December 13, Ford arrived in Reno with business manager Harry Updegraff and art director Rudolph Bylek to set up an operations office. Ford met Charles Edward Bull, a Reno justice of the peace, who was said to resemble Abraham Lincoln, a role to be cast for the film. Ford found Bull even more “in character” than had been reported and signed him for the part. The next day, Ford and Bylek went to Wadsworth, Nevada, ten miles south of Dodge, to pick locations in the small town posing as Litchfield, Illinois. That night, Ford and Bylek took the train back to Los Angeles, while Updegraff stayed in Reno handling business details for the shoot.

Filming began in Los Angeles just after Christmas, shooting the interior shots with Charles Bull. Ford, Bull, and a core group then traveled north, passing through Reno on December 31 for the Litchfield prologue scenes. After only a few hours of filming, the company quickly moved on to Dodge, so they could welcome the 300 company members arriving from Los Angeles the next morning.

Freezing weather and a blanket of snow greeted them. The circus sleeper cars, designed for summer use, had no heat. George Schneiderman and his camera crew decided the Pony Express office set looked more inviting, so they outfitted it as their sleeping quarters, installing bunks and covering the missing walls with canvas. "We took the uniforms the studio had sent along as costumes for the soldiers," Ford said, "and wore them because they were warm." In the biggest tragedy on the shoot, one man succumbed to the cold. Louis F. Muessig, the dining car steward, developed pneumonia and died in a Reno hospital three weeks into their stay.

Encountering what the newspapers called a "baby blizzard," Ford turned to his cameraman and asked what to do about the snow. Schneiderman replied, "There must have been snow when they built the railroad so why don't we shoot anyway?" When later scenes were filmed on barren ground and fresh snowfall wrecked continuity, Ford ordered the snow to be cleared away. "And that's what we did," Hough said. "We brought the cattle in, the horses and everything else. We swept the whole town off. It may sound unbelievable, but I don't suppose we lost more than a couple of hours. Well, now, you take 400 people, horses and cowboys, and Indians and everything else—they can sweep a street in pretty quick time."

The first scenes on the North Platte town set were shot on January 5, and the footage was shipped to the Fox studio in Hollywood for developing and viewing. West Coast production head Sol Wurtzel was pleased with the dailies and sent a telegram to Ford: "Street looks splendid. Snow makes it doubly realistic and attractive. Believe after you review scenes on screen you will feel that all trouble of present location was worthwhile." But while on location, Ford never looked at any of the footage. The screening room, set up in one of the unheated railroad boxcars, was so cold no one wanted to sit in there to watch the rushes. Ford saw the Nevada footage for the first time when he returned to Hollywood.

On January 13, scenes of an immigrant wedding were shot on a moving train while cold winds swept across the flat land around them. They finished with the North Platte set by January 21, and the location was transformed into the town of Benton. By this time, the company had also laid a mile and a half of track.

The Reno-based newspaper, the "Nevada State Journal" reported that the Fox Company was spending as much as \$45,000 a week on the production. The same article also announced that Sol Wurtzel was on location checking on the progress of the film, and he was gratified by what he saw. With location shooting slated to last 60 days until March 1, they were moving fast enough to wrap up production by February 14. The big concluding scene, the driving of the Golden Spike, was shot on February 10, with 500 people on set. Seventy-five Shriners from Reno participated, wearing military uniforms. Fifty automobile-loads of visitors came from Reno to watch the event. That evening, they celebrated with a cast and crew party replete with vaudeville acts and a turkey feast.

"The Iron Horse" was Fox's answer to the wildly successful Paramount picture "The Covered Wagon" (1923), a film that had singlehandedly revived the public's sagging interest in westerns. Jesse Lasky, the vice-president in charge of production at Paramount, had championed "The Covered Wagon," allowing it to be shot on an epic scale, giving it a generous \$500,000 budget, which eventually rose to \$750,000. The film recouped the full amount in just two New York theaters, going on to become the biggest hit of the year. Fox reportedly spent only \$280,000 on "The Iron Horse," with Ford keeping it on schedule and within the budget (despite claims to the contrary in later years). The film was the top grossing movie of 1924.

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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