

The History of the Twentieth Century
Episode 387
“Hooray for Hollywood”
Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

Hooray for Hollywood!
You may be homely in your neighborhood,
But if you think that you can be an actor, see Mr. Factor,
He'll make a monkey look good.
Within a half an hour you'll look like Tyrone Power.
Hooray for Hollywood!

Richard Whiting and Johnny Mercer, “Hooray for Hollywood.”

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 387. Hooray for Hollywood.

I want to talk about cinema today, a topic I last touched on in episode 274. In that episode, I took the story of motion pictures up through the early years of sound.

We're going to pick up that thread today, and I'll note right off that although I try to take a global outlook in *The History of the Twentieth Century*, this topic right here—motion pictures in the Thirties and Forties—is overwhelmingly a story about the American film industry based in Hollywood.

The United States was a world leader in the production of films even before the introduction of sound. The country got a leg up on the rest of the world during the period from 1914 to 1917. While European nations were engaged in a desperate existential battle and could not afford to spend many resources on something as frivolous as movies, Hollywood thrived during the period of American neutrality. Aside from the war kneecapping the competition, Hollywood also benefited from the fact that the United States was a large country with a growing population, a

large portion of whom became avid movie-goers. The domestic market for American films was enormous.

When talking pictures came on the scene, they originated in America. When Technicolor came on the scene, it appeared in America. With their large income streams, American studios could afford to spend lavishly on technology and on talent; they hired the best writers, the best actors, the best directors, the best everybody. Hollywood's financial resources also meant that when talented artists emerged from the film industries of other countries, say the UK or Germany, American studios could write paychecks large enough to convince those artists to abandon their homelands and move to California, where there was not only more money but more glamour and a more appealing climate, and here we can see another reason why the film industries of other countries couldn't compete: Hollywood kept poaching their best talent.

Talking pictures first came on the scene in America in 1927, although it took a few years to work out the kinks in the new technology and get it installed in every one of America's tens of thousands of theaters.

You may remember that the year 1929 marks the beginning of the Great Depression. Generally speaking, depressions are bad for business, but movies were an exception. Sort of. The studios struggled during the early years of the Depression, but movies were cheaper than any other form of entertainment except radio, which is free, but only after you pay a large upfront cost for the receiver. Also, listening to radio requires you to have a house or apartment and electricity. Movies were the perfect entertainment for hard times.

The swankier movie theaters downtown ran one feature film several times a day, usually a major new release, but in neighborhoods and small towns, you could find a smaller, and most likely dingier, theater that charged a lower admission price, as low as fifteen cents, which might buy you two older, lesser feature films plus a cartoon, a travelogue, an episode of an adventure serial, a newsreel, and a few trailers for coming attractions. The combined program could run four hours or longer, and would be repeated several times from early afternoon until late that night. Some of these theaters ran film programs around the clock, 24 hours per day.

Some people, some families virtually lived at the movie house during the Great Depression. It might be that they were going stir crazy at home and needed to go somewhere. Theatres were heated in the winter, and many were air conditioned in the summer, which made them attractive places for the homeless, or for those who had no air conditioning or no heat at home. The unemployed hung out at movie theaters because they had nothing better to do.

The Hollywood studios of the Thirties were well aware that their audiences were full of people who, in one way or another, were there to escape the harsh realities of the Great Depression. They calibrated their output accordingly, which is why the first decade or so of talking pictures is filled with escapist fantasies. They didn't call Hollywood "the dream factory" for nothing.

The business end of the motion picture industry was quite different from how Hollywood does business in our time. The Thirties and Forties were the heyday of the studio system, and it worked like this: the head of studio production was lord of the domain. Every studio maintained a roster of players under contract, just like a professional sports club. Writers, directors, actors, and the technical people were almost always salaried employees of the studio, and they worked on whatever picture they were told to work on.

Each major studio cranked out at a minimum, one new feature film every two weeks. Paramount Pictures, the studio that turned out films the way Henry Ford turned out Model As, was releasing 60 to 70 per year. Their grade "A" products were literally called "A pictures." These films were made by the most talented directors and the most celebrated film stars and were granted generous budgets and shooting schedules. "B pictures" had much smaller budgets. They were usually shot in a week or two, using existing costumes and sets and relying on second-string talent. They were also shorter than an "A picture," as short as 70 minutes. Most B pictures ended up as the bottom half of a double feature, like the "B" side of a record.

If anyone besides me knows what the "B" side of a record is.

The studios bought up options on novels, short stories, and especially plays as potential material for future films. Studio writers would draft treatments, which are detailed synopses of a proposed film that might run to fifty pages or more. Sometimes executives would assign more than one writer to do a treatment of the same film project, then choose among them, or combine ideas they liked from different treatments.

Once a treatment was finished and approved, a writer would be assigned to flesh it out into a full shooting script. Once the script got the green light, as they say, the studio executives would assign a director, actors, and technical people from among those under contract to shoot the film.

After the film was shot, a rough cut of the finished movie would be shown to the producers or studio executives, who might require changes, including having portions of the film reshot. Meanwhile, a composer would be hired to compose a score. The next step was usually what were dubbed "sneak previews," meaning showing the film to a test audience, and if the reaction was good, the film would be released.

Demand for new movies was strong, so studio executives were always pressing the creative people to get their work done faster. When it was time to show the films in theaters, the major studios owned their own theater chains, which gave them a ready-made market for the picture, alongside the studio's distribution division, which would oversee rentals to independent theaters.

Hollywood film studios operated in the grand American tradition of vertical integration: every step of the process, from the writer who drafts the treatment to the price of the popcorn sold in the theater lobby, was controlled by the studio.

Actors generally were signed to seven-year contracts, which were very much one sided, granting the studio the power to terminate a contract early for a variety of reasons, including morals clauses that allowed a studio to fire an actor who got embroiled in scandal.

So what do the actors get out of this deal? First and foremost, they get a regular salary, guaranteed for seven years, so long as they played ball with the studio. That's a better deal than most actors get. By the way, studios could and sometimes did loan out their actors to other studios, or even make trades, similar to how sports teams trade players in our time. But in the case of the studios, these loans or trades of actors were one-picture deals; the actors would return to their home studios afterward.

Why would a studio agree to such a deal? For money perhaps, or as part of a trade to borrow an actor they especially wanted for a particular film, but actors were also loaned out to other studios as a disciplinary measure after they did something to displease their own studio management. It served as a reminder of who was boss.

These contracts came with other benefits, apart from the steady paycheck. The studios would often pay for singing or dancing or acting lessons, and the studios' formidable publicity departments would work hard to make contract actors into celebrity film stars. A newly hired actor might be put through a carefully planned publicity campaign that would unfold over several years, beginning with smaller roles and working up to stardom.

These actors' personal lives were also managed by their studios' publicity departments. They might be sent on carefully selected publicity appearances or to do interviews with a magazine or columnist likely to provide a favorable story. They even assigned actor couples to do appearances together or go on dates together, as a way of getting their names into the gossip columns. It was not for nothing that the immortal showman P.T. Barnum famously declared, "Say anything you like about me, but spell my name right."

I told you in episode 274 about how the introduction of sound changed filmmaking; it was said that when pictures started talking, they stopped moving. Actors had to stand close to the microphones, and the noisy camera had to keep its distance, resulting in scenes with small groups of actors standing still in a small space and filmed from a static camera at a middle distance. Critics derided these films as "teacup dramas." Early musicals required an orchestra on set, but just off screen, to play the music the actors sang along with.

Over the course of the 1930s, technological improvements brought movement back into film. Boom mikes allowed the crew to follow an actor with a microphone overhead to make sure every line of dialog came through, which allowed the actor to move around the set. Musical numbers were filmed silently, with the singing and the orchestra added later. Once film sound tracks became standard, technology developed that allowed picture and sound to be edited separately. Lines of dialog that didn't come through properly could be re-recorded and spliced into the film later, a process called dubbing.

In 1935, the first feature film in Technicolor appeared. Technicolor, the company, became the industry leader in color film and jealously guarded its privileges. If a studio wanted a film to be shot in Technicolor, they had to use cameras owned by Technicolor and camera crews who worked for Technicolor, and they had to employ Technicolor's in-house "color coordinator," as she was called. She was Natalie Kalmus, the wife of Herbert Kalmus, one of the company founders. Natalie would supervise filming, and if she didn't approve of the director's creative choices, she had the power to terminate the deal then and there, pack up the Technicolor equipment, and take it and the film crew right off the project.

Natalie Kalmus' main concern was that the film made the Technicolor process look good no matter what the film was about, and this accounts for the vivid color palettes in Technicolor films of the era, like *The Wizard of Oz* or *Gone with the Wind*.

So which studios are we talking about, when we speak of the major Hollywood studios and the studio system? There were eight studios generally regarded as the majors, and between them they controlled 95% of the market. These eight studios were usually divided into what was called the Big Five and the Little Three. In descending order of size and influence, they run like this: first, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, or MGM for short, which was at the time the premier Hollywood studio. Next would come Paramount Pictures, then Fox Film Corporation, which in 1935 merged with the smaller Twentieth Century Pictures to become Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corporation, a mouthful of a name usually shortened to "Twentieth Century-Fox." The new company gradually edged out Paramount and became number two in the industry.

In fourth place we come to Warner Brothers, a smaller studio that made the leap into the Big Five when it introduced the first talking pictures, and bringing up the rear is RKO Radio Pictures. I already told you the story of the founding of RKO in episode 309.

Behind the Big Five come the Little Three, all of which were similar in size: Universal Pictures, United Artists, and Columbia Pictures.

Behind the Little Three were a number of smaller studios, known collectively as "Poverty Row," a reference to Gower Street in Hollywood, where most of them were based.

Today's episode will be the first in a series in which I'm going to talk about each of these studios and look at the most notable films they released in the Thirties and Forties. During this era, each of these studios had its own identity as a purveyor of certain kinds of films, and all were run by executives who were notable in their own rights, and we'll talk about them as well.

I'm not going to say a lot about the Poverty Row studios. Most of them you never heard of anyway. The one you are most likely to have heard of is Republic Pictures, the most prominent of them, which was created in 1935 by the merger of six—yes, you heard me, six—Poverty Row studios. These were: Majestic Pictures, Invincible Pictures, Chesterfield Pictures, Monogram Pictures, Mascot Pictures, and Liberty Pictures. These six Poverty Row studios all had in

common that were all on the brink of bankruptcy by 1935. So were Fox and Paramount, but will get to them. These six also had in common that they were all heavily in debt to a film processing laboratory called Consolidated Film Industries. The owner of Consolidated, Herbert J. Yates, settled their debts by taking control of the six and combining them into Republic Pictures.

Westerns were Republic's bread and butter. Westerns were very popular in the silent film era, because they favored action and beautiful scenery, and their plots had little in the way of nuance. You knew right away who were the good guys and who were the bad guys, so they didn't require much dialog to keep the audience up to speed.

The introduction of talking pictures changed this. Talking pictures were better at telling stories with dialog and drama, and of course music. So Busby Berkeley and the Marx Brothers were in, cowboys were out.

But this was good news for Republic Pictures. Westerns were cheap and easy for a small studio to make, as the costumes, props, and sets were readily available and could be used over and over.

Republic even owned its own ranch for location shooting. Republic and its predecessor studios even found a way to reconcile Westerns with talking pictures: they discovered and developed the singing cowboys: Gene Autry and Roy Rogers. The studio also picked up John Wayne for a time during a low point in his career, and tried to make a singing cowboy out of him, but that didn't work out so well. I'll have more to say about John Wayne in a future episode.

Apart from feature-length Westerns, Republic was also notable for its serials. These were a story divided into a series of short films, often twelve, and typically each episode ended on a cliffhanger. Theaters would run one episode of a serial for a week, then change over to the next episode, hoping the cliffhangers would help draw last week's audience back this week to see more of the story.

Many of Republic's serials were based on comic strips, comic books, or radio shows. Examples include: *Zorro Rides Again*, *Captain America*, *The Lone Ranger Rides Again*, *Dick Tracy's G-Men*, and *The Adventures of Captain Marvel*. No, not that Captain Marvel. This Captain Marvel was Shazam. Don't ask; it's a long story.

I once attended a science fiction convention at which I had the opportunity to catch a few episodes of Republic Pictures' 1935 serial *The Phantom Empire*, starring Gene Autry as a singing cowboy who discovers on his ranch a portal that leads to a technologically advanced underground civilization called Murania. *The Phantom Empire* is widely regarded as the first science fiction Western, if indeed that is a thing. In fact, it's the first musical science fiction Western. Possibly also the last musical science fiction Western, I don't know. Who would have thought to make a musical science fiction Western? Republic Pictures, that's who. Actually, Mascot Pictures, which was one of Republic Pictures' predecessor studios, if you want to get technical on me.

[music: “The Yellow Rose of Texas.”]

Moving on, we come to the Little Three, and here we begin with Columbia Pictures. Columbia got its start as a Poverty Row studio, run by Harry Cohn, one of its founders. Cohn became head of the studio in 1932 and held that position until his death in 1958. During that time, he gradually built Columbia into a major studio.

Two years into his tenure, Cohn signed a vaudeville team that billed themselves originally as “Ted Healy and His Stooges,” but after a few years, the stooges parted ways with Ted Healy and became “The Three Stooges.” The act consisted of Moe Howard, born Moses Horwitz, the child of—say it with me—Jewish immigrants from what was then the Russian Empire. Moe also acted as the team’s business manager. The second stooge was Larry Fine, born Louis Feinberg, a comedian and violinist who was the child of—I don’t really have to say it again, do I?

The third Stooge was originally Moe’s older brother, Shemp Howard, born Samuel Horwitz. Shemp left the team in 1932 and they replaced him with Moe’s younger brother, Jerry Howard, born Jerome Horwitz. The younger Howard shaved his head for the part and became known as “Curly.” Because he had no hair. Get it?

After ending their association with Healy, The Three Stooges signed a deal with Cohn in 1934 to appear in a series of comedy shorts for Columbia. They would continue to work for Columbia for 23 years, until 1957. Their short films consisted of farcical plots filled to the brim with outbursts of slapstick. The 190 shorts they made for Columbia are today considered comedy classics. Curly Howard, with his childlike persona and his gift for improvisation, is generally regarded as the best comedian of the group, but his health began to decline in 1944. He had a stroke in 1946 and left the group. He died in 1952. They replaced him with his predecessor, Shemp Howard, until his death in 1955. Afterward came Joe Besser and then Joe DeRita.

The Three Stooges typically released eight or nine new shorts every year; Cohn paid them \$2,500 each per short, which was good money in 1934, and they were worth every penny. Three Stooges shorts were among the most popular shorts of the time, so popular that Columbia was able to demand that theaters book some of Columbia’s feature films in exchange for the right to exhibit Three Stooges shorts.

This being Hollywood, Cohn took care to ensure the Stooges themselves were not fully aware of how popular and lucrative their shorts had become. They had signed to a one-year renewable contract, and Cohn renewed that same contract 22 times. He never offered the Stooges a raise; to the contrary, he kept telling them that the market for shorts was getting weaker every year, which was true, but didn’t acknowledge how successful the Stooges’ shorts were.

Good pay in 1934 was not so good by 1957, the year Columbia ended their relationship with the Stooges. It was only afterward that they learned how much their work had actually been worth. In the 1960s, Columbia made even more money from these shorts by syndicating The Three

Stooges on television, mostly in children's programs. I grew up watching Three Stooges shorts, although it is debatable, and was debated at the time, whether their brand of slapstick is appropriate for children.

The Stooges themselves made some money from residuals and from licensing. Larry Fine suffered a serious stroke in 1970 that ended his career. He died in 1975. Moe Howard sold real estate later in his life and also passed away in 1975.

The Three Stooges made a lot of money for Columbia, but the one person most responsible for lifting Columbia out of Poverty Row and into its new status as a major studio was a film director named Frank Capra.

Frank Capra was born in a small village outside Palermo, Sicily in 1897. His parents brought him along to the United States in 1903, when he was just five years old. He grew up in Los Angeles, earned a degree in chemical engineering at the California Institute of Technology in 1918, and soon after became a lieutenant in the US Army during the First World War.

He became a US citizen in 1920, moved to San Francisco, and worked a variety of odd jobs until he was able to talk a movie studio startup in San Francisco into giving him a job as a director. He moved on to writing silent comedy films for Mack Sennett in Hollywood.

In 1928, he took a job at Columbia, where his engineering background proved valuable as the studio transitioned to talking pictures. He directed a string of pictures for Columbia that did well at the box office and impressed Cohn. Soon he was Columbia's top director. Cohn raised his salary to \$25,000 per year, a luxurious income during the Great Depression, and put his name above the title on his films, making Capra the first Hollywood director to be awarded that honor.

In 1934, Capra directed a screwball comedy titled *It Happened One Night*. I should explain this term "screwball comedy." We've come across it before. This was a popular type of film in the Thirties. A screwball comedy is a type of romantic comedy in which the romantic relationship itself is played for laughs. Typically it is the woman in the relationship who drives the plot, which involves putting the leading couple into awkward situations. The dialog in these films is filled with witty repartee, usually bickering between the two principals and often delivered at a pace so rapid it can be hard for the audience to follow. The name comes from a baseball term for a type of pitch that behaves in an unexpected way, and screwball comedies can be seen at some level as a sort of comic parody of more traditional romance stories.

It Happened One Night starred Clark Gable and Claudette Colbert as the lead characters. Clark Gable was one of the most popular and bankable stars of the time, bankable being a Hollywood term for an actor so popular that their mere presence in the film guarantees the picture will earn a lot of money. Gable was under contract to MGM at the time, but MGM chief Louis B. Mayer loaned him out to the much less prestigious Columbia Pictures as a punishment for his uncooperative attitude. Mayer felt that MGM had made Gable a star and he was insufficiently

grateful. Columbia was willing to pay MGM a hefty fee to use Gable, and Mayer agreed to the deal.

It Happened One Night swept the Academy Awards that year, winning all the major categories: Best Picture, Best Director for Capra, Best Adapted Screenplay, Best Actress for Colbert, and Best Actor for Clark Gable, the guy for whom working on this picture was supposed to be a punishment. Gable would be nominated twice again for Best Actor, but the only time he took home the golden statuette was for *It Happened One Night*, and the film made him a bigger star than ever.

It Happened One Night was the first movie ever to win all five major awards, and this will not happen again for 39 years, until 1975's *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*.

Capra followed up *It Happened One Night* with 1934's *Broadway Bill*, another screwball comedy, and then 1936's *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*, starring Gary Cooper and Jean Arthur. This was a more serious film, about a humble man living in a village in Vermont during the Great Depression who suddenly and unexpectedly inherits a \$20 million fortune. This film illustrates Capra's evolution from mere comedy to stories with a certain theme: an ordinary man from a humble background who defeats corrupt and scheming elites by virtue of his working-class values.

These distinctively Capraesque films may have been sentimental—Capra himself dubbed them “Capra corn”—but they were just what Depression-era audiences in America wanted to see. *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* won Capra his second Academy Award for Best Director.

Capra's next film was a departure from this formula: it was 1937's *Lost Horizon*, a fantasy adventure about Westerners who survive a plane crash in the Himalayas and discover Shangri-La, a mystical valley hidden in the mountains. The film was based on a 1933 novel with the same title by British writer James Hilton.

Lost Horizon was not a financial success and undid much of the good Capra's earlier successes had done for Columbia, but he recovered with 1938's *You Can't Take It with You*, adapted from a 1936 play by George S. Kaufmann and Moss Hart, about a young man from a very proper upper-crust family who falls in love with a woman from a, shall we say, less proper background. This story was more in line thematically with Capra's best work. It starred James Stewart and Jean Arthur, and was a critical and commercial success, and it won Best Picture and gained Capra his third Academy Award for Best Director in five years.

James Stewart proved to be the ideal everyman actor to portray Capra's idealized everyman protagonists, and the two collaborated again on Capra's next film, 1939's *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, in which Stewart plays an naïve man appointed to the US Senate by a corrupt state governor who believes the innocent Mr. Smith will be easy to manipulate. Senator Smith instead uncovers the corruption in his home state and takes up a quixotic political battle to destroy it.

The release of this film was controversial in October 1939, just as the Second World War had begun. Many condemned the film for its depiction of an American political system riddled with corruption. Senate Majority Leader Alben Barkley called the film “silly and stupid.” The *Washington Star* newspaper complained that the film portrayed American democracy in exactly the same colors as Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin did.

But the American public loved it. *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* stands as the third highest grossing film of the 1930s, topped only by *Gone with the Wind* and *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, and it represents the peak of Capra’s career, although it is not the film he is best remembered for today. We’ll get to that one.

Now Columbia was a major studio, and Capra was one of the biggest directors in Hollywood, but this film marks the end of their relationship. Capra would jump ship to Warner Brothers, where he made two films, 1941’s *Meet John Doe*, another comedy/drama about a humble man who becomes a political force, and 1944’s *Arsenic and Old Lace*, a black screwball comedy, if that’s a thing, starring Cary Grant, who discovers that two elderly sisters are in fact serial killers, and no, I am not making this up.

After the United States entered the Second World War, Capra enlisted in the US Army and was assigned to produce and direct a series of films to educate soldiers about the reasons the US was fighting in the war against the Axis, which ultimately became a set of seven films in a series called *Why We Fight*.

Capra prepared for this project by viewing Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will*, which I talked about in episode 293. Capra found that film terrifying—that’s the word he used—and resolved that his films would be a cinematic counterattack. Capra made use of the words and the propaganda films of the Axis powers—including *Triumph of the Will*—in an effort to condemn America’s enemies using their own words.

Capra brought all his cinematic talents to bear, and the Army was pleased with the resulting series of films. President Roosevelt liked the first one, *Prelude to War*, so much that he ordered that the *Why We Fight* series be made available to movie theaters to show to American civilians as well as soldiers.

The Army also used Capra to produce a recruitment film specifically intended for an African-American audience, called *The Negro Soldier*. Capra, himself an immigrant and a member of a disfavored ethnic group, threw himself into this project. He consulted with a number of experts to make sure the film’s depiction of African-Americans was accurate as possible and avoided stereotypes.

The film is framed as a sermon by an African-American preacher, who reviews the contributions of African-Americans to building the United States, beginning with the Boston Massacre through the Revolution and America’s other wars. It extols the accomplishments of African-American

teachers and lawyers and scientists, and shows scenes of African-American soldiers in training and in combat. The preacher also reads a quote from *Mein Kampf*, dismissing Black people as “half-ape,” and cites Jesse Owens at the Berlin Olympics, and world heavyweight champion boxer Joe Louis, who had defeated German Max Schmeling (and who had enlisted in the Army after Pearl Harbor.)

Capra was nervous about how the film would be received by African-Americans, but it was welcomed with enthusiasm and was shown at recruitment centers across the country. Virtually every African-American who served in the Army during the war watched it. So did many white soldiers, many of whom hailed the film and encouraged the Army to show it to more white soldiers. Today the film is regarded as a landmark in the history of American film for depicting African-Americans more realistically and with more dignity than previous films had done. The US Navy later produced its own film, titled *The Negro Sailor*, which highlighted African-American naval heroes of the war, including Doris Miller, whom we have already met.

In April 1945, Capra co-founded an independent production company called Liberty Films, and it was through this company that Capra produced and directed the film that he is best known for in our time, the 1946 Christmas-themed film, *It's a Wonderful Life*, again with James Stewart as the everyman hero.

Loosely based on Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, *It's a Wonderful Life* tells the story of George Bailey, a small-town resident who in his youth had abandoned his own dreams in order to help others in his home town of Bedford Falls. Just before Christmas, and as he is on the brink of suicide, his guardian angel visits him and illustrates to him how important he was to his community by showing him an alternate version of Bedford Falls in which he never existed. The film ends with George being celebrated by his family and neighbors.

It was the same sort of sentimental exaltation of homespun American values that Capra loved to explore, but the postwar world was a different place. The film did reasonably well at the box office and was nominated for six Academy Awards, but it lost money because it cost over \$3 million to make, a hefty budget for the time, and the box office receipts did not recoup its costs.

Capra's film was overshadowed by *The Best Years of Our Lives*, a drama that was *the* hit in 1946. It was about three American servicemen trying to readjust to civilian life after the end of World War II. It was produced by Samuel Goldwyn, and released through RKO. It won seven Academy Awards that year, including Best Picture.

The failure of *It's a Wonderful Life* doomed Liberty Films, which was bought out by Paramount and the film itself was largely forgotten. In 1974, when the film's copyright was up for renewal, no one renewed it, owing to a clerical error. That gives you an idea of how highly regarded the film was.

When television stations across America realized there existed a Hollywood Christmas film that they could show without paying any royalty, *It's a Wonderful Life* began appearing regularly on American television at Christmas time. This presented the movie to a whole new generation of Americans previously unfamiliar with it, and it became far more popular than it ever had in 1946.

Happily, Frank Capra and Jimmy Stewart both lived long enough to see their picture achieve its status as a classic Christmas film—perhaps *the* classic Christmas film. Both of them acknowledged the film as one of their personal favorites.

In our time, *It's a Wonderful Life* remains a Christmas favorite, universally known, universally celebrated, and I have to add, universally parodied. In 1998, the American Film Institute placed it at number 11 on its list of the greatest American films of all time.

We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Jay and Avril for their kind donations, and thank you to Jeanne for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Jay and Avril and Jeanne help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone always, so my thanks to them and to all of you who have pitched in and helped out. If you'd like to become a patron or make a donation, you are most welcome; just visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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The end of year holidays are upon us, so it's that time of year when I remind you that donations to and patronages of *The History of the Twentieth Century* make the perfect holiday gift...for me. You never have to worry if it's the right size or the right color or if it's to my tastes, and I can promise you it will never be returned.

Now I recognize that not everyone has a patronage or a donation in their budget. If that's the case, might I suggest a rating and review that would help the podcast find new listeners. That would make a nice present, too. Or maybe you can find a new listener yourself, someone in your life who might enjoy becoming a listener. And as always, I thank *you* for being a listener.

And I hope you'll join me next week, here on the *History of the Twentieth Century*, as we continue our look at American cinema. This time we'll consider three more studios, Universal, United Artists, and RKO. Woman of the Year, next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. I said that the film *It's a Wonderful Life* fell into the public domain in 1974, and it's a principle of copyright law that once a work enters the public domain, that status is permanent. But as you may be aware, a copyright claim on the film re-emerged in 1993.

How did that happen? After the failure of Capra's Liberty Films, the company was sold to Paramount Pictures. Paramount sold the rights to many older films, including *It's a Wonderful Life*, in 1955. These rights ended up with a company called National Telefilm Associates. The principal business of that company was syndicating old movies to TV stations.

National Telefilm also acquired the rights to the film library of Republic Pictures after Republic went out of business. In 1984, National Telefilm renamed itself Republic Pictures, effectively reviving the old film studio.

In 1993, with the fiftieth anniversary of the release of *It's a Wonderful Life* pending, the CEO of Republic was reminded of how much money his company was not getting, due to the lost copyright of the film. But all it took to fix that little problem was some creative lawyering.

I said that the film was loosely based on Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, but it is explicitly based on a 1943 self-published short story titled "The Greatest Gift." The film might be in the public domain, but the short story is not. And Republic, as successor to Liberty Films, owned the film rights to that story. Therefore, Republic and its lawyers concluded that since they held exclusive film rights to that story, no one else could market a film based on that story, not even one in the public domain.

The rest of the industry decided not to fight it, and for the past thirty years, the television network NBC has been broadcasting *It's a Wonderful Life* every year at Christmas, paying a hefty fee for the privilege of showing a film technically in the public domain. Hooray for Hollywood.

The story "The Greatest Gift," will itself enter the public domain in about fifteen years. We'll see what happens then.

[music: Closing War Theme]

