

Today, 100 Years Ago

By Michael Ventura

February 7, 2014

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This issue of the Chronicle is dated Feb. 7, 2014. On Feb. 7, 1914, the world first beheld Charlie Chaplin on the screen in his iconic getup. That is fact. Slide over here into fiction, my novel-in-progress, The Dragon:

Three days before, on Feb. 4, 1914, a bemused sort of person entered "the Keystone," as Mack Sennett's lot was called. She was 16, barefoot, green-eyed, self-consciously flat-chested, and wore a raggedy dress. She called herself Willie; no last name. She'd lived all her life in that area, then called Edendale; her family's farm was a few steep hills away. Willie left school in the fourth grade for farm work. Like most folks in 1914, she's never turned on a faucet or an electric light, nor spoken into a telephone, nor ridden in a car, nor flushed a toilet. But she's sharp, uncommonly agile, kind of pretty, and game. Always carries a knife. And loves the "flickers." Befriended by some "Keystoners," she was invited to watch their newest offering:

On that screen was the Devil. I was raised to know the Devil. I'm looking at him, glad I got my knife. Small comfort, a knife against the Devil, but small is better than none. Amongst these folk, the Devil lives.

[Willie finds shelter that night in the prop shed.]

I swear, I smelt baking bread. Strong smell, too. From where, who knew? When we were little, Mother'd bake bread and we'd be hanging about for the smell, me and Fred, and Mother'd say, "You got any questions about Heaven, just remember the smell of baking bread and put that together with Forever. That's all you need to know about Heaven."

How's a person supposed to figure waking long before dawn with the Devil in my head amidst that smell of heavenly bread? And bells ringing. One's tinny, steady – a shepherd's staff, the bell hanging on twine from a hole drilled in the grip. There's a dog, too, well trained, yapping soft, suggestive-like, not a bark to wake folks up. And a happy-like clatter of harness bells, a one-horse rig, and the clip-clop of hooves that for no reason I can think of is the comforting'est sound, a horse steady at slow trot. And a streetcar's clang.

Clip-clop and tinkle'y harness got softer, farther, the streetcar closer, while the shepherd walked slow, each step making a sweet double ring – his sheep must'a been a safe space from the tracks or he'd'a moved faster. I know that's a fine hard-working dog for that shepherd not to worry at that trolley.

No choice now but to follow my mind where it didn't want to go, but had to, 'cause a mind's got no control over itself, which, saith Daddy, "is how it is the Devil's instrument!"

I let go my will, tried to feel protection breathing that heavenly smell, and got to considering how, while folks laughed amidst tobacco scent, I seen the Devil on that screen. A skinny imp, walking quick and funny, waddlelike, and you see by the way he puffs his cigarette he's mean as spit.

Twirling a cane he was, tipping his bowler hat at this and that, pants and shoes some sizes too big, vest a size too small, the Devil don't need to care how he looks, no, he cares for nothin' but trouble and disruption, curlin' his lip under that little moustachio. The Devil, he can't take a stroll for the sake of a stroll but that he's gotta make someone unhappy.

It all began so normal. The crowd is real people. What's goin' on is real. You don't see that the Devil is the Devil right off. It's the walk that clues you first, you see he's strange, he don't walk like no one real. Then he looks at us. That ain't right, not for a flicker, not like that. He looks at us, interested, walks off, comes back, looks again, real interested. But it ain't us he's looking at, is it? It's the camera. He don't want that camera to crank at nothin' but him. He keeps goadin' that camera to crank at him, and the boss of the camera tries to fight him off, thinking he's dealing with just a man, but there's nothing just-a-man about this imp, you can't fight him off, you can't get rid of him. The Devil struts and looks down his nose on all the goin's on, 'cause he knows what's important here – and it's nothin' to him to slap a kid, he swings at one kinda hard – no, he knows what's important is that he's shown up, he's here, amongst us, and we'd better know it, and the camera is how we'll know. Oh, the Devil has discovered that camera! Where that ol' Devil comes from there ain't no cameras, it's like he's never heard of one – he ain't God, after all, he doesn't know everything – but now he's seen one, it's gotta watch him or else. On that point he's all meanness. You can just see he's indestructible. Knock him down, he's up again. Throw him around, kick him, threaten, he ain't fazed. Try to reason with him, he listens all polite-like, tips his bowler at you, swings his cane like a toff, but that's just to make mockery, he's listening just to prove he won't listen. That boss is outmatched and finally knows it and allows for the Devil to look straight into that lens, claiming it as his own, and the meanness of his face is big on the screen scrunching itself up into more meanness and squinting those I-don't-care eyes right at me. Everybody laughed. Not me. I see what I see.

What I saw was a secret so terrible the Devil didn't have to keep it secret, 'cause it would be secret no matter what.

I'm not very smart. I don't know what the Devil's secret is, 'cept everybody's got a piece of it and everybody works real hard not to know it. Now that the Devil's found the flickers there's no tellin' what's comin'. And it's to Keystone that he came, same as me, breathing deep of Heaven.

[The next day, Willie hangs about the outdoor studio, where five film crews work simultaneously within a few feet of one another.]

So I'm mindin' my own beeswax midst the hammerin' and fiddlin' and shoutin' and thumpin' and crankin' and cussin', lookin' this way and that, trying not to be in the way, when the Devil caught my eye as I caught his.

I didn't flinch. That same small bowler's on his head, he holds the same cane, wears those big shoes, and his eyes are full'a mischief. I'm wishing I was Catholic, 'cause they can make the Sign of the Cross, but us Baptists, we got nothin' 'cept not flinchin'.

"What you lookin' at?" says I to the Devil. He burped, or pretended to, covered his mouth 'n' said, "Such odd things do pop out of one!"

Stuck my tongue out at him.

Stuck his back at me, tipped his bowler, then smiled like I never seen, for just a sec, then he's moony, he's silly, he's sad, and he laughs at all that, purely delighted with himself, lookin' sweet as any girl. Then his face is still. And every one'a those looks seemed dead real.

"You're the Devil. That's the Devil's way. He can be anything." "Devil, is it? Nothing so grand. A minion, merely – but eager to do my part." Some guy calls out, "Chaplin!" "Pardon. I'm up." "Action!" a guy yells. A camera cranks and that ol' Devil tips his bowler to me and goes, but how he goes! Charges into a hallway, knocks a fellow down with a mighty slap and the Devil faces Walrus-Moustache and they butt chests and the Devil rears back and kicks Walrus full in the chest with the flat of his big shoe, his leg straight out, I thought the man'd die, but Walrus sails through a doorway, Devil tries to sail after him but the door slams so hard in his face his head should'a come off, but he just pushes the door like nothin' happened and goes on in and that's that. Cranking stops.

The Devil, he became the most famous person in the world. I got to like him too. That's a trick he had, he made you like him. But never did I forget he is the Devil.

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