

# Tom Mix, Prescott Rodeo and filming of *The Texan* made silver screen memories

By Robert S. Birchard

Cowboy star Tom Mix was not the first filmmaker to set up shop in Prescott, Arizona, but he would often make Prescott a home away from Hollywood during his movie career.

The Prescott Chamber of Commerce was bitten by the movie bug as early as 1912 and, after several months of correspondence, attracted the Chicago-based Selig Polyscope Company.

When the Selig troupe arrived in Prescott, Tom Mix was little more than a utility player. William Duncan, who wrote, directed and starred in his own films, headed the unit. The first Selig film made in Prescott was *The Sheriff of Yavapai County*, in which Duncan played sheriff Bud O'Neil; Mix played crooked gambler "Apache" Frank. The one-reeler proved successful enough that Duncan's unit would remain in Prescott most of that year.

In *The Law and the Outlaw*, a two-reeler, Mix played outlaw "Dakota" Wilson. He became known for performing daring stunts, and mostly they went as planned, but the May 30, 1913, *El Paso Texas Herald* outlined one stunt that went awry:

"Prescott, Ariz., May 30—A \$1000 moving picture machine destroyed and two men as near death as they ever will be without actually crossing the great divide, was the result of an attempt by Tom Mix to throw, by the horns, a wild steer in Joe Roberts's slaughter pen. "Mix agreed to "bulldog" and throw the steer for the Selig Polyscope Company. Operator Stanley Ostland placed his machine in a corner of the corral. Nip Van lassoed the animal, but released the lariat as soon as Mix ran in and seized the steer's horns.

"Mix held on with a grip of iron. The steer ran him off his feet and the two went straight for the camera. It all happened in an instant and Ostland had to leave the instrument to save himself. When they struck the camera, it was knocked to the ground and reduced to something resembling kindling.

"Even then Mix did not give up. He held on till he had jerked one horn away. He could not hope to throw the steer by one horn and went over the fence to save himself."

Mix was more successful in Prescott's Frontier Days rodeo, where he took first prize in Bull Riding in 1913. His association with Frontier Days and the Northern Arizona Fair would lead to a more enduring association with Prescott.

In late 1913 Mix was sent to California, where he was made head of his own Selig satellite unit based at the Bachmann Studio in Glendale, not far from downtown Los Angeles. Mix remained with Selig until late 1916 before signing with the Fox Film Corporation. After seven years in the picture business, Tom became an "overnight sensation" at Fox.

With stardom came clout, and Tom returned to supervise



Cowboy star Tom Mix with his co-stars Gloria Hope and Robert Walker in a scene from *The Texan* (Fox, 1920), a film based on the 1918 novel "The Texan, A Story of the Cattle Country" by James B. Hendryx and shot in part during Prescott's Frontier Days rodeo in 1920, (Photo Courtesy of author)

the Northern Arizona Fair rodeo with Prescott local Lester Ruffner in 1918, 1919, and more significantly attended Prescott's Frontier Days in 1920, where he shot scenes for *The Texan*. The June 30, 1920, *Prescott Weekly Journal-Miner* noted that Tom Mix arrived in town the day before, and enthused:

"It is important for Prescott to have these performances filmed for the sentiment is truly western, and Prescott is indeed the center of things western.... Tom Mix belongs in Prescott, for the spirit for the 'action picture man' is at home here."

Mix made 85 pictures for Fox between 1917 and 1928, returning to Prescott several more times, notably in 1922 for his film *Romance Land*. Unfortunately, most of Tom's Fox films are now "lost" due to nitrate decomposition and a disastrous 1937 Fox vault fire. But, almost miraculously, *The Texan*, with its images of Prescott's Frontier Days, survives at the Danish Film Institute—and Mix, the "action picture man," is still at home in Prescott—at least as long as *The Texan* continues to exist.

Note: With filming on *Granite Mountain* under way, there is renewed interest in movies being filmed in the Prescott area. This article about cowboy star Tom Mix, early days of the Rodeo, and filming of *The Texan* has nothing to do with the tragedy of those 19 firefighters who perished during the Yarnell Hill fire of 2013. It shares, however, a few sidebar notes about the early days of filmmaking in the area, and was first published as a Days Past article in September, 2013. -- Sharlot Hall Museum