

THE PROSPECTOR (1912)

PRODUCTION COMPANY: Essanay Film Manufacturing Company. DIRECTOR: Arthur Mackley. WRITER: Arthur Mackley? CINEMATOGRAPHER: William Evans? CAST: Fred Church (Jim Clayton), Arthur Mackley (Sam Dunn), Evelyn Selbie (Dunn's older daughter), Audrey Hanna (Dunn's younger daughter), unknown (Dunn's son). TRANSFER NOTE: Digital file made from a 35mm negative. RUNNING TIME: 8 minutes.

While not a unique example of an early Western, *The Prospector* nonetheless offers a great deal of information for a historical understanding of the emerging genre, its producers, and the transition of Hollywood filmmaking as an industry from its early, geographically scattered roots to a California-based, highly organized production system. By 1910, Westerns accounted for a third of Essanay's total output, and in 1912, the company released 74 films of that genre—making it one of the leading producers (along with Selig, American, Bison, and Bison-101) of Western films. *The Prospector*, released December 12 of that year, might textually represent a typical Essanay Western of the era, even as its production history illustrates the company's rapid changes.

Essanay, founded in 1907 by Gilbert M. Anderson (an actor in numerous early Westerns, including Edwin S. Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* of 1903) and George Spoor (a film distributor looking to produce his own inventory), set up its early operations in Chicago. *The James Boys in Missouri*, a one-reel (as were all Essanay films until 1913) depiction of Jesse James and his gang, was the company's first Western. The film proved financially successful enough to warrant more in the genre, but Chicago's weather prevented year-round production. Anderson took a cast and crew to the West Coast, where for the next four years they produced numerous Westerns, which were shot on location in Oregon, Washington, Colorado, and California. The studio in Chicago, under Spoor's supervision, continued to produce dramas and comedies while also completing the postproduction processing on the films coming in from Anderson.

Having previously established temporary bases in Golden, Colorado, and Lakeside, California, Anderson decided to create a permanent West Coast studio and moved the company in March 1912 to Niles, California, a railroad town with fewer than 2,000 residents. Work on new

Westerns commenced immediately after the company assembled a studio in a barn and nearby buildings. Spoor visited that September and finalized plans to build larger facilities complementing those in Chicago. Despite the new location, Anderson worried that the weather, along with the ongoing construction, might prevent the crew from reaching the “one Western per week” quota the company had established. On November 1, Anderson sent director-writer-actor Arthur Mackley south to Los Angeles with a small cast and crew to fill the gaps, a role Mackley had been serving on the road as well as in Niles since Essanay’s arrival.

Mackley joined Essanay shortly after its founding and started directing films alongside Anderson in 1911, typically the “filler” pictures not starring Anderson or the other better-known actors in the company. The Essanay “prestige” one-reelers included Anderson’s *Broncho Billy* series, the crown jewel in the Essanay brand, and the *Alkali Ike* series featuring comedic actor August Carney; Mackley handled the less-notable productions, including his own *Sheriff* series. *The Prospector* was almost certainly shot in one day, probably in late October, before Mackley’s departure for Los Angeles; three other Mackley-directed films made in Niles were released after *The Prospector* and before the first film shot in Los Angeles (*The Sheriff’s Child*, released January 22, 1913).

Although it is difficult to ascertain the specific crew on the film, the camera operator was probably William Evans, who had joined the company in Niles after shooting documentary footage in the Philippines for Spoor’s Chicago division (released on September 28, 1912, as *An Indian Sunbeam*) and worked in Mackley’s unit in Los Angeles. Scenic painter Earl B. Parson, props coordinator William A. Russell, electrician Al Bundrick, and carpenter Benjamin P. Lee were also sent south with Evans and worked frequently on Mackley’s films. The cast for *The Prospector* was composed of Essanay regulars and newcomers: Fred Church joined Essanay during Anderson’s first tours west and appeared in the company’s earliest Westerns; Evelyn Selbie joined Essanay in Niles after working for the Méliès Film Company; Audrey Hanna, a child actor, was added to Anderson’s

touring company, probably in Golden, Colorado, along with her father, Jay Hanna, and left Essanay in March 1913, when Mackley's unit returned to Niles. It is unclear who plays Dunn's son in the film, although it is definitely not Anderson. The role might be played by one of the real-life cowboys in the Essanay acting company, Louis J. Morissette and Jake Wood, who frequently appeared in Essanay productions as extras or in small parts, and who accompanied Mackley to Los Angeles and appeared in the films produced there.

The film follows Jim Clayton (Church), a prospector on his way to file a mining claim who stops to rest at the home of Sam Dunn (Mackley). Dunn's son (actor unknown), older daughter (Selbie), and younger daughter (Hanna) are also there. That night Dunn and his son conspire to rob Clayton of his gold, but they are overheard by the younger daughter, who warns Clayton. A fight between Dunn, his son, and Clayton ensues, in which Clayton fires his pistol unsuccessfully. Dunn's older daughter (Selbie) seizes the pistol and holds off her father and brother. To spare Dunn's daughters from retribution, Clayton escapes with them and marries the elder. Rapidly setting up his new family with clothes from a general store, Clayton decides to forgive Dunn and his son, returns to the cabin, and makes peace—even telling them, “We'll work the mine together.” In the final shot, a happy Dunn waves good-bye as Clayton and his new family ride away down the trail.

The surviving print consists of 30 shots with seven intertitles. Although working with only five locations (the entrance to the cabin and barn, the interior of the cabin, the area outside the general store, and the vicinity of the church), Mackley uses a variety of camera positions in both the interior and exterior spaces to give the film a far more elaborate visual style than might be expected. The film prototypically represents the quick production style of Essanay filler Westerns of the time. Furthermore, *The Prospector* was perfunctorily marketed; it appears in one advertisement (along with four other films) in *Moving Picture World*, which ran on December 14, 1912, two days after its release. It receives a one-sentence description: “A thrilling drama of the west, a fight for gold, and altogether an interesting subject from beginning to end.” No actors are listed, nor was it mentioned

in any prerelease ads or any others after this date. Contrary to Essanay advertising of the period, which frequently lists the cast and, in the case of its popular *Broncho Billy* or *Alkali Ike* series, mentions titles in trade ads prior to and following the release date, *The Prospector* was given very little marketing.

In terms of reception, the film capitalized on the ongoing public fascination with prospecting following the Yukon gold rush in 1898, in which at least 40,000 people traveled through Alaska to the Klondike River in Canada to try to strike a fortune. Essanay released numerous other films with prospecting themes, including *The Little Prospector* (1910), *The Prospector's Legacy* (1912), and *The Crazy Prospector* (1913). Internationally, *The Prospector* was distributed through Essanay's London office, established in 1910 by George Spoor's brother, Harry, to accommodate the rising international interest in the company's Western films. By 1911, having made local contacts in Berlin, St. Petersburg, Hong Kong, Sydney, Melbourne, Johannesburg, and Rio de Janeiro, Essanay was sending overseas at least 20 prints a week, nearly all of them Westerns. The prospecting theme might have struck a particular chord in Australia, where this surviving print was located. Various gold rushes had captured the public imagination in the 1850s, and a massive gold discovery in Papua New Guinea in 1907 led to its colonization by Australia in 1914.

Despite its status as one of Essanay's filler pictures, *The Prospector* nevertheless encapsulates the broad narrative transition in the Western genre undertaken by Essanay (and Anderson, particularly) as well as the industry at large. By 1911, Westerns across the industry began to de-emphasize crime, nonwhite characters, and "cheap" melodramatic plots in favor of white characters engaging in activities related to family, domesticity, and the church. Anderson had followed these trends in Essanay productions, moving away from race-based plots (a staple of his early films) and instead primarily offering moral, ethical, and psychological narrative conflict as the basis of Essanay's Westerns after 1912. Anderson's *Broncho Billy* series made direct attempts to engage female spectators by presenting the film's hero interacting with women and children,

focusing on fatherhood and a strong moral character, and offering the occasional love story. *The Prospector* paradigmatically features these same elements: Clayton is contrasted sharply with Dunn, even becoming a substitute father for the younger daughter as he marries the elder, while the conspiratorial father and son are deeply criticized for their greed. Critically, though, they are forgiven in the end. The restored strength of the family becomes *The Prospector*'s underlying theme. In the end the elevation of the white hero and family aligns not only to Anderson's generic goals for Essanay's Westerns but also the narrative shift across the industry.

—Peter Alilunas

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