

Brothers Chester and Shirley Clawson. These two prolific Mormon filmmakers can effectually be credited with creating Mormon cinema. Their pioneering cinematic work was emblematic of the films made during the First Wave and set the stage for everything that has come since. Perry Special Collections, BYU.

THE FIRST WAVE:

THE CLAWSON BROTHERS AND THE NEW FRONTIER (1905–1929)

In calling this era the new frontier, there is some danger of forgetting the large industrial organizations that supported film's early pioneers. The analogy, however, is of some use here not only because of Utah's recent pioneer past at the turn of the century—only a generation removed—but primarily because of the proud, isolationist stance LDS filmmakers were forced to assume in response to the mainstream industry's attacks on their religion. With no political redress or recourse to non-Mormon allies, the Latter-day Saints were left to their own devices to depict what they saw as the glories of their scriptures, forebears, and modern leaders. They had their guides, to be certain—modern Jim Bridgers like Thomas Ince or D. W. Griffith—but Mormon filmmakers seem to have felt they were blazing ahead where none had gone before, where God wanted them to go.

Beginning an Era: *A Trip to Salt Lake City*

Before 1905, movies had been shown in a variety of transient settings such as carnivals and vaudeville shows, but that June a Pittsburgh storefront was converted into the first nickelodeon—a permanent projection facility so called for its admission price of five cents—and a boom of such venues swept the country. On the cusp of this movement came a typical one-shot comedy titled *A Trip to Salt Lake City*. Made by American Mutoscope & Biograph, the same firm that under its previous name had filmed the Rocky Mountain Riders, the picture depicts the interior of a Pullman railway car in which several women in succession deposit young children into sleeping berths. Finally a single father arrives, and, after being overwhelmed by his enthusiastic progeny then henpecked by his formidable spouses, he briefly exits to retrieve a large water canister. He supplies drinking hoses to each bunk, thus meeting the needs of his large family. An impressed railroad employee congratulates the polygamist on his ingenuity.

Given the sensationalist use of Mormonism in Victorian literature,¹⁴ it is amazing that a satirical film on Mormons did not come earlier or that there were not more of them. This particular production, however, was certainly brought about by the Senate hearing for the seating of Apostle Reed Smoot, a controversial and high-publicity event, begun in 1904, that had called national attention to polygamy in the post-Manifesto Church. Amid this larger controversy, *A Trip to Salt Lake City* failed to gain any response from Church leaders as later films would, perhaps because it was

Key Films of the First Wave

- *Salt Lake City Company of Rocky Mountain Riders* (1898, USA, director unknown, 2 minutes 34 seconds). First recorded filming of Latter-day Saints in early newsreel of the Spanish-American War.
- *A Trip to Salt Lake City* (1905, USA, director unknown, 3 minutes). First fiction film with Mormon content, a satire on modern polygamy made during the Reed Smoot Senate hearings.
- *A Victim of the Mormons* (1911, Denmark, director August Blom, approximately 60 minutes). First major anti-Mormon film, which sparked a fad in 1912 and afterwards.
- *One Hundred Years of Mormonism* (1913, USA, director Norval MacGregor, 90 minutes). First theatrical feature film created by the LDS Church.
- *The Life of Nephi* (1915, USA, producer William A. Morton, 3 reels). Part of an aborted effort to bring the entire Book of Mormon to the silver screen; the first cinematic depiction of the Book of Mormon.
- Clawson brothers films (1916–1929, USA, directors Shirl and Chet Clawson, various lengths). First Church-sponsored documentaries on Mormon subjects, events, and leaders.
- *A Mormon Maid* (1917, USA, director Robert Z. Leonard, 65 minutes). The most significant anti-Mormon film of the silent era.
- *Trapped by the Mormons* (1922, UK, director H. B. Parkinson, 97 minutes). Famed but slightly overhyped anti-Mormon film that marked the genre's temporary demise.
- *All Faces West* (1929, USA, director George Edward Lewis, unknown length of several reels). Second (and last) Church-produced theatrical feature film.

so mild-mannered, perhaps because they thought it more astute to ignore it, or perhaps because it never even came to their attention. It remains unknown, for instance, if it ever actually played in the city of its title. Regardless, *A Trip to Salt Lake City* is representative of a trend in early motion pictures not only to respond to current events but to capitalize on stereotypes that had been staples in nineteenth-century literature.¹⁵

MORMONS AND THE MAINSTREAM INDUSTRY

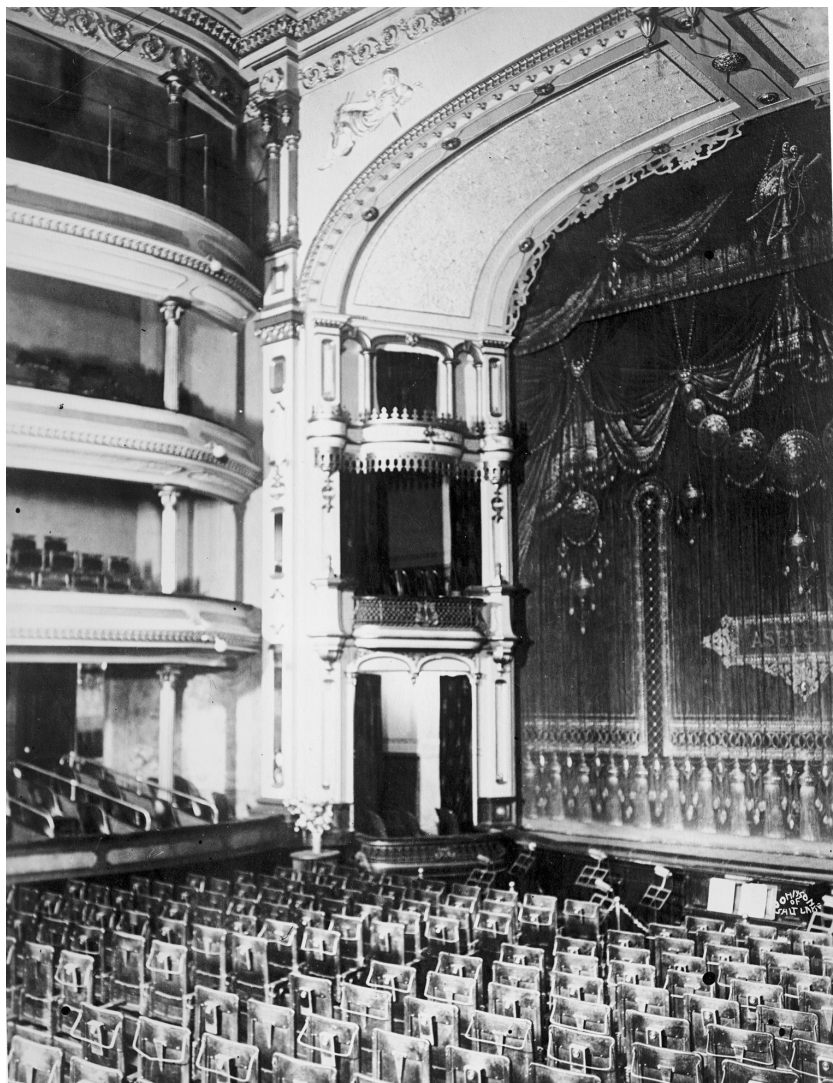
Commercial Distribution and Exhibition

Patronage was the first major contribution Latter-day Saints made to the film industry, and it has remained a consistent and powerful force throughout their history, influencing not just LDS filmmakers but millions more who have never touched a camera. Hence, a history of the beginnings of film exhibition in Utah is fitting to a history of Mormons and film. By 1905 enough Utahns were patronizing the nickelodeons for proper cinemas to soon spring up in their wake. D. Lester Park, who would become a prominent figure throughout the First Wave, laid claim to being “the first man to show a motion picture in the state.”¹⁶ Whether this was true or not, by 1905 he had become perhaps the most prominent local film distributor.

He was soon rivaled, however, by William W. Hodkinson, a non-Mormon who began exhibiting films in Ogden in 1907 and soon branched out to San Francisco and Los Angeles. He named his company Paramount and created a logo of stars and a mountain peak probably based on Ogden’s Mount Ben Lomond. In 1914 he entered groundbreaking distribution agreements with various studios but was soon removed from power by the ambitious head of one of these, Adolph Zukor, under whom Paramount continued to grow; today it is the oldest studio in America. Hodkinson never repeated the success of his first venture, but his influence in revolutionizing film distribution—which grew in part out of Utah’s enthusiastic cinematic culture—was great enough that he has been described as “the man who invented Hollywood.”¹⁷

Of course, Utah film distribution boomed beyond the efforts of these two men. In 1908 the first proper cinema in Salt Lake opened, Harry Rand’s 300-seat Empire Theater at 158 South State Street. This was followed by venues like the American Theatre, which opened at 241 South Main Street on July 8, 1913, at the cusp of the picture palace craze. With 3,000 seats and a 165-foot lobby, it was touted as the largest movie theater in the world. The citizens of Salt Lake City had proven just how much they loved the movies,

and the Mormons among them had begun their love affair with the maxim that bigger is better. Cinemas stretched from Brigham City in the north to Moab in the south, bringing much of small-town Utah into touch with the rest of America for the first time. By the beginning of the 1920s Salt Lake City had four more large theaters, Ogden two, and Provo one.¹⁸



The interior of the Salt Lake Theatre. Built in 1862, it played a pivotal role in early Mormon dramatics and became a popular cinema in the 1910s. On February 3, 1913, it housed the premiere of the first great Church feature film, *One Hundred Years of Mormonism*. Used by permission, Utah State Historical Society, all rights reserved.

It was estimated that in 1921, 30,000 people attended the movies in the greater Salt Lake area every day.¹⁹ Such high levels of patronage, combined with national attitudes of the Progressive Era, catalyzed a private force in film exhibition that would arguably have a greater influence on Mormon culture than Hollywood. This new player in film exhibition was none other than the LDS Church itself.

Private Church Film Distribution in the Context of Social Reform

The growth of cinema in Utah couldn't help but prompt a response from Church leaders, who quickly grasped film's educational and socializing promise as well as its demoralizing and dangerous potential. Hence, they taught that strict control must be exercised over film screenings and similar social functions. The roots of this position, of course, long predate the movies and have their basis not so much in moral censorship as in the Church's effort to shape the social conditions of its members. Corresponding with a larger reformation movement in America, the LDS Church created programs and institutions that would permanently reshape its social climate.²⁰ Those changes also influenced Mormon attitudes toward movies.

With the turn of the century, specific social entertainments such as dancing and picnics began to come under Church scrutiny. Local and general "amusement committees" were formed, and many stakes began building and operating amusement halls.²¹ This reformation impulse led to numerous programs, including the creation of libraries and gymnasia, soon often attached to chapels within a single structure; the resultant organization of sporting tournaments, primarily basketball; the adoption of the new Boy Scouts of America program in 1913; the creation of "road shows" or "merry-go-rounds" to encourage wholesome theatricals; and the introduction of a Tuesday night "family home evening," which was begun by the Granite stake in Salt Lake City in 1909 but adopted Church-wide by 1915.

It was within this milieu that private Church film exhibition was born. Spurred on by the successful film exhibition of the Salt Lake City Methodists in June 1911, members of the LDS Sunday School superintendency, particularly Salt Lake Theatre manager George D. Pyper, began investigating the possibility of using film. Pyper secured the biblical movie *From the Manger to the Cross* (1912) for private exhibition in the autumn of 1913. Though this was successful, subsequent attempts to exhibit films waited for two additional events: the creation in 1916 of an LDS Social Advisory Committee, with Apostle Stephen L Richards as chair and Pyper as assistant chair, and the end of World War I in 1918, after which national

interest in film's didactic potential increased. At a Social Advisory Committee meeting on December 16, 1919, Pyper and William A. Morton proposed regularizing Church-sponsored "motion picture evenings" at LDS amusement halls.²² The concept was accepted and promoted, soon making film exhibition a Church-wide, if initially uncoordinated, endeavor. It is noteworthy that rather than simply condemning or censoring motion pictures, the LDS Church sought to appropriate the new medium into its evolving social institutions. This would pave the way, ultimately, for the institutional production of film as well.

Mormons Go to Hollywood

While Church officials were engaged in bringing Hollywood's product to the Great Basin, other Latter-day Saints were heading to Los Angeles, where in 1923 the Church organized the first stake outside the Rocky Mountains. As the film industry grew in southern California, Church members were working in a variety of capacities.

Some may wonder what Latter-day Saints working in the mainstream entertainment industry have to do with films that deal explicitly with Mormonism. The relationship is far more than a cultural curiosity, as it happens. First, LDS filmmakers who have made Church-related films have also spent a large portion of their careers on mainstream secular work. Second, the LDS beliefs or roots of these people have influenced their secular work, often infusing some mainstream films with a Mormon worldview. Third, there are multiple instances of nonpracticing Mormons contributing directly to institutional and independent Mormon films. Fourth, the accumulation of Latter-day Saint professionals—even completely irreligious ones—in the mainstream industry has led to a critical mass of talent, allowing Mormon cinema to eventually emerge as a distinguishable entity. It is safe to say that there would be no Mormon cinema today—institutional or independent—if not for generations of Latter-day Saint filmmakers working in California over the past century: Los Angeles has been just as important to Mormon film as Salt Lake City or Provo.

Although he did not actively practice his religion, the most significant ethnic Mormon director of the silent era was James Cruze, whose career included titles like *The Covered Wagon* (1923), *The Pony Express* (1925), *I Cover the Waterfront* (1933), and *Gangs of New York* (1938). *The Covered Wagon* has often been credited with reviving the dying genre of the western, and its success made Cruze the highest-paid director in the world.²³

Several Latter-day Saints also made names for themselves as screenwriters and actors, but interestingly the two most influential Church

members were not filmmakers but scientists. Physicist Harvey Fletcher joined Western Electric's Research Division in 1916, where he helped develop the hearing aid with a vacuum tube. His later work at Bell Labs led to the perfection of binaural sound reproduction; in December 1931, with Arthur C. Keller and Leopold Stokowski, he created the first stereophonic recording. Stereo first appeared in the movies in *The Robe* (1953) and became common after 1975. Its effect on the film and music industries is incalculable, and most historians of audio technology deem Harvey Fletcher its primary father.²⁴

Philo T. Farnsworth grew up in Rigby, Idaho, where he proved to be a prodigious scientist. According to legend, fourteen-year-old Philo noticed the straight rows he was plowing in his father's field and struck upon the concept of video scanning by sending individual electrons in a series of similar lines. In San Francisco, he achieved the first all-electronic television transmission on September 7, 1927. His wife, Pem, and brother-in-law B. Clifford Gardner, both LDS, soon became the first human beings to have their images transported by video. Lengthy custody battles ensued with RCA, but eventually the U.S. Patent Office legally established Farnsworth as the sole inventor of television, and in the ensuing years he has gained minor celebrity status within the Church. A year before his death, Farnsworth stated, "I know that I never invented anything. I have been a medium by which these things were given to the culture as fast as culture could earn them. I give the credit to God."²⁵

Hollywood Comes to the Mormons

In addition to Latter-day Saints going to Hollywood in the First Wave, it did not take long for Hollywood to discover Utah. The filming of major movies in the state may seem tangential to Mormon cinema proper, but it too has enhanced a reciprocal relationship between the industry and the Latter-day Saints. By the 1920s, studio filming began to place Utah on the global map, perhaps the first time the state had been thought of as anything other than the isolated land of the Latter-day Saints. Cinematic representations of Utah have indirectly helped to mainstream the Mormons within American culture. Most early productions took place in the open deserts and canyons of the south; Monument Valley alone has become one of the most trafficked locations in cinema history. John Ford, who first shot in Utah for *Iron Horse* in 1924, had a particularly fruitful relationship with the state, shooting over a half dozen films there and causing Monument Valley and the Moab area to become known the world over as "John Ford Country." Since the 1920s, hundreds of films, westerns and otherwise, have

been made, partially or entirely, in southern Utah, resulting in strong film bureaus that organizations in the population centers to the north have only recently matched.²⁶

MAINSTREAM DEPICTIONS OF MORMONS

A Victim of the Mormons: The Anti-Mormon Film Begins

It is unknown if any Mormon-themed films followed closely behind *A Trip to Salt Lake City*, but in 1911 a slew of anti-Mormon productions began with a vehemence that shocked Church members. The first of these was apparently *Tilly and the Mormon Missionary*, released in England that August,²⁷ but, as a farce, its impact was negligible, and it was soon followed by a much more notorious production, the Danish *A Victim of the Mormons*, released on October 2, 1911, in Copenhagen.

A Victim of the Mormons (*Mormonens Offer*) tells the story of Florence Grange, whose brother George introduces her to an old friend named Reverend Andrew Larson, a Mormon missionary who quickly woos her away from her fiancé, Leslie, and absconds with her to Utah. George and Leslie set off in a pursuit that crosses the ocean and continent; en route Florence has a change of heart and must be detained forcibly, eventually becoming imprisoned with Larson's first wife in Salt Lake City. After the depiction of a baptism in the Mormon temple, George and Leslie chase Larson home where he falls through a trapdoor into Florence's basement cell. In the ensuing fight, Larson tries to shoot Florence, but Leslie deflects the shot and the bullet kills Larson instead.²⁸

Denmark's film industry at this time was one of the strongest in the world, and *A Victim of the Mormons'* production company, Nordisk Films, was well established in Europe and North America. The picture fully exploited the developing star system and was directed by the well-known August Blom. At three reels' length—roughly an hour—it was not only the longest Danish film of 1911 but also one of the longest ever up to that point. The prestige of such a production compelled Latter-day Saints in Europe and America to respond. In Scandinavia and England—*Victim* premiered in London a week after its Copenhagen debut—missionaries soon standardized their response by standing outside theaters and distributing pamphlets, including a tract specially written by European Mission President Rudger Clawson entitled "The Anti-'Mormon' Moving Pictures and Play."²⁹ Here we see the first direct connection between filmic depictions of Mormons and LDS missionary work. The Church would first fight these

negative depictions, then counter them with their own film productions to compete for a more authentic representation of Mormonism to the masses.

A Victim of the Mormons was slated for a U.S. premiere on February 3, 1912, and Church leaders and members across the country launched a multipronged campaign to suppress it. Eventually the National Board of Censorship withdrew its support of the picture, but Nordisk released the film anyway, actually using the Mormon protest as free publicity.³⁰ What began as one sensational film quickly became a deluge, with at least a half dozen similar titles emerging in 1912. The experience of these two years determined how the Church has seen and approached cinema ever since. It becomes worthwhile, therefore, to examine the genesis of the anti-Mormon pictures themselves.

The Roots of Anti-Mormon Cinema

Cinematic exploitation of Mormonism apparently evolved from nineteenth-century literature, beginning with Edward Marryat's 1843 *Monsieur Violet: His Travels and Adventures among the Snake Indians*. This book introduced a new element into fiction: the marauding Danite agent. Briefly existing in the Missouri conflicts in the summer of 1838, the Danites gained a new life in literature and succeeded in becoming the "myth that would define Mormonism,"³¹ appearing in at least fifty-six books before 1900, most of which included polygamous storylines as well.³²

Why such a great interest in Mormonism in general and polygamy and Danites in particular? It served as an activity of self-definition for American and British societies, as Mormonism proved an exemplary foil against which to contrast conservative values. Of much more immediate interest, however, was profit. Mormonism lent itself to sensationalism, and "the evil fact of polygamy made credible almost any fiction. . . . A lucrative market existed for Mormon stories, which appealed both to the reform-minded and the curious, the pious and the prurient. . . . Victorian novelists dwelt on myths about the Mormons because the facts were simply too mundane."³³

If the genre was beginning to wane by the 1890s, anti-Mormon sentiment received fresh impetus with the aforementioned Reed Smoot hearings. A muckraking yellow press contributed to popular impressions of clandestine polygamists and other more fictitious entities such as modern Danites. There were visually based affronts, most often in the form of illustrated magic lantern lectures but also including the illicit photographs Max Florence took of the Salt Lake Temple interior in September 1911.³⁴ The literary genre also revived, from ostensibly nonfiction accounts to the novels of the new British author Winifred Graham, who became a

major anti-Mormon crusader for the next fifteen years, helping formulate an organized crusade in 1911. In this year, anti-Mormon rallies were held throughout England, and though the government took no action against the Church, there were a few cases of mob violence. Much of the activity took shape in the form of propaganda like Graham's *The Love Story of a Mormon* and the play *Through Death Valley, or The Mormon Peril*, both of which paved the way for cinematic representations.³⁵

The few silent anti-Mormon films that are available today are generally seen as camp and are received with great bemusement, but within this historical milieu of rising anti-Mormon sentiment, Latter-day Saints appropriately considered these films serious assaults. The threat to the Church, especially with the onslaught that arrived in 1912, was palpable.

Waxing and Waning: Anti-Mormon Films 1912–1922

The rapid release rate of anti-Mormon films in 1912 meant that a great many of them were underway in 1911, with at least one, a Danish copycat film called *The Flower of the Mormon City* (*Mormonbyens Blomst*), released late that year. This and subsequent titles generally tended to focus on the Old West—thus providing a more likely context for the Danite element—rather than on modern missionaries. Though it is unknown if Church leaders were aware of *Flower*, by January 1912 they were fighting two more pictures: *The Mountain Meadows Massacre* and *The Mormon*. The first of these was distributed by the French firm Pathé Freres, the largest film company in the world, which wasn't about to capitulate to complaints from Utah. Flying A, producer of *The Mormon*, was likewise pressured to drop Mormon references, but the film was released under the intended title on January 25. Further films came in the form of *An Episode of Early Mormon Days*, *Marriage or Death*, and *The Danites*, all of which were released despite the Church's efforts.

There would never again be another onslaught as heavy as this, and three European offerings from the mid-1910s, all based on the Sherlock Holmes story *A Study in Scarlet*, offered little threat as World War I diverted attention from the Mormon problem. The war was not a big enough deterrent in the U.S., however, as anti-Mormon films reached their zenith with the 1917 *A Mormon Maid*. Produced by Famous Players-Lasky, the film opened on Valentine's Day at New York's Strand Theater. It ran sixty-five minutes on five reels and was described as the most advertised film in the history of cinema up to that time. Such a high-profile production, with a familiar plot featuring Danites and polygamous intrigues, could no longer be justified by anti-Mormon sentiment; rather, motivation now came from



A production still from *A Mormon Maid* (1917). The innocent heroine Dora Hogue (Mae Murray) is held captive by two malicious Danites. The Danites' costume is essentially identical to costumes worn by Ku Klux Klan characters in the popular *The Birth of a Nation* two years before, the All-Seeing Eye being essentially the only difference. Frame enlargement. Richard Alan Nelson Collection, Perry Special Collections, BYU.

within the industry itself, as the film was a blatant attempt to capitalize on the success of D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* two years earlier. The connection between the two films cannot be overemphasized, particularly in the fabricated connection between the Ku Klux Klan and the Danites; one intertitle even tells us that the Danites' hooded costume (historically nonexistent) was the direct predecessor of the KKK's. The strategy worked, as critics lauded the film and audiences flocked to it across the nation.

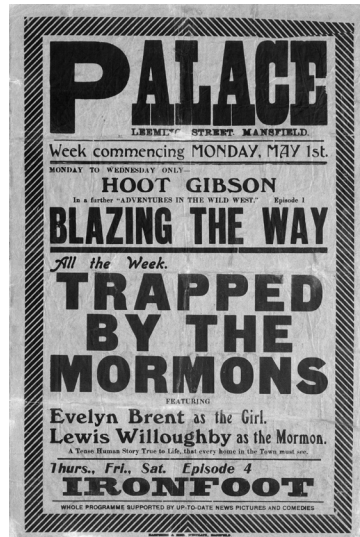
The Church could not ignore such an important production, but once again it found itself at an extreme disadvantage. Eastern States Mission President Walter Monson began the resistance when the film was first announced, but neither his nor anyone else's work did anything but heighten interest. The film became extremely popular with anti-Mormon organizations like the National Reform Association and the National Anti-Mormon League. It continued to be shown publicly and privately across

the globe for at least three years and unquestionably represents the climax of the silent anti-Mormon films.³⁶

Though perhaps nothing could match this in force or scope, other lesser productions followed. In late 1918, Fox released two films based on Zane Grey novels, *Riders of the Purple Sage* and its sequel *The Rainbow Trail*. This time Reed Smoot spearheaded the crusade, and although no results were reached in 1918, he renewed his efforts, with other prominent Latter-day Saints, over a 1921 re-release. This campaign seemed as doomed as the others until two Fox representatives approached Senator Smoot seeking his support in eliminating a 30 percent excise tax on motion pictures; the deal making evidently took all of five minutes, and the pictures' removal was so complete that they are entirely lost today. The films were remade in 1925, 1931, and 1941 without any references to Mormonism, and in 1924 a film based on a Zane Grey novel with a *positive* stance on the Church, *The Heritage of the Desert*, also had its LDS elements excised.³⁷

It is unlikely that producers now saw the Church as having political muscle. The disappearance of the American anti-Mormon film was most likely due to the subject's loss of sensationalism, and negative references to Mormonism virtually disappeared from the screen. The anti-Mormon film would be given one last gasp in Europe, however, where Mormonism once more became a hot topic after the postwar return of American missionaries. In 1920 Germany released its only known anti-Mormon film, *The Mormon Uncle* (*Der Mormonenonkel*), of which virtually nothing else is known. Far better documented are two English films, *Trapped by the Mormons* and *Married to a Mormon*, released in March and April 1922 as part of Winifred Graham's last desperate campaign against the Church. Both films came from the fledgling Master Films studio at Teddington, both featured lecherous missionaries defeated by monogamous heroes, and both were written by Frank Miller and produced and directed by H. B. Parkinson.

Trapped by the Mormons is often treated as the most important and damaging of the anti-Mormon films,



A British broadside advertising *Trapped by the Mormons* (1922), with other offerings for the week. Richard Alan Nelson Collection, Perry Special Collections, BYU.

though both descriptions better fit *A Mormon Maid*. Contemporary missionary reports, in fact, show that the film's effect was primarily positive. Elder G. Osmond Hyde wrote home from Hull that it "was the best stroke of advertising that we have put forth since coming over here. In three evenings we let more people know that we are here than we could have done in three months at ordinary tracting from door to door."³⁸ Similar reports came from various regions. In Australia, for instance, future Church leader Marion G. Romney saw *Trapped*, happily distributing tracts afterward. But in North America, Church leaders were less willing to rely on goodwill. Attempts to suppress the films in Canada in 1924 failed, but Senator Smoot was again successful in blocking their initial release in the United States. Though *Trapped by the Mormons* was re-released in England in 1928 as *The Mormon Peril*, it apparently never saw an American screen.³⁹

The anti-Mormon film was not extinct, but the lackluster success of these two projects certainly helped put it into remission. By the 1930s, Mormonism had outlived its sensationalism, and lurid depictions virtually disappeared from the page, stage, and screen. Following the example of Reed Smoot, Heber Grant, and others, Latter-day Saints had begun to actively foster a positive public image, some by producing movies of their own.

INSTITUTIONAL AND INDEPENDENT FILMS

The Church Enters Filmmaking: *One Hundred Years of Mormonism*

The greatest legacy of the anti-Mormon films was, ironically, the fostering of an appreciation for motion pictures within the LDS Church hierarchy. The proceedings of the April 1912 general conference are illuminating in this regard, as nearly a dozen sermons, the most forcible from President Joseph F. Smith, touched on the subject. The Church was in fact already acting to take advantage of this new medium and gain a level platform with its attackers. Simultaneous with their various campaigns against the films of 1912, Joseph F. Smith, other Church leaders, and rank-and-file Latter-day Saints began investigating opportunities to put the Mormon story as *they* saw it on film.

Occasional short films had already depicted Utah subjects positively, or at least neutrally, which was virtually as good. Friendly travelogues and scenic pictures prepared an environment for filmmakers to create work with overtly pro-Mormon sentiments. The first of these came, appropriately, from Utah's first native film company, the Rocky Mountain Moving Picture Company, formed in August 1908 in Salt Lake City. Among the firm's first productions were scenic shots of local interest, including all

of the buildings on Temple Square.⁴⁰ In the weekly meeting of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles on June 30, 1910, President Smith reported that “a man named Hutchinson [had] proposed the idea of illustrating the chief points in the history of the Church by means of moving pictures.” This was most likely S. W. Hutchinson, a director of the Rocky Mountain Company. The General Authorities agreed to pursue the project, but we have no further record of the venture.⁴¹ Other short films were undertaken in the early 1910s, including an unfinished historical picture called *The Romance of Mormonism* in 1912 and the completed *The Romance of the Utah Pioneers* in 1913, which became the first cinematic portrayal of an LDS handcart company.

In June 1912 the Church itself struck a deal with the Ellaye Motion Picture Company to make a huge film telling the Church’s full history. Ellaye’s president and general manager, Harry A. Kelly, gave the Church final cut approval in return for assistance and, presumably, endorsement. Soon, however, Ellaye claimed this stipulation was too limiting, though it also appears the company had run out of funds. It was replaced by the California-based Utah Moving Picture Company. The name *One Hundred Years of Mormonism* came from a popular Church textbook by John Henry Evans published for the 1905 centennial of Joseph Smith’s birth. The film was apparently not a direct adaptation, but the subject matter of the book and film were obviously very similar, following the Church from Joseph Smith’s infancy to the development of modern Utah. The scale of the production was massive, and with six reels running for ninety minutes the film was truly gigantic for its time, dwarfing prestige productions like *A Victim of the Mormons*.

One Hundred Years of Mormonism opened on Monday, February 3, 1913, at the Salt Lake Theatre in the largest premiere in the city’s history. Two other prints opened in San Francisco and Los Angeles on February 9, and the three prints traveled through the western states, each accompanied

The angel Moroni appears to Joseph Smith as he prays. Double exposure was used to suggest the supernatural in depicting heavenly visitors for the first time in Mormon film in *One Hundred Years of Mormonism* (1913). Only a few minutes survive of this, the first Church-sponsored feature film. LDS Church Archives, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.





Young Joseph Smith courting Emma Hale in a scene from *One Hundred Years of Mormonism* (1913). LDS Church Archives, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

by a live lecturer. Feedback resulted in some cuts and reshoots, including footage from the April 1913 general conference that was shot and added to the film with First Presidency approval.⁴² The film went into a limited general release in June, by which point it had grossed \$25,000. The extent of its distribution is not clear, but trade journals report a states' rights approach in the domestic market with London alone as the only probable foreign venue.⁴³

Contemporary reports on the film's artistic merits were mixed: Audiences were reported to have burst into spontaneous applause, yet James E. Talmage recorded in his personal journal that it was "not a complete success" and contained "many crudities and historical inaccuracies."⁴⁴ Its faults notwithstanding, *One Hundred Years of Mormonism*

is unquestionably the most important LDS film of the silent era. LDS film historian David Jacobs has given three reasons for this status: It is "the *only* silent movie sanctioned by the Church as essentially authentic, the *only* film utilizing genuine relics from the pioneer trek, and the *only* picture drawing on the experience of still-living pioneers," both as actors and otherwise.⁴⁵ It has also been lost, undoubtedly one of the great tragedies of the First Wave. But in the late 1990s, Robert Starling, who was working as a producer for the Church's Audiovisual Department, discovered a few minutes of *One Hundred Years* catalogued incorrectly in the Church Archives in Salt Lake City. Though not a complete copy, this find constitutes arguably the most important and electrifying event in recent Mormon film history.⁴⁶

The Clawson Brothers

One Hundred Years of Mormonism influenced LDS filmmakers to build up the local film industry in a number of ways, resulting in both secular and religious productions. Its most important progeny was announced on December 20, 1913, when a young man named Chet Clawson wrote in the *Deseret Evening News* that he and his brother Shirl had received permission from the First Presidency to make a feature film based on the Book



An angel appears to reprimand Laman and Lemuel in *The Life of Nephi* (1915). The film was shot in black and white with color later painted on by hand. This is one of thirty-nine stills preserved by A. J. T. Sorensen for use in an illustrated magic lantern lecture, rediscovered in Church Archives by Brian Sokolowski. LDS Church Archives, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

of Mormon.⁴⁷ The Clawson brothers would become the driving force of silent Mormon cinema, setting the stage for everything that has come since. If any one man deserves to be called the father of Mormon movies, it is Shirl Clawson.

The Clawsons decided to break the project, known as *The Story of the Book of Mormon*, into multiple films, and William A. Morton was contracted to write the first installment, *The Life of Nephi*. However, when the First Presidency approved this script the Clawsons evidently failed to pay the contracted \$400. After two years of work and negotiations, Morton removed the Clawsons from the project and undertook to produce it himself, enlisting the help of Anton J. T. Sorensen, William J. Burns, and a few others, including a professional cameraman from California. The eventual result was a three-reel picture that premiered on October 25, 1915. After local showings, the film was lost; all that remain are thirty-nine hand-painted slides Sorensen used in an illustrated lecture. Morton and the others predicted lives of failure for the Clawson brothers, a future that fortunately did not materialize.⁴⁸

Shirl and Chet were the sons of Hiram Clawson, long associated with the Salt Lake Theatre, and grandchildren of Brigham Young through their mother, actress Emily Partridge Young; hence, they sprang from the most prominent dramatic family in the Church, with theatrical roots going back to the very first performance in Nauvoo. Shirl, whose full name was Shirley Young Clawson, consistently displayed more dramatic and cinematic interest than his brother Chet, or Chester, who tended more to the business affairs. It is possible that they were making film documents of the Church as early as 1910, but after *The Life of Nephi* fiasco, Shirl moved to California to work as a cameraman for Universal Pictures. He returned after just one

year, however, and the brothers again made the creation of Church films their full-time occupation. Joseph F. Smith evidently agreed to outfit them, making their works loosely Church-affiliated, and the Clawson or Deseret Film Company was soon established in the lower floor of the Lion House, where the Lion House Pantry Restaurant is now located. On April 9, 1916, during general conference, they did their first major filming, of Church leaders and the crowds at Temple Square. Two private screenings were held, and thus *The Eighty-Sixth Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* became the first truly official Church film.⁴⁹

Over the next decade, the Clawsons worked intensely, eventually moving to the basement of the Deseret News Building on South Temple and Main Street. They supplemented their religious work with advertisements, titles, and newsreels, but Church films remained their passion. They shot invaluable records of dozens of General Authorities on the streets, temple grounds, and in their offices and homes. They recorded Joseph F. Smith's funeral, Boy Scout excursions, monument dedications, parades, conferences, athletic events, picnics, and dozens of other activities and scenic shots, in Salt Lake and elsewhere. Virtually nothing escaped their lens; they even filmed President Grant playing golf.⁵⁰



The Clawson brothers filmed events at the 17th Annual Track & Field Meet and Relay Carnival at BYU on April 29 and 30, 1927. The intertitle for this event reads, "Dashing Girls (50 Yards)." LDS Church Archives, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

A still from a film of President Joseph F. Smith, who enjoyed automobile excursions. The Clawson brothers took many such candid films, creating an important history. LDS Church Archives, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.



For the most part, their films were not documentaries but actualities—short, unpretentious slices of life contained within a single shot. Because of this practice, as well as their two-man-studio setup, the Clawson brothers of the 1920s rather resemble France’s Lumière brothers, who are credited with the world’s first public film screening on December 28, 1895. Particularly in their aesthetic simplicity combined with documentary richness—and because they, like the Lumières’ employees, operated as cameramen, laboratory technicians, and distributors for their own pictures—the Clawsons’ operation was quite similar to the Lumières’. Usually the Church Historian’s office describes a Clawson picture with words like “President Joseph F. Smith (close up) in front of temple, removes hat, then glasses,” or “Stephen L Richards in Sunday School office; George D. Pyper in and out.” Obviously, despite their apparent nonchalance, the Clawsons, like the Lumières’ cameramen, were *directing* their subjects, treating them as actors, often with multiple takes.

Perhaps the least clear aspect of the Clawsons’ work is what they *did* with their films, particularly in terms of distribution and exhibition. We know they used film for archival purposes, as this was mentioned in connection with the April 1916 general conference, but records also refer to such films’ public relations potential. In a 1923 *Improvement Era* article, Harold Jenson mentioned being “engaged with Clawson Brothers, in taking moving pictures . . . which moving pictures were shown in Salt Lake City.”⁵¹ It is possible that this particular piece, on flooding near Willard and Farmington, was done in the Clawsons’ capacity as agents for Pathé news, but it shows that films were indeed exhibited locally. Given the Pathé connection, however, it seems highly likely that the Clawsons themselves saw their films not as actualities but as newsreels, pieces that would not only cause a thrill of recognition in their viewers but also help bolster

their faith as well. The films probably served three purposes: archival, commercial, and religious. By watching the prophet or Church activities, contemporary Latter-day Saints, paying admission at commercial theaters, could become galvanized to help build up the kingdom; these films also gave future generations the opportunity to view a bygone era in a manner never before possible.

Institutional Broadcasting Begins

Church broadcasting began with radio, which quickly helped foster a culture of officially sanctioned audiovisual media, including cinema. Although radio lacked film's visual component, it eventually helped lead to the increased use, institutionally and independently, of media such as film and, later, television. Not only have many films since the Third Wave been created specifically for television, but electronic media—including radio—paved the way for the Church's search for wholly controllable cinematic distribution outlets, including VHS, closed-circuit broadcasts, and satellite.

The Church's interest in radio grew naturally out of the organization's rich publishing history, particularly with periodicals. In 1921 the managers of the *Deseret News* decided to launch a station, and after major difficulties in building and hauling equipment up to a tin shack atop their roof, they achieved their first official broadcast on May 6, 1922. The infant station's call letters were KZN, presumably for "Zion." Even though the station began with a single daily half-hour broadcast, it sparked a radio craze in Salt Lake City as people, who now had something to listen to, went out and bought receivers. In 1924 the newspaper sold the station to father and son team F. W. and John Cope, who renamed it KFPT. The Church assumed majority ownership in 1925, permanently changing the call letters to KSL, for "Salt Lake." That October KSL broadcast general conference, and Church involvement with radio had begun.⁵²

All Faces West

After World War I, the initial excitement from *One Hundred Years of Mormonsim* had dissipated, but it seems that gradually more individuals, perhaps inspired by the consistent work of the Clawsons, began making amateur or promotional films in favor of the Church. In 1923 the Church itself proposed making another larger-than-life feature, although both this and a feature proposed later by the Clawsons were never completed. Then, on March 24, 1928, the Church announced a deal with the Pioneer Film Company to create an epic of the pioneer journey tentatively called *The Exodus of the New World*, although the final title would be *All Faces*

West. George Pyper wrote the screenplay, and Levi Edgar Young served as historical advisor. Principal photography wrapped by November, and the film appeared to have all the ingredients for success: the blessing of the General Authorities on the one hand and big-name Hollywood stars Ben Lyon and Marie Prevost as the romantic leads on the other. Pioneer began publicizing a second, secular feature and purchased twelve acres in the Sugar House area of Salt Lake for a permanent studio, loudly promising to bolster the local economy for years to come.

In the meantime, however, the nature of movies had changed completely with the coming of sound. *The Jazz Singer*, the first great talkie, had its Salt Lake City premiere on May 19, 1928, and although the Church had been investigating sound film for years, its arrival caught the Pioneer Film Company completely off guard. *All Faces West* would have to become a talking picture, a process that was happening to various films across the world. In November Pioneer began advertising it as such, and in December they started selling stock to raise additional funds. The necessary amount was not forthcoming, however, and eventually hopes for synchronization had to be abandoned. Accompanied by an orchestra, the film premiered privately around Valentine's Day 1929, opening to the public on March 2. It ran for one week, a typical run, but a national release was slipping out of reach. By September the company went into suspension, and the film is lost today. *All Faces West* was presumably no worse artistically than *One Hundred Years of Mormonism*, but it had the misfortune of being released at the time of greatest upheaval in the history of global cinema. A great many films across the world suffered a similar fate.⁵³

The End of an Era

This loss, however, was only a minor setback for Mormon cinema compared with other events. The Clawson brothers had continued working prodigiously for thirteen years, by this time creating a priceless visual record of the Church and region. Their skill and inventiveness as a two-person film studio has been largely unmatched in the history of cinema. In 1929 they were embarking on yet another feature and were apparently in the process of converting to synchronized sound. Their basement office was a complete film studio, including laboratory film processing equipment. It was also essentially their library, the walls covered with shelves of canned reels, many of them the only copies. The entrance was by an iron staircase that went to the street level, with an inward-opening metal door at the bottom; near this was a small washroom with a skylight grill opening in the sidewalk overhead.



On June 10, 1925, the fifty-year anniversary of the Young Men's Mutual Improvement Association, the Clawson Film Producing Co. filmed twelve thousand members of the MIA marching in a parade in Salt Lake City. Surviving Clawson footage contains many recordings of commemorative events and youth activities. Pictured here is the YMMIA float. LDS Church Archives, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

On October 23, 1929, both men were working in the studio when a rewinding machine Shirl was using emitted a spark that landed in a basket full of highly flammable nitrate-based film. Fire erupted immediately. After a moment attempting to extinguish the flames both men ran to the exit but the door had swollen shut. Chet broke the door's glass window and the incoming air caused an explosion that filled the studio. Both men ducked into the washroom, then Chet ran through the flames and leaped through the broken window, saying later he felt literally shot through the small opening by a power greater than his own. By the time the fire department arrived and broke through the skylight to Shirl, he was only slightly burned but had suffocated. Later the fire chief reported that if it had been regular carbon-based smoke he would have survived, but the nitrate produced a poisonous gas. His own films had killed him. Chet was burned terribly, nearly losing his ears. He never made another motion picture.⁵⁴

The fire also obviously destroyed a great deal of their work—Chet, the businessman, estimated \$10,000 worth of it. What survives generally came from other sources, much of it discovered in odd locations in the ensuing decades, most notably in 1948 when Frank Wise was able to compile a collection of found footage into the film *Latter-day Saint Leaders: Past and Present*.⁵⁵ With luck, more of the Clawsons' footage and the other lost films of the silent era will yet be found. Still, the detail of their surviving prints—records of the personalities and daily functioning of the Church for two decades—constitutes an invaluable legacy, one that, for all the increased pervasiveness of film and media, has never quite been repeated in the Church. The Clawsons' era remains a singular moment in LDS history.