

A Cure for Pokeritis

By Steve Massa

If you're a devotee of classic American films, you're probably well aware of and have seen dozens of comedies with popular male/female teams such as William Powell & Myrna Loy, Spencer Tracy & Katherine Hepburn, Rock Hudson & Doris Day, even all the way up to Adam Sandler & Drew Barrymore. But how about John Bunny & Flora Finch?

Although closer in spirit to the mismatched pairing of a Wallace Beery & Marie Dressler, Mr. Bunny and Ms. Finch were the first popular male/female screen comedy team. Their films were known as "Bunnyfinches" to their legion of fans, many of whom were sure that they were married in real life.

After a stage career that had encompassed twenty-two years of minstrel shows, circuses, vaudeville and working with legends like William Brady, Lew Fields, and Raymond Hitchcock, in 1910 the rotund Bunny presented himself at the Vitagraph Studio in Brooklyn looking for work. Resembling Shakespeare's Falstaff or Sir Toby Belch come to life, Bunny made an immediate impression on moviegoers and became a favorite. In February of 1911, he first worked with the tall and skinny Flora Finch. The combination of the expansive Bunny with the severe Finch created an instant combative chemistry (which may have been helped by the fact that they're said to have had an active mutual dislike for each other).

Finch had been born in England in 1867 and began her career there on stage. After coming to the U.S. she started working in films while trying to establish herself on the American stage. Starting with the Biograph Co. in 1908, she caught the attention of D.W. Griffith and made an impression in his "Jones Family" shorts and other comedies like "All On Account of the Milk" (1910). In 1910 she moved over to Vitagraph.

Although Bunny and Finch only appeared in slightly more than half of their output of Vitagraph films together, they were their most popular. The pair were often at odds as husband and wife as in "The Subduing of Mrs. Nag" (1911). Flora is the hen pecker of the title who objects to pretty Mabel Normand as her spouse Bunny's business secretary. No matter how Mabel tries to homely herself up Mrs. Nag is still not satisfied, so finally the secretary pretends to be a man in her brother's clothing and gets the old lady to flirt with "him." Husband Bunny is in on the scheme and catching the missus in the flirtation now he has the upper hand to keep her nose out of his



From "The Motion Picture Story Magazine," Aug 1913-Jan 1914,"
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business office.

Other popular titles include "Her Crowning Glory" (1911), "Polishing Up" (1914), and "Bunny Backslides" (1914), but their most famous teaming is "A Cure for Pokeritis" (1912). Bunny has sworn off playing poker to Flora, but is actually still indulging one night a week under the guise of it being a "Sons of the Morning" social club meeting. Flora gets suspicious when Bunny re-enacts the poker games in his sleep, and contacts her effeminate cousin Freddie. Following Bunny on his next evening out Freddie confirms the truth and conspires with Flora to have his bible class masquerade as cops and "raid" the next game. The following week the scheme goes through as planned and when Freddie and company are dragging the gamblers off to the hoosegow their wives conveniently show up and get them off the hook, leaving the miscreants in their custody and debt.

"A Cure for Pokeritis" was directed by Lawrence Trimble, one of Vitagraph's best directors. Originally a writer, the

story goes that on an assignment to write about movie making he showed up at Vitagraph with his dog Jean just as a dog was needed for a film. Jean became very popular and ended up in her own series, with Trimble helming most of the shorts. He also directed Bunny and Florence Turner in items like "Bunny's Suicide" (1912), and "Up and Down the Ladder" (1913). In 1913 he and Florence Turner moved to England and set up the Turner Film Co., where they turned out features on the order of "My Old Dutch" (1915) and shorts like "Daisy Doodad's Dial" (1914). Thanks to World War I they were back in America by 1917, but Trimble directed features for companies like Goldwyn and Selznick. He later developed another dog star, Strongheart, and piloted his films until 1926.

Bunny specialized in playing "salt of the earth" characters such as flirty husbands, old bachelors, and crusty sea captains, etc., and both he and Ms. Finch were film actors far ahead of their time who got many laughs from a subtle look, or when a conflict of emotions would play across Bunny's broad face. Although physically filling the

stereotype of the jolly fat man, it's rumored that Bunny was bad-tempered and egotistical and, due to his extreme weight, narcoleptic, even able to snooze away in a complete standing position. In 1914, despite declining health, the comedian began doing double duty in films and on stage. Overwork, combined with kidney disease, caused his death on May 1, 1915. Tributes from around the world eulogized Bunny, predicting that he and his films would continue to be cherished by future generations, but within only a few years the memory of him dimmed and most of the films disappeared.

The peak of Flora Finch's career was her years with Bunny and Vitagraph. Leaving the studio in 1916, she set up the Flora Finch Film Corporation the following year and turned out some starring two-reelers that were coolly received by audiences and exhibitors. She returned to the supporting ranks and had good roles in many high profile features such as *Quality Street* and "The Cat and the Canary" (both 1927). By the time sound arrived, outside of an occasional role such as the village gossip in *The Scarlet Letter* (1934) or her funny cameo at the open-

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

*Steve Massa is the author of *Lame Brains and Lunatics: The Good, The Bad, and The Forgotten of Silent Comedy*. A librarian in the *Billy Rose Theatre Collection* at the *New York Public Library for the Performing Arts* at *Lincoln Center*, he has organized comedy film programs for the *Museum of Modern Art*, the *Library of Congress*, the *Smithsonian Institution*, and the *Pordenone Silent Film Festival*. In addition to consulting with the *Eye Film Institute*, *Netherlands* and other archives, and writing for film journals such as *Griffithiana*, he is a founding member of *Silent Cinema Presentations* which produces NYC's *Silent Clown Films Series*. Steve has also contributed essays and commentary tracks to many comedy DVD collections such as "The Forgotten Films of Roscoe 'Fatty' Arbuckle," "Harry Langdon: Lost and Found," "Kino Video's Buster Keaton: The Short Films Collection," and co-curated "The Mishaps of Musty Suffer" DVD set.*