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NICKELS AND STEEL

An Introduction

In the spring of 1914, one quiet Sunday morning, they posed for the photograph. Oscar stood self-assuredly, hand on hip, while Stephanie, neatly dressed, was shadowed in the booth. The neighborhood boy's blurred attendance at the photo's edge was likely accidental, unnoticed until the photographer made his print. The Gorseks were pleased with their theater—the grandly named Theatorium—as well as its new display. The draped American flags did double duty, announcing their proud patriotism while colorfully promoting their newest offering, Pathé's two-reel Civil War photoplay, *In The Days of War.* "Feature" films like this one were a recent addition to the regular program for their moving picture show, and they were worriedly hopeful that its spectacle of exploding bridges and "gripping sequences . . . in the lives of two families bound by love and divided by war" would allow for a profit, even at their usual five-cent admission price.[1]

FIG. 1.1.
Theatorium, circa 1914. *Courtesy of John G. Arch.*

The oldest Gorsek son, Oscar, was the theater's manager, Stephanie sold the tickets, Marian played the piano, and their three other brothers, Joseph Jr., William, and Frank, served as ushers and did chores.[2] Their parents, Joseph and Johanna, had immigrated to the United States in the late 1890s from Slovenia, which was then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and initially settled the family in San Francisco, where Joseph worked as a baker. The family chose San Francisco based on the fantastic tales they had heard in their mother country of the California gold rush, but the reality was, of course, far removed from the myths. A long way from home and finding few other Slovenes that far west, within a few years they moved east to Pittsburgh, where multiple waves of eastern and central European immigrants had created comfortably familiar, if overlapping, ethnic communities. On arrival, the Gorseks established themselves in Lawrenceville, a neighborhood along the Allegheny River that originally had been populated by "first wave" English, German, and Irish mill workers, but which by the turn of the century was primarily inhabited by Russians, Poles, and Slovaks. Although Joseph died of an unknown illness just a few years after arriving in Pittsburgh, the family survived otherwise largely intact. On a busy part of Lawrenceville's Butler Street, they opened and operated the Theatorium, a two-hundred-seat nickelodeon.

Over the last few decades, the history of the silent era has become one of the most dynamic and contested areas of inquiry within film studies. This history would be incomplete without the nickelodeon, a site and sign of cinema's modern emergence in America. And the history of the nickelodeon cannot be written without Pittsburgh. If the movies were once chiefly believed to offer audiences an experience unvaried by space, place, person, or time, this literal snapshot of the Theatorium, a theater started by immigrants and run by their American-born children in a neighborhood of mill workers and their families, is a visible reminder of a history of the motion pictures as much determined by exhibition and consumption as by production, as much by Pittsburgh as by Hollywood.

This book is, as must be clear by now, about Pittsburgh and the movies. It's about a city and its exhibitors, distributors, and audiences, about their desires, investments, and actions—some collective, many competing—to define what the movies were and what they might become in this place and time. While written from this very local perspective, this study aims to provide an intimate view not only of a city but also of film history itself, from the nickelodeon era to the late 1920s, focusing in particular on the transformative middle period in the 1910s. My emphasis on the local—on neighborhoods like Lawrenceville, places like the Theatorium, and families like the Gorseks—signifies not only a belief in the importance of geographic and biographic specificity, of real places and the real people that lived there, but also a critical perspective, a resistance to broader histories that are determined and overdetermined by studios, producers, and their Hollywood films.

It has often been said that history begins with a question. But this particular history actually began with a footnote: precisely, footnote number 6 in chapter 13 of Charles Musser's 1990 book, *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907.*[3] The chapter, entitled "Nickels Count," is devoted to the origination of the five-cent movie theater. A rigorous scholar of film's earliest years, Musser journeyed to Pittsburgh to research the long-standing but empirically underscrutinized belief that the "official birthplace of the nickelodeon was Pittsburgh," that the nickelodeon was in fact a "Pittsburgh Idea."[4] His canvass of archival materials related to the nickelodeon in this city led Musser to the local historical society and eventually to an unusual trade journal entitled the *Pittsburgh Moving Picture Bulletin* (1914–1923). The end result of his Pittsburgh research was a productive reassertion of this city's significant historical place in the emergence of the movies as mass entertainment. However, within the scope of Musser's much larger national project—whose chronological endpoint predates the *Bulletin*'s arrival by seven years—the Pittsburgh story plays a fairly minor role. It is not surprising that after extracting a brief quote from a single issue of the journal, Musser left Pittsburgh and its weekly *Bulletin* behind. While this city's trade journal afforded Musser with a limited if useful source of information, from the moment I opened the first issue of the *Bulletin,* it provided me with an abundant source of wonder.

This book significantly draws on the *Pittsburgh Moving Picture Bulletin,* the first known regional trade journal for the movies, as both a body of evidence and an object of study. The *Bulletin* is a rare survivor, for while there is some evidence of several similar journals from other parts of the country, few are extant and none appear to have begun as early. National trade journals from the same approximate time period and even earlier, including *Variety, Motography, Motion Picture News,* and *Moving Picture World,* are widely available, at least on microfilm, and these have, over the last twenty years, become one of the primary shared resources for historians of American cinema. However, the significant role that regional trade papers like the *Bulletin* had in shaping the movies as an institution and a culture at both the local and national level has been largely unknown.

Published weekly, the *Bulletin* was wholly devoted to the movie business in the Pittsburgh region. It focused on issues specific to its local audience, the formation of a community of exhibitors and distributors, and the cultural, economic, and institutional challenges that such a community faced in its city and beyond. The journal's editorials, articles, ads, and images make visible an intricate set of alliances and conflicts, both local and national, among constituencies whose (often blurred) borders are often arranged along social, economic, religious, ethnic, and political lines.

One of the primary reasons for my strong sense of pleasure on initial contact with the *Bulletin* is that it allows us to see and hear the city's varied populace of moving picture workers, entrepreneurs, and impresarios not simply as abstract categories but as embodied individuals. We learn about Pete Antonopolis, the first-generation Greek American who used a one-armed violinist and other "old-style museum stuff" to attract an audience to his downtown theater. We also discover Mrs. C. C. Emmel, widow-owner of the Broadway Theatre in McKees Rocks, and her promotion of an elaborate street parade heralding the arrival of a new Pathé serial. We come to know Mayer Silverman, the rebellious manager of the Liberty Film Renting Company, and his brief arrest for "neglecting" to submit the films he distributed to the Pennsylvania State Board of Censors for approval. It is often impossible to locate figures like Antonopolis, Emmel, and Silverman, the practices they evolved, and the work they performed within the existing history of the movies, but these local men and women, along with thousands of others much like them, were central to the movie business of their era.

Of course, Pittsburgh was not alone, and the history of other communities has considerable value, too. People of every place and time deserve to be measured, deserve to have a history. Local history offers an invaluable potential to reconstruct the everyday lives of our ancestors, whether long or recently gone. At its best, it can provide a powerful link between experience and history, provoking in us an awareness of how those of the past might have experienced the world. This book hopes to offer a few of those resulting moments by joining a small but significant body of work by scholars devoted to local history of a very specific kind, the history of exhibition and moviegoing as practiced in individual towns and cities across the country.[5] While film historians now collectively agree that locale matters, there remains a deep lacuna of knowledge regarding the potent variations between and within communities small and large, rural and urban. Local film history, in its narrow empirical vision and fine attention to detail, reveals the complex dynamics of everyday life in relation to the encompassing social and economic forces within which it is embedded.

In regard to these broad and determinative forces, Pittsburgh often appears as much a symbol as a city; a steel-fired, smoke-belching metonym for the stunning advances of modern American industrialization and its overwhelming effects upon those that lived and labored within its metropolitan crucible. In 1909, Paul Kellogg described it this way: "Pittsburgh is the capital of a district representative of untrammeled industrial development, but of a district which, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, for vigor, waste and optimism, is rampantly American."[6] Perhaps nowhere else in the world did the commingled powers of industrialization, urbanization, and immigration play out upon and shape such an extreme, visible topography. Recognized in its contemporary moment as a capital-driven city distilled to its purest and most brutally efficient form, Pittsburgh was intensively studied and documented by a diverse group of urban planners, Progressive reformers, and social engineers who saw the city to be at once exemplary and representative of modern industrial society in all its problems and possibilities. Offering a detailed microcosm of the very sort of rough-and-tumble, working-class, urban environment often assumed to be the wellspring of American movie culture, Pittsburgh provides a fundamental site in which to assess cinema's historical narrative and to test that narrative's truths, mythologies, and invariably messy complications and contradictions.

On August 26, 1786, an anonymous writer in the *Pittsburg Gazette* presciently predicted: "The town must in future time be a place of great manufacturing; indeed, the greatest on the continent, or perhaps the world." In fact, by 1914, Pittsburgh led the world in the manufacturing of iron, steel, glass, electrical machinery, cork, aluminum, tin plate, rail cars, turbines, air brakes, fire bricks, white lead, and pickles. Situated at a point of natural confluence where the Allegheny and Monongahela Rivers flow into the Ohio, Pittsburgh was an ideal location from which white settlers could trade their goods—at first with the area's Native Americans and, by the turn of the twentieth century, with much of the rest of the world. Perhaps America's true gateway city, Pittsburgh provided the country with a commercial entrepôt centrally located by train or barge within twelve hours of the Atlantic Ocean and the Mississippi River and within six hours of the Great Lakes.

The efficient shipping possibilities offered by the region's three rivers was matched by a cheap and seemingly limitless power source: extensive bituminous coalfields stretching outward from Pittsburgh for miles in all directions. Both high in quality and close to the earth's surface, these fields were easily strip-mined. By 1900, investments by local corporations in modernizing production processes and transportation systems resulted in a Pittsburgh region that supplied 64 percent of the nation's structural steel, 50 percent of its coking coal, and 26 percent of its steel rails.[7] The enormous size of these new, technologically advanced steel mills led manufacturers to absorb increasingly larger tracts of riverside real estate, and "population followed industry."[8] The efficiencies resulting from this intersection of rivers, men, and mills led to Pittsburgh's world primacy in the production of heavy industrial goods, transforming it into a place contemporary commentators described as "capitalism's key city."[9]

The workforce required to turn that key also changed considerably over the second half of the nineteenth century. Trained craftsmen, primarily of British, Welsh, Irish, and German heritage were slowly displaced as a result of a number of interrelated factors, including: an almost total shift from iron to steel production, the increased mechanization of all phases of millwork, and the collapse of the union movement, violently marked by the demise of the Amalgamated Association at Homestead in 1892. In their stead, a less highly skilled immigrant workforce was required to labor longer hours for considerably less pay—although wage rates constantly fluctuated both up and down during this era, common labor in the mills earned on average 16.5¢ an hour, or $1.98 for a twelve-hour day.[10] Most of the men receiving this pay were recent immigrants from less industrialized regions of the world, including the American South, southern and central Italy, and central and eastern Europe, especially Russia and Poland. The influx of these men, their families, and others caused the city's metropolitan area to nearly triple in population between 1880 and 1910 to over a million people, making Pittsburgh the eighth-largest city in the country.[11] Of that 1910 Pittsburgh population, over 271,000 were first-generation foreign immigrants, another 342,000 were the children of foreign-born parents, and 34,000 city residents were African American. Immigrants and their children accounted for between half and two-thirds of the city's residents between 1880 and 1930.[12]

The vast majority of these immigrant mill workers could neither afford the time nor the fare required for commuting from home to work, and overwhelmingly they lived within walking distance of their places of employment. This is particularly true for the steel industry, the largest single employer in the Pittsburgh region, where the seventy-two-hour workweek was often standard even after World War I.[13] By 1914, steel mills and their accompanying industries lined the riverbanks in the Pittsburgh region to a distance of twenty miles from the city's core. As these mills spread out, they gathered around them concentrations of workers and their families—and as many as 90 percent of the laborers in these steel mill communities walked to work on a daily basis.[14] This pattern of the city's development, along with the well-documented process of chain immigration, contributed to the creation of highly homogenous ethnic working-class communities, often crowded into housing built on the surrounding steep hills and other scraps of land considered unusable for mill operations. For example, by 1900, Polish immigrants in Pittsburgh had consolidated their employment in various steel mills, and a majority lived either within a mile or two of the mills on the Allegheny River in a neighborhood that became known as Polish Hill or up against the mills of Jones and Laughlin and the Oliver Iron and Steel Mills on the growing South Side. Other eastern and southern European ethnic communities including Lithuanians, Croatians, and southern Italians developed similarly homogenous communities around their places of employment.[15]

Conversely, the rapid expansion of a trolley system, while described by one local author in 1915 as "still far from ideal," was well enough established along certain routes to affect a nascent suburban lifestyle for Pittsburgh's growing "middling" class of corporate bureaucrats and small-business entrepreneurs.[16] Public transportation followed the path of least resistance, and so convenient transit access developed along the natural corridors formed by valleys and plains, primarily east and west from the city center. Separated by a distance of several miles from the mills and occasionally "even free from smoke," by 1914, the city's East End neighborhoods were composed primarily of upper- and middle-class single-family homes, and the business district on Penn Avenue in East Liberty correspondingly developed as a new and important hub of bourgeois commerce, drawing consumer enterprise away from the city's center.[17]

In direct relation to the consolidation of these industrial and housing patterns, the city's downtown commercial and business area, "peninsular Pittsburgh, some call it," was increasingly filled with the new "high-rises" of the region's corporate headquarters.[18] The insides of these brick, steel, and glass monuments to industrial modernity needed to be staffed accordingly, and by 1914, Pittsburgh's office staff accounted for over 12 percent of the working population, an amount more than twice the national average. This expanding core of mostly young men and women, a group social historian Ileen DeVault has aptly described as "the sons and daughters of labor," found themselves, in almost every way imaginable, somewhere in the complex middle.[19] Most boarded trolleys and left their millbound families and communities behind to take up a relatively new kind of work in the city's center. If their wages and working conditions reflected a marginally better standard of existence than their laboring brethren in the mills, the majority of these white-collar workers continued to reside and interact with the ethnically homogenous communities of their families: in 1915, only 6 percent of Pittsburgh's clerical and sales workers lived in the city's

FIG. 1.2.
"Penn Ave., looking East, East Liberty, Pittsburg, Pa.," postcard, circa 1914.
Courtesy of Q. David Bowers.

wealthier suburbs.[20] Film historian Robert Allen has rightly noted that "income overlap" between manual and nonmanual workers "blurred class boundaries" and helped produce "a kind of dual social identity." In Pittsburgh, these patterns of residency, based primarily on ethnic and familial relationships, continued to play a crucial and often central role in the formation of the city's social and cultural identity.[21] The complex transformations of social geography had significant implications for Pittsburgh's movie theaters and their moviegoers.

It was a city, regardless of where you lived or worked, dominated by a few companies and a single industry, and most of its residents soon found their own existence in some way subject to the steel mills' organization of life and labor. Driven by the growth of its master trade, Pittsburgh was in many ways less defined as a city than as a sprawling industrial region, less a civic entity than an economic one.[22] The industrial rationalization of the region prevailed in and took advantage of governmental and social fragmentation, and in the absence of any significant countervailing power, the mill owners were often largely free to structure the life of the city and its people at their will.[23] The result was that Pittsburgh's urban geography, social institutions, and labor relations were primarily shaped by the dominant needs of the metal industry and its owners. The subsequent mutilation and pollution of the area's striking topography was depressing in its totality, and living within the resulting tortured environment meant that basic requirements for food, shelter, and water were often impossible to meet. The workers who inhabited the resulting landscape "most frequently compared to hell," found that the massive wealth they helped bring forth from its fires was unequally distributed between labor and management.[24] According to the 1910 census, there were 2,369 industrial enterprises operating within the region, with 20,692 salaried employees earning average salaries of $1,204, while 139,285 wage earners received annual average paychecks of $646. In comparison, after total amounts paid for salaries, wages, materials, and other expenses were accounted for, profits that year for the metropolitan's industrial establishments both publicly and privately held equaled almost 59 million dollars.[25]

It is this atmosphere of stark inequality and the resulting widespread and highly visible problems that resulted from this imbalance of capital that led in the late 1900s and early 1910s to the publication of the landmark *Pittsburgh Survey.* Instigated by a small group of the city's business and welfare leaders in conjunction with the Charities Publication Committee of New York (later largely financed by the Russell Sage Foundation), the survey was a massive-scale exercise in Progressive reform and social research. Beginning in 1908, a field staff composed of authorities from the emerging disciplines of social work and labor relations descended on the region to investigate conditions of environment, workplace, and home; in the following six years they produced a thick set of documents, articles, and exhibits about the struggles of everyday life in contemporary Pittsburgh.[26] The survey was, and remains, distinctive in the breadth of its collaborative efforts to research, illustrate, analyze, and offer solutions to a staggering array of social, industrial, and civic issues.[27] Collectively, the resulting publications call for Pittsburgh to supply its citizens with safer working conditions, greener spaces, cleaner air and water, higher wages, shorter working hours, improved sanitation, and better housing. Despite its encyclopedic accounting of city life, however, there are significant and sometimes telling gaps in the survey's production of knowledge about the region and its residents. Of particular interest is the survey's surprising disinterest in the economic, cultural, and social dimensions of Pittsburgh's commercial amusements. In its thousands of pages, only once, in the survey's second volume, entitled *Homestead: The Households of a Mill Town,* is there an extended description of the role that the movies played in the life of the region's people. According to sociologist Margaret Byington, who authored the volume as a study of immigrant family life across the Monongahela River:

> Practically the only public amusements in Homestead . . . were the nickelodeons and skating rinks. Six of the former . . . sent out their penetrating music all the evening and most of the afternoon . . . Men on their way home from work stop for a few minutes to see something of life outside the alternation of mill and home; the shopper rests while she enjoys the music, poor though it may be, and the children are always begging for five cents to go to the nickelodeon. On a Saturday afternoon visit to a nickelodeon, which advertised that it admitted two children on one ticket, I was surprised to find a larger proportion of men in the audience. In many ways this form of amusement is desirable. What it ordinarily offers does not educate but does give pleasure . . . for five cents the nickelodeon offers fifteen minutes' relaxation, and a glimpse of other sides of life . . . As the nickelodeon seems to have met a real need in the mill towns, one must wish that it might offer them a better quality of entertainment.[28]

As hinted at in Byington's description, the nickelodeon was a central site of working-class entertainment in this period and reformers were often conflicted about the movies and their cultural primacy. In general, reformers understood the neighborhood movie theater as a site of largely unfulfilled Progressive potential, which, on one hand, offered a much-needed public space of respite from the traumas of the real world. On the other hand, however, the movie theaters too often, according to at least one other Pittsburgh researcher, presented images and stories that "play up the base qualities of life, showing reels upon reels of highly sensational love stories, infidelity of husband or wife."[29] This researcher, unlike Byington, was not part of the official survey force. The Reverend R. Earl Boyd of the city's Protestant Trinity Temple was a resident of Pittsburgh, and his self-published work focused on the Strip District, a rough but busy stretch of narrow ground running east of the city's core, bordered by the Allegheny River to its north and the passenger yards of the Pennsylvania Railroad on its south. Boyd's research included an accounting of the area's five movie theaters, summarized in a section devoted to neighborhood institutions labeled as "harmful social agencies." All was not lost for the movies, however, according to the minister, for once the Strip's exhibitors could be convinced to resist the medium's more "anti-social features" and offer pictures with a more "educational, wholesomely recreational message," the nickelodeons could then provide a "helpful" experience to the Strip's residents, 83 percent of whom were immigrants or their children.[30] Conversely, the minister perceived the two other primary local forms of "harmful" leisure, the saloon and the pool hall, to be well beyond the reach of any positive social transformation. In comparison to its five nickelodeons, the Strip offered its residents seventy-eight licensed saloons, ten "chartered clubs," and "eight drug stores notoriously selling liquor without a prescription," along with "ten or fifteen 'fly by night' speak-easies and about a dozen 'white line' and 'dope' joints where alcohol and drugs are obtained."[31] Although Boyd does not enumerate the Strip's pool halls, which he describes as chiefly patronized by young men having "long been recognized as … thugs, petty criminals and loafers," another social survey from the following year gave a total metropolitan count of 332 pool rooms.[32]

While bars and pool halls were perceived by reformers as dangerously unrepentant sites of working-class immorality, other sites of commercial leisure and amusement in the city were marked (to varying degrees) as less socially problematic, many of which were included in a popular guidebook

FIG. 1.3.
View of the Strip District, circa 1925. Photograph by Mettee Holmes.
Courtesy of Carnegie Museum of Art.

of the same period, *Pittsburgh, How to See It.* Authored by local historian George Fleming, who wrote a regular weekly column devoted to the history of the city for the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette,* the guide's list of entertainments for potential visitors included two amusement parks: Kennywood, downriver on the Monongahela opposite the mill town of Braddock; and West View Park, located on the northern side of the Allegheny River. Neither of these "fine natural park[s] with the usual amusement features and devices," charged an admission fee, but each required a ten-cent trolley ride to access their various pleasures. Or for twenty-five cents, you could sit in the top bleachers of Forbes Field, hallowed home of the Pittsburgh Pirates baseball team, described by Fleming as "the finest ball park, in matter of situation and construction, in the baseball world." If you preferred to be entertained indoors, you could instead turn to one of the approximately twelve legitimate theaters spread throughout the metropolitan area, including five in the downtown district: the Nixon, the Alvin, the Grand, the Davis and the Duquesne. Collectively, according to Fleming, they offered the region's citizens and visitors alike "a good variety of . . . elaborate productions of modern classic drama and comedy . . . and the highest class refined vaudeville" at admission prices ranging from twenty-five cents to two dollars and more.[33]

But if one could not afford such prices, or simply favored the movies to the stage, the choice of venue was virtually limitless. While the exact figure is unknown, and likely unknowable, the approximate number of movie-only theaters in the Pittsburgh region by the mid-1910s is somewhere in the range of two hundred.[34] In Pittsburgh the movies were everywhere, and "except in exclusive residential sections, visitors will not have to go far to find entertainment from moving films . . . for there are many five cent shows, or 'Nickelodeons.'"[35] It is these many shows, their owners, and their audiences that are the primary focus of this book's following chapters.