

# ***The Land Beyond the Sunset***

By Scott Simmon

*From the National Film Preservation Foundation (NFPF) Treasures of the American Archives DVD program notes, by permission of NFPF and Scott Simmon*

Most one-reel films — considered full-length before multi-reel features gained popularity after 1913 — squeeze elaborate plotlines into their quarter-hour running time. “The Land Beyond the Sunset,” an Edison one-reeler filmed around New York City in 1912, instead takes its unhurried story through diverse genres: from social-problem drama through a pastoral fantasy and into an unclassifiable poetic finale.

Joe, a tattered newspaper boy living in the tenements with his abusive, alcoholic grandmother, gets a ticket from the benevolent volunteers of the Fresh Air Fund. This nonprofit organization, founded by a Protestant minister in 1877, provided brief summer trips away from the unhealthy slums. (More than 120 years later, the organization still annually provides vacations for three thousand inner-city New York children to its camps in the Hudson River Valley. Although Edison collaborated on films with the Red Cross and other charities, one wonders how fully the Fresh Air Fund sanctioned its depiction. The female volunteers, solicitous though they are, lose track of Joe after filling him with a fairy tale about the happy “land beyond the sunset.” He wanders off to find a boat and drifts away into the horizon.

Following the inviolable pattern, “The Land Beyond the Sunset,” valorizes the healing powers of the country for urban ills. The little-known director Harold Shaw — the film is sometimes attribute to J. Searle Dawley — clearly had an eye for both landscape and city compositions. Where a D.W. Griffith one-reeler would presume that taking a slum child to the country was in itself a happy ending — see his “A Child of the Ghetto” (1910) — this film uses fantasy to arrive at a less sanguine resolution. The ambiguity of the final long shot — does Joe die? Or drift into a transcendent realm? — makes for something quite rare.

Thomas Edison proved better at managing technology than overseeing moviemaking. “The Land



*A wistful Joe (Martin Fuller) sets out to find the mythical Land Beyond the Sunset. Courtesy National Film Preservation Foundation.*

Beyond the Sunset” comes near the end for his film company. A federal anti trust suit in 1912 against the Motion Picture Patents Company, which Edison dominated, was one blow. The death knell was Edison’s adherence to single reel dramas as the rest of the industry moved toward longer features. The later Edison one-reelers have long been unbailable for public viewing and have generally been dismissed by scholars. With recent and forthcoming preservation, they can be reassessed.

Further information and viewing: For the charitable work of the Fresh Air Fund, see [www.freshair.org](http://www.freshair.org). Another nonprofit organization, the National Child Labor Committee, collaborated with the Edison company in 1912 to make “Children Who Labor,” which is included in the “More Treasures from American Film Archives” DVD set. More Edison one-reelers from the 1910s, preserved by the Museum of Modern Art, can now be seen in Kino International’s 2005 DVD set “Edison: The Invention of the Movies.”

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

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