

Sally Dixon:

Record, record. Record, record. Voice level. Voice level is good. [Pause in recording 00:00:11]

Okay Jim Sweeney, I'm finally getting to this thing. I'm going to give it to you as clearly and concisely as I can. I think I'll begin with Harris and Davis. Those two men. John P. Harris, who later became a state senator from Pennsylvania, and Harry Davis were in the entertainment business as well as real estate, and were supplying all of the local theaters with not only his travelling stock company shows but opera, and a bit of this and that. They were the managers and the owners of the Grand Pittsburgh Grand—[pause in recording 00:00:54]

Jim? Jim Sweeney? Jim? Little higher, little higher, little more. Little more. There you go.

Okay. Jim. I'm going to try to rattle this off to you. Not rattle it too much, but a little bit. There's so many facts on this and everyone claims to have the truth. Each source that I read claims he's got the exclusive truth on it. I'm going to give you what I have, but realize that all the interweaving and the claim for authenticity is still in question in my mind in a number of places. And I'll try to give you a list of which, which those places are so you can either print them as truth or as questionable.

What I'm going to do—or the way I'll do this is I think too follow through Harris and Davis all the way to give us sort of a framework to wrap the other film activities and incidents, around. Harris and Davis were the ones who did start the nickelodeon, which is sort of the feature thing that we keep talking about in this city, though by no means is it the only exciting and important thing in film history. That is, in the overall contribution to what was happening nationally and internationally in film. It was just one of our contributions. I was intrigued with the tremendous amount of stuff that I found and fairly important stuff as far as hometown boy makes good at that. It's a tale. It's a tale. But let's begin with Harris and Davis.

First of all, Harris is—wait until I get my facts, here. My little sheet. Here I go. Okay.

Harris was John P. Harris, who was later due to become state senator, and his brother-in-law, Harry Davis, had been in the real estate and entertainment business in Pittsburgh for a number of years, owning several theaters and being regular bringers of Vaudeville and stock company acts. They'd been intrigued by motion pictures and the possibility of this kind of thing since they read about this Frenchman,

Lumiere, who was working on it in France. And they had sent off a request about this machine that he had invented that supposedly threw motion pictures on a screen. Had gotten one, had gotten a projector, and were using it downtown at the Avenue Theater, which was one of their, one of their theaters. And but what they were doing was to show these one reel films. That was the size of it. And they showed it between acts as a novelty, as just a thing of interest, not thinking of the possibility of theaters that would show nothing but motion pictures. It often had a lecture to go with it and, and was shown as what could be done with photographs, a new amusement. It was still shown, though, just to those who could afford to go to a legitimate theater. The great, great bulk of people in Pittsburgh, which had quite a labor force in it at the time, who were not wealthy, who earned often not more than ten cents an hour, didn't go to these theaters. You had the sharp division there, so they were denied, really, access to the motion pictures of, when it first came to Pittsburgh.

An interesting thing to me, as a matter of fact, absolutely intriguing, was the very first film of Lumiere's that Harris and Davis brought to show in Pittsburgh. And It was shown on April 12, 1897. A year after this newfangled thing, this projector, cinematograph, as Lumiere called it, had been invented. The film that they showed was a one-reeler called *The Charge of the French*—and I'll spell this for you—"C-U-I-R-A-S-S-I-E-R-S." And I nearly flipped when I saw this, because that's the first film I showed at the museum in the History of Film series when it opened March 1, 1970. Funny coincidence. [00:05:14]

Anyway, Harris and Davis went on this one-reel film business between acts, became very, very, popular, and all of the legitimate theaters in town, of which there was a great number, began to show them and they all bought their own cinematograph projector from Lumiere in France. At the same time in this country, Edison had invented the Vitascope, which was his projector, but the Lumiere cinematograph gave a smoother picture so most of them were using that. At that time, using that projector. Harris and Davis went on and on and found themselves—I'm going to take this on up with them, as I said, for a framework—found themselves in—at the end of nineteen four, early nineteen five— [pause in recording 00:06:02]

An empty storeroom on their hands [pause in recording]

Let me get my little thing on this now. Wait a minute. [pause in recording]

Three four thirty-five Smithfield seat—Smithfield Street. They were intrigued with motion pictures all the way and with entertainment. And they thought to themselves, "why not make out of this? At least try to make a theater that would show nothing but films." There were more and more of them available, and some two-reelers even, which would be a pretty long film, fifteen, twenty minutes. And, they thought this was a possibility so they began to outfit this empty storefront with fittings from their Pittsburgh Grand Opera House, which they also owned, and surplus seating and drapes and fringes and what have you from their different theaters. So they gave to this little storefront, a kind of elegant air and fitted it out with ninety-six seats and had ordered a cinematograph projector from Lumiere in Paris, again, which didn't come by the day of their opening, which was June 19, 1905. Fortunately, a man named Dawson was travelling through with a travelling motion picture show and loaned them his Lubin projector in the meantime. Which they used for that very first screening, that first showing.

They opened the show—they opened the little theater at 8:00 a.m., closed it at 12:00 p.m., it was so enormously popular—oh, before I go to that, let me go back to the name of it. All of their friends, of course, were intrigued with this novel thought they were having of using a whole storefront for continuous motion pictures showings and were helping them name this thing and they decided they wanted to keep the price down so that many people could come to it. And one man named Eugene Connelly thought that a good name would be the price of entry, which was a nickel, or the nickname for it, and *odeon*, which in classic Greek means theater.

And so they picked up on that and this was plastered across the front of the storefront and outlined with electric light bulbs or incandescent bulbs, and which was pretty flashy for the day. And signs were put out telling what films were being shown. The first show there was a double bill called *Poor But Honest* and *The Baffled Burglar*. This came to between fifteen and twenty minutes worth of film. They were all one or two-reelers. The first day's receipts were twenty-two dollars and fifty cents. Word spread quickly and the next day's receipts were seventy-six dollars. Within two, two weeks they were making a profit of one thousand bucks a week. It was remarkable.

The beauty of it was, it cost no more than a glass of beer. So the average working man who had never really had a chance to see this kind of thing in such a way could come and he came and he brought his family, his entire family—aunts, uncles, and cousins and so forth. They did a land office business. The ninety-six seat theater went from 8:00 a.m. in the

morning until 12:00 midnight. There was room for a thousand a day to stand in the aisles. They came from all over. It was a wonderful attraction. It caught on immediately. The popularity of it, both based on price and availability and quickness. Every, when you think of it, every fifteen or twenty minutes they had a complete turnover of crowd and were just able to pack them in. [00:09:59]

Almost immediately, fourteen or fifteen nickelodeons, as the name it came to be commonly called, sprang up in Pittsburgh and the immediate area and within a year there were a hundred. By the way, Eugene Connelly was a writer for the Pittsburgh Press. The first operator and sort of manager of that first nickelodeon was Harry Cullen, who was later to become one of the organizers of Metro, which went on to become Metro-Goodwin Meyer. He produced *The Ragged Earth* and *Vampire* with Olga Petrova, in later years. But he started here, too, so there you had it going on.

When the nickelodeon opened on Smithfield Street, down the street, several, stores, was the Keystone Jewelry Store whose owner was Louis Selznick. And you know of course that he went on to run and own Selznick Studios. And the other way, across the street, or catty-corner across on that second floor, selling suits at Kaufman's, was Harry Warner. So you had right here Harry Warner and Louis Selznick, both within spitting distance as it were, of the first nickelodeon. Let me think.

Okay so the nickelodeon opens in 1905 and caught on. It was the first popular theater, popular movie theater for the masses. It was no longer a novelty. It was a growing concern, continuous entertainment. Before this, of course, most people hadn't—or that is, the working man, the laborer, had seen his motion pictures in the form of Edison's kinoscope, which was really a box with a number of slides, pictures in sequence. And you put your nick—your penny in, cards would flip over in very quick succession, giving the impression of motion. And that was their experience with motion pictures until this nickelodeon.

The next problem, of course, with Harris and Davis was to supply their house, their little theater, the nickelodeon, with films, with a continuous change of films. Though God knows at first enough people came and were just delighted to see those people in motion on a screen. Oh also what they did after outfitting it with the grand opera chairs and hangings, curtains, velvet curtains with tassels and so on—for the screen, they stretched a piece of white linen, and old white linen bed sheet. Probably not old, probably new. But anyway that was the first screen, which is quite an intriguing thought. To announce themselves to the general

public, they put a phonograph, had a phonograph cranking outside to call the people in and this attracted great attention to them, of course. Um, let me think what else. They had little boys inside, barefoot boys taking people up and down the aisles. Which was great fun.

Okay, so we've gotten the first nickelodeon, which was, according to the Pennsylvania Historical Society, the first building—wait a minute, let me read it exactly to you—say they—"The first permanent bringing-together of films in a separate building for show purposes in a theater in which there was no other kind of entertainment." I think it's that no other kind of entertainment that makes it unique. But maybe more importantly even was that it was available to everyone and lots of people could throng in. There was no one who couldn't afford it, in short, and probably a bunch of little boys snuck in on a regular basis or helped with the ushering and got in that way.

Okay so the nickelodeon's on Smithfield Street. Harry Warner is selling suits at Kaufman's and he said he saw the crowds from his second floor vantage point. Quote "When I looked across the street and saw the nickels rolling in, I knew it was for me." So with his brothers Sam, Albert, and Jack they started a movie house in New Castle and Youngstown and eventually of course became partners in the huge Warner Brothers Picture Corporation. So that was going on at the same time.

Harris and Davis had to start their own production company to begin supplying all of these nickelodeons that were springing up, many of them owned by them of course. One of the nickelodeons, just an intriguing little story—one of the nickelodeons was directly across the street from the courthouse. It was at the corner of Fifth and Grand and where the judges were trying criminal cases and of course trying to hear witness' testimony and so forth, but there was the nickelodeon's phonograph and so finally the, it was so intolerable that an injunction was issued against all picture houses restraining them from using phonographs to attract their patrons. So of course they had to really work awfully hard. Not awfully hard after that. It was enough of a novelty that people came anyway, but they—out came the movie billboard, as it were, in spades.

Harris and Davis then started their own production company in 1906, which is the following year. They hired two top Edison men for it. One was Gilbert Anderson. He came in at forty dollars a week. They had their studio in the Alsop(?) building on Fifth next to the Park building. I don't know if those building, either of them, are still here. I'm just not sure. Probably. Anyway, Gilbert Anderson came in as one of these two top Edison men. He had acted for Edwin S. Porter in *The Great Train Robbery*

in 1903, by the way. He had Porter had asked him if he could ride a horse and wanted to play in a western and he said sure and he showed up for it and was thrown from his horse after riding one block, got off and said he wouldn't have any more of that and so ended up being filmed only in those sequences that didn't have him riding. That was sort of a quick beginning and quick end. At that point, he was to come back to westerns later.

Anyway, he stayed in Pittsburgh for a year and did quite a bit of filming for Harris and Davis. On October 24<sup>th</sup>, for instance, he filmed *The Consecration of St. Paul's Cathedral* and then later on made a chase-type film comedy in Hazelwood. It was about a newspaper reporter trying to get his story and people were going up and down over fences and one of the camera tricks, so to speak, techniques that he used, was to reverse the film then, and so part of the time they were going over the fence and part of the time they were going backwards. Which, of course, people thought was very, very funny. He was fired after a year for complete lack of ideas, left Pittsburgh, went onto I believe it was Indianapolis.

Let me see. Well, here he is. Oh, St. Paul's Cathedral. Let's see.

Yeah, Indianapolis and he teamed up with a man named Spoor(?) to formed their own production company and they combined their first two initials S and A, which later became the S&A Company, became the leading motion pictures studio in the world, in the early part of the century. He was not content just owning the company. He began to then write, direct, and produce and act in his own films and became the world-famous Bronco Billy Anderson, which is intriguing. Because here was this man who was in Pittsburgh as part of the Harris and Davis's first production company and fired for complete lack of ideas.

That's that on Harris and Davis for the moment. That happened in 1906 after the founding of the nickelodeon. Oh, let's see, he came Bronco Billy. Okay, here we go.

Oh, later on in 1909 Harris and Davis Production Company was joined by a man named Craft and Cody was Buffalo Bill Cody. And with that team, they shot the very first feature film. It was all *Buffalo Bill*. He bought the rights to it and they shot it. They filmed for three weeks and ended up having to discard all but four reels of this film, *Buffalo Bill*. But it was the first feature-length film. Until then they'd been one and at the most two-reelers. It was the beginning of the feature film movement and that, too, came out of Pittsburgh.

It was this man—Craft was a great promoter and he wanted to call Harry Davis Motion Pictures direct from the Grand Old Opera House in Pittsburgh. That's how this first feature film, *Buffalo Bill*, went out. This film was no longer in existence, I guess, being on nitrate film it's disintegrated. But that was the second cowboy film, as it were, that Harris and Davis had to do with. The first, of course, Bronco Billy Anderson and now Buffalo Bill Cody. [00:20:00]

This first feature was an independent film, which meant in those days unlicensed. Which meant that many theaters had to become independent theaters in order to play it. They liked this in that independent films were generally all good whereas the licensed or non-independent films had to be brought in packages from the big studios. And they'd give you one good film maybe and then three bad ones. So it did force many of them to become independent, but it upped the quality of film again because of course the independent could do what he want. He was bound to do something that he thought was really good because he's selling them one at a time, rather than these package deals. That intrigues me too that Pittsburgh then was the home, as it were, of the independent film movement back then. And here today we've got our independent filmmakers and a great resurgence of independent film making going on in Pittsburgh with those that we bring to the museum in conjunction with that part of our program. So it was happening then too that we seem to be home to the independent filmmaker.

Okay. That sort of takes care of Harris and Davis. Let's go back over their achievements. They gave us the first moving picture in Pittsburgh at their theater, the Avenue Theater. It was Lumiere's—yeah, shit—

Owned and operated by a man named Gustavus Adolfus Whitehead. He sold out in the mid-20's and left town. But interestingly enough his son has returned to Pittsburgh and is the retired chairman of the board for Gulf Oil Corporation. W.K. Whiteford.

Let's go back now. That gives a framework of Harris and Davis whose activities went on this city. Of course they went on to own huge chains of theaters after that and then John P. Harris to be state senator. Very active in that way.

Okay. While all of this is going on, before of course there was a man nearby born named Edwin S. Porter. April 21, 1870. He was born in Connellsville. Eloped with Caroline Rettinger from Somerset and they were married June 6, 1893. From then on, Edwin S. Porter joined Edison and was the projectionist for the very first Vitascope, which was Edison's

projector. That was on April 23, 1896. At the same time, of course, that Lumiere came out with his cinematograph in Paris. But Edison was that first projectionist for the first American projector. Born in Connellsville.

In 1897, Porter was in New York as a projectionist again with Edison, and he was the very first man to suggest and then consequently to use film movies, that is, film as advertising. In New York, on Broadway, on the side of a building he was screening Haig & Haig Whiskey, Pabst Milwaukee Beer, and somebody's chocolate. I don't know which. This went well, but of course the local theater owners were furious, because he was—people could see his free and they were paying, otherwise would have been paying to come into the theaters. But he was the first to use film as advertising. Maybe the forerunner of TV advertising, TV ads or whatever. He wanted to get independent and to make some really good films. So in 1903—[end of recording]