

HOLLYWOOD'S RELUCTANT STAR

FORREST JAMES

In 1926 the Alabama Polytechnic Institute (API) had a pretty fair baseball team. The team's stand-out players included future major league infielder Ben Sankey and a pair of three-sport lettermen: twenty-year-old twin brothers Forrest "Fob" and Everett "Ebb" James. Fob played first base and Ebb was catcher. The API Tigers were coached by Dave Morey, a former Dartmouth star pitcher and a member of the 1913 World Champion Philadelphia Athletics.

Toward the end of their schedule, on Saturday, April 17, the Tigers were in Nashville splitting a two-game series with the Vanderbilt Commodores. The trip was not unusual—just a routine set of away games. But the trip proved a fateful one for Fob James. He went to



play baseball. But along the way, a chance encounter in a hotel lobby gave James the opportunity of a lifetime—an invitation to play the leading role in a Hollywood film.

Fob James was the son of James Edward James, a prosperous Lee County farmer who died when Fob and Ebb were twelve years

old. James's widow, Willie Edmond Bedell James, moved with her children to Auburn where she bought a large home she converted into a boarding house. In this way, she was able to maintain her large farm in Lee County and provide for her four sons—Fob, Ebb, and their brothers Edward and Louis. All four attended API (later renamed Auburn University), where they excelled in academics. At API, Fob and Ebb also succeeded in

As a college student, Forrest James starred in the film Stark Love but passed up a Hollywood career, choosing instead to build his life and legacy in his home state of Alabama.

By John White

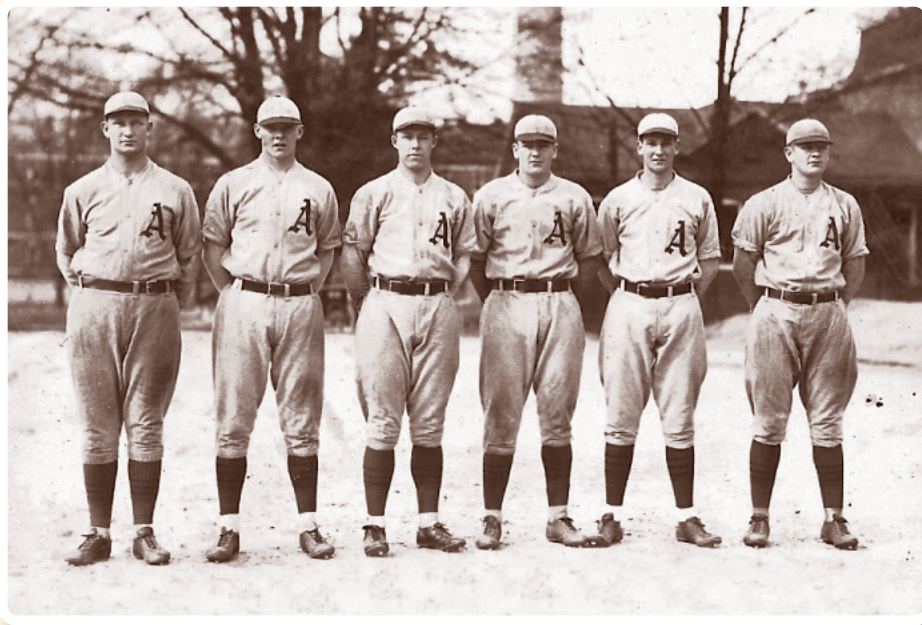


Above: Fob James portraying Rob Warwick in the lost masterpiece Stark Love. (Donald Ramlow) Opposite page: Most of the publicity materials for Stark Love, were destroyed—like most copies of the film itself. The few remaining materials, such as this glass slide, hold an important record of the film’s creation. (Helen Mundy/Donald Ramlow Collection)

athletics despite their relatively small frames. A sportswriter of the time noted that, although they weighed a mere 165 pounds, they made up for their lack of size with “plenty of pluck, aggressiveness, and keenness in athletic maneuvers.” As a young college athlete, legendary football coach Ralph “Shug” Jordan rented a room at the James boarding house, and he became acquainted with the twins. In 1971 he reminisced about them for

a reporter: “If they had played today, there’s no telling how much publicity they would have gotten.”

During the fateful baseball trip to Nashville, James received the chance for a different kind of publicity, one not based on his athletic talent. While the players lounged about their hotel lobby, a tall man of military bearing suddenly approached Fob James. He introduced himself as Paul Wing of Famous Players–Lasky Corporation, then asked the boy a most unexpected question: would he like to play the leading role in a movie? James was skeptical—there were not many Hollywood casting agents roaming the streets of Nashville in 1926—but polite and mannerly by nature, he agreed to meet with film director Karl Brown, who was also staying at the hotel.



caught Coach Morey's attention, and he asked what all the commotion was about. When James related the story, Morey checked with the hotel clerk and found that the men actually were Hollywood filmmakers who had just departed for Knoxville. Morey managed to track them down and resume discussions. After vetting their credentials and gaining assurances that filming would occur in the summer, after the conclusion of the baseball season, the coach gave his approval. He even negotiated James's hand-

After an extended conversation with the men, Fob thanked Brown and Wing, then sought out his brother Ebb for advice. Fob thought the men were frauds. Ebb agreed with him but wanted to find out for himself before passing judgment on the situation. So he went to Brown's room, posing as Fob, and asked to resume the talks. After a brief chat, Ebb grew convinced that the men were charlatans. Brown later claimed to have recognized Ebb as the true charlatan in the room; he saw a potential actor in Fob, he said, not his brother.

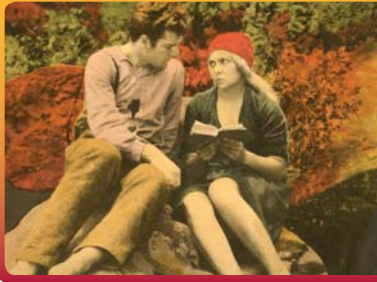
Despite their misgivings, the twins sought yet another opinion. After conferring with former API pitcher and current assistant coach, E. R. "Slick" Moulton, the brothers decided that Slick should don an API sweater, go up to the suite, and pose as Coach Morey in order to get a third opinion. Slick followed through, met with the men, had a pleasant chat, shook hands, returned to the restaurant, and assured the James brothers that their assumptions were absolutely correct—the men were obviously fakes.

Later at dinner, the story made the rounds among the ballplayers, who began harassing James, calling him "John Gilbert" and "Rudy Valentino." The teasing



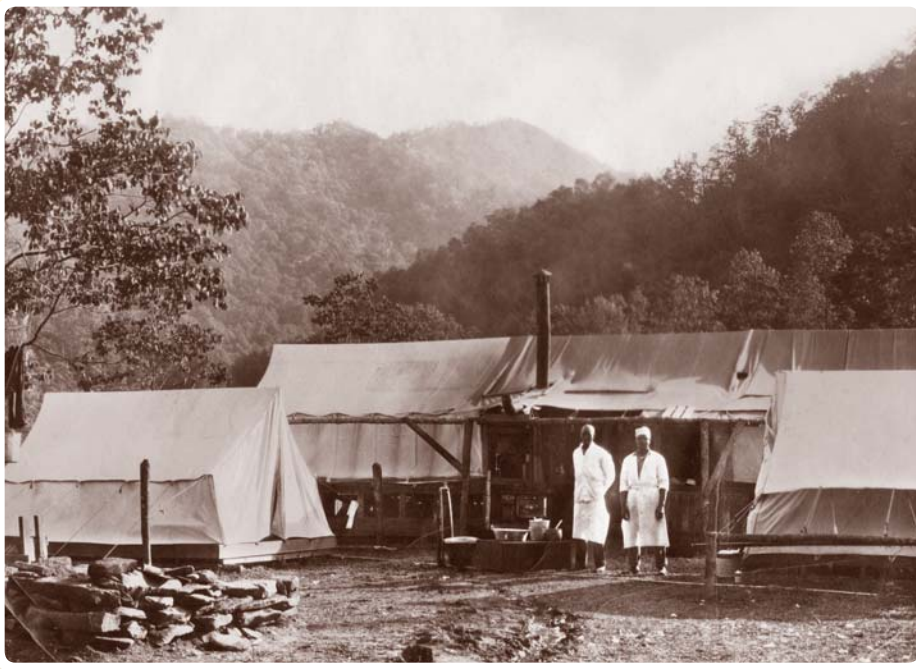
Top: The 1926 API infield consisted of, left to right, "Bully" Hitchcock, Ben Sankey, C. O. Stewart, Fob James, Dick Maury, and Ebb James. Above: Karl Brown (center) and the crew of Stark Love. Paul Wing is on Brown's immediate right, and Jim Murray is on Brown's left, wearing a cowboy hat and jodphurs. (Both Sidney James Nakhjavan)

some thirty-dollar-per-week salary. Before he knew it, James was trading his bat and glove for a leading role in a major motion picture.



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Director Karl Brown had a clear vision for his new film, titled *Stark Love*. A silent film, *Stark Love* depicts a violent clash between father and son over the affections of a mountain girl. Yet the film also contains a powerful subplot: an idealistic self-educated young man, Rob Warwick (played by Fob James), questions the social order of a remote mountain community.



Top (and following pages): Publicity materials for the film consisted of colored film stills handed out by the studio. (H. C. and Chester Miracle) Above: The commissary, a temporary structure erected on the Polo Field, provided for *Stark Love's* set and crew during filming. (Donald Ramlow)

Shot on location in the rugged Unicoi Mountains near Robbinsville, North Carolina, the movie featured locals playing nearly every role. Although this was not a common approach to movie making, it had been used in some

recent films, and Brown hoped that using everyday people would add to the film's authenticity. The decision to cast local mountain people for his picture was also probably influenced by the film's modest \$40,000 budget. In fact, only three people appearing in the film were not from the mountains. Fob James played the male lead, while the female lead was played by Helen Mundy, a teenage girl who, according to legend, had been discovered at a Knoxville, Tennessee, soda fountain. (Helen's last name was actually Monday, but she used Mundy as her stage name.) Although he was Karl Brown's chief assistant and business manager for the production, Paul Wing also stepped in to play a circuit preacher. None of the players had theatrical experience, except for Helen, who had danced in a tour of *George White's Scandals*.

Most of the actors came from nearby Robbinsville or from small settlements in the Unicois, but for the roles of Quill Allen and Jason Warwick, Brown ventured across the mountains into Kentucky. Brown had trouble finding available local men who

he considered "rough enough" to play these characters, and he hoped to find appropriate actors by widening his search. (According to some accounts, Robbinsville men were afraid to portray the characters, thinking it would reflect poorly on their town.) Arriving in Barbourville, he met a man named Mayes on the courthouse square and told him that he was looking for two men to be in a movie. Mayes immediately replied, "Well, Tom Brogan and Silas Miracle are the two you'll be wanting."

Brogan and Miracle were authentic mountaineers and good friends. Miracle was a farmer who made good



Helen Mundy dressed for her role as Barbara Allen. After filming *Stark Love*, Mundy pursued a brief career in Hollywood before declaring that she would rather marry and raise a family. (Helen Mundy/Donald Ramlow Collection)

whiskey, and Brogan was a carpenter who liked to drink it. Loading down his mule with full saddlebags, Miracle would bring his wares to the courthouse square, where Brogan would be regaling his buddies with the latest political gossip or joke. To this pair, who shared an adventurous spirit, the train ride to Robbinsville to make a Hollywood movie must have seemed like the greatest of larks.

Karl Brown filmed through the summer of 1926. Thanks to the engineering and organizational skills of Paul Wing and cameraman Jim Murray (a former cavalryman), roads were built; a multitude was sheltered, fed, and paid; cameras and lights worked; and dams

burst on cue. Luckily, the Santeetlah Dam was being built on the Cheoah River at the time of filming. Wing was able to borrow dynamite from the dam's construction crew to blast through rocky outcrops and construct roads. Lighting the film in such a remote area was also a challenge, but Brown adapted. Because of the dam project, many empty cabins remained in the area after the Tallassee Power Company purchased property in advance of a new lake. Brown had cabins disassembled and moved to the film site where they were rebuilt, leaving two walls out. In this way, an interior shot could be made using daylight. Lighting was enhanced by batteries of acetylene lights that were inspired by the helmets of the many coal miners in the area.

Geographic and technical difficulties were not the only challenges to the production. Moonshine proved to be the greatest danger to life and property. One night a gunfight broke out after a mountaineer stole his brother's still. There was no bloodshed, although bullets whizzed through Helen Mundy's tent.

Robbinsville historian Marshall McClung tells of another whiskey-fueled incident.

A series of "splash dams," similar to those used in the logging industry to float logs downstream, had been designed near the headwaters of the Little Santeetlah for the film's climactic flood scene. The idea was to knock timbers from the splash dams in a sequence to simulate a gradual, increasing tide that would flow by the Warwick cabin as the courageous Barbara Allen rescues the unconscious Rob Warwick from the raging waters.

Unfortunately, the Graham County men in charge of the splash dams became bored waiting for the camera setup and began drinking moonshine. By the time Paul Wing signaled for the first dam to be opened, the men were so drunk they knocked loose the timbers of all the dams at once. The resulting torrent thundered down Santeetlah Creek, hitting Mundy and James with tremendous force, washing them downstream well past their intended mark. Mundy was afraid of water and had to be tied to a small raft in order to film the scene in the first place. The actual events apparently terrified her.



Critics at the time of the premiere were nearly unanimous in their praise for the film and its actors.



Barbara Allen (played by Helen Mundy), her fate sealed, shrinks from the leering gaze of Jason Warwick (played by Silas Miracle). (Helen Mundy/Donald Ramlow Collection)

“I feel certain that the look of fear on the young lady’s face was genuine,” said McClung, describing the film’s climactic scene. Despite myriad hardships encountered during filming, Brown finally finished the task, and the on-site work for *Stark Love* was complete.

When filming was done, Brown returned to New York to edit his picture at the film company’s Astoria Studios in Queens. After demanding severe cuts to the film—including a violent rape scene—studio vice president Jesse Lasky informed Brown that he was shelving the movie. He had misgivings about *Stark Love* from the start because of the subject matter.

Now that Paramount was poised to spend money on a marketing campaign, he balked, believing it was a bad investment. Brown passionately argued for his film’s release, even offering to pay for a premiere out of his own pocket. Lasky was impressed—he let Brown pay.

Karl Brown secured the Cameo Theatre at 42nd Street and Broadway for his premiere on February 27, 1927. The film opened to great critical success and a four-week run. Critics at the time of the premiere were nearly

unanimous in their praise for the film and its actors. *The New York Times* proclaimed *Stark Love* “The most unique motion picture ever made!” Critic Mordaunt Hall extolled its “ethnographic value.” *The News* called it, “an almost perfect picture!” *The Sun* implored, “See it at all costs!” *Stark Love* went on to make the lists for the *New York Times*’s and the National Board of Review’s top 10 films for 1927, in the company of Cecil B. DeMille’s *King of Kings*, Victor Fleming’s *The Way of All Flesh*, Josef von Sternberg’s *Underworld*, and William Wellman’s *Wings*. Karl Brown had defied the Paramount studio system and won an audience for his film. But his star actor was not part of that audience.

Fob James’s mother, Willie Bedell James, distrusted Hollywood. She thought it a vulgar, sinful city, as did many people in her generation. So when her son completed filming *Stark Love* and earned the chance to make more movies, she was not impressed. She strongly encouraged him to turn his back on Paramount’s offer



Fob James did not attend the premiere of Stark Love, and he never saw the picture in which he starred.

of a five-year contract to star in motion pictures. He dutifully—and by all accounts willingly—acquiesced. He did not attend the premiere of *Stark Love*, and he never saw the picture in which he starred.

If James had accepted Paramount's offer of a contract, the company likely would have created a public persona for him, one appropriate to an up-and-coming actor. However, since he decided to reject the Hollywood life, the marketers of *Stark Love* created a different image for their fleeting star—one designed to make him seem like a stranger to the civilized world. James's background as an educated southerner, which differed so drastically from the life of his character, Rob Warwick, did not fit the image that movie promoters wanted. Producers worried that if people knew the truth about *Stark Love's* star, the movie would seem less authentic. So they did their best to perpetuate myths about James, circulating rumors that he was an illiterate youth who turned down a Hollywood contract to return to the wilderness with his rifle and dog. At the time of *Stark Love's* premiere, newspapers printed "wanted posters" pretending that Paramount was combing the Appalachians looking for the would-be star.

James did resume his previous life, though certainly not the life of a mysterious mountain man. After filming *Stark Love* he returned to school, where he and Ebb led the 1927 Tiger baseball team to the Southern Conference Championship. Fob also served as captain of the 1927–28 basketball team. After a 20–2 season, the team was runner-up to Ole Miss in the Southern Conference. API's only defeats were a pair of one-point losses to the Rebels, a team that also featured a set of twins, Ary and Cary Phillips. For the first time in school history, the university awarded the prestigious Porter Cup, honoring the school's best all-around athlete, to two players: Fob and Ebb James.

After graduating from API with degrees in secondary education, Fob and Ebb continued their athletic

careers by playing Southeastern League baseball for the Selma Cloverleafs. Eventually they each became high school teachers and coaches. As a coach for Lanett High School from 1931 to 1939, Fob had a reputation for selecting athletes who were unlikely to succeed, then developing them into college scholarship material. His career winning percentage in football still stands as the school's best.

In addition to coaching high school sports, Fob began an association with West Point Manufacturing as their athletic director. (At the time, it was common for businesses to field industry-league sports teams.) Eventually, by 1940, he became their "director of in-plant feeding," a position he held until his retirement in 1970. While with West Point, he also served, during the 1940s, as general manager of the Valley Rebels, a local Class D minor league baseball team. He was much involved in civic affairs and narrowly lost a mayoral race in Lanett.

Fob and his wife, Rebecca Ellington James, raised three sons. The eldest boys, Fob Jr. and Cal, continued the family sports tradition, playing high school football at Baylor School then college football at Auburn and Georgia Tech, respectively. In 1961 Fob Jr. founded Diversified Products, an exercise equipment company, and served as its president until he ran for governor of Alabama in 1978. Cal succeeded him as president of their company from 1978 until 1991. Fob Jr. served two terms as governor (1979–1983 and 1995–1999).

All three sons carried on their father's commitment to community. The youngest son Bob, the family historian, is a dedicated patron of the Chambers County Museum and recently contributed archival materials related to Fob Sr.'s sports career to that organization—including the Porter Cup.

Fob James Sr. turned his back on Hollywood to return to his native Alabama and live the life of a small-town sportsman, civic leader, and family man. To the day he passed away on July 3, 1973, he seemed never to have regretted his decision.

PLOT SYNOPSIS

STARK LOVE

By John White

Because the film Stark Love has never appeared on VHS or DVD, most people—even avid film buffs—have never seen it. Therefore, Alabama Heritage offers a detailed plot synopsis below. Please be advised that this description does contain spoilers.

Stark Love is a silent film that follows the saga of Rob Warwick, a poor mountain youth whose mother suffers poor health from toiling to feed and clothe her family. Meanwhile, Rob's father, Jason Warwick, hunts, drinks whiskey, and loaf. The opening screen title sets the movie's tone: "Deep in the North Carolina Mountains...Man is the absolute ruler—Woman is the working slave." Rob grows fond of a young mountain girl, Barbara Allen, and is determined that she will not suffer his mother's fate. He views education at a school far away in the valley town as a means through which he and Barbara may escape the harsh realities of their lives.

Rob travels to the school and uses what little money he possesses to pay for Barbara's tuition instead of his own, sacrificing his own future in an attempt to secure hers. While Rob travels by foot on the long way back home, his mother passes away. Unaware of the affection between Rob and Barbara, Jason Warwick asks for and is promised her hand in marriage; though she is unwilling, her father forces her to go home with Jason Warwick. When Rob returns home and understands his father's intentions toward Barbara, he is horrified. His attempts to reason with his father lead to a mighty brawl between father and son, but Rob is defeated and thrown out of



Starcrossed lovers Barbara Allen and Rob Warwick (played by Mundy and James) reflect on their plight. (H. C. and Chester Miracle)

the cabin. He lies by a raging creek, now near the point of flooding.

When Rob is powerless to protect her, Barbara takes matters—and a sharp axe—into her own hands. She escapes from the cabin in time to save Rob from the flood. Barbara's brave actions enable her to leave the mountain for a better life with Rob. In an unexpected turn, Barbara is the true hero of the story. In the care of a less sensitive and skillful director, *Stark Love* would be poor melodrama. Instead, it is a stunningly beautiful portrait of early-twentieth-century Appalachia and can be regarded as an early example of feminist cinema.

LOST MASTERPIECE STARK LOVE

By John White

S*tark Love*, although critically successful, failed to play well in middle America. It did not help that the studio mounted a rather tepid publicity campaign, or that the film was produced in the midst of studio reorganization. (Famous Players-Lasky Corporation was reorganized in 1927 under the name Paramount Famous Lasky Corporation, later becoming the Paramount Pictures Corporation.) Another strike against the film's commercial success was the dawning of the talking picture. By the time of the film's release, in a sense, it already was out of fashion. Shortly after its run, Paramount likely burned the film, as it burned all but thirty-seven of its 1,014 silent feature films for the silver they contained. For many years the film was considered lost.

In 1968 film historian Kevin Brownlow journeyed with fellow filmmaker Andrew Mollo to Prague soon after the Soviet invasion. They were making a film about the city's occupation and hoped to make an additional film about Nazi officer Reinhard Heydrich at Barrandov Studios. Along the way, Brownlow was arrested and held for a short time for filming at the Russian army headquarters, the Kommandantur. On his release from the Russian authorities, Brownlow visited the Czechoslovakia National Film Archive to screen some of the silent treasures stored there. By a stroke of good fortune, the archive's curator, Myrtil Frida, included in the program his "favorite" American silent film, *In the Glens of California*—the European title for *Stark Love*.

Brownlow was so taken by the picture that he wanted to learn more about it. After discovering that Frida had the world's only known copy of the film, Brownlow

wrote the *Film Magazine* article "Stark Love: Kevin Brownlow Asks How Could We Forget a Film Like This?" This led to copies being made for the Museum of Modern Art and the U.S. Library of Congress. The movie was also selected for screening in the 1969 New York Film Festival.

Brownlow sought out the film's director, Karl Brown, who by this time had disappeared from society and was believed by many to be dead. After a hunt worthy of a pulp detective novel, George J. Mitchell, an amateur film historian, cinematographer, and ex-Army intelligence officer, found Brown living in North Hollywood with his invalid wife, the former aviatrix and actress, Edna Mae Cooper.

Through Brownlow's encouragement, the elderly director decided to pen his memoirs, *Adventures with D. W. Griffith*, which became quite popular, especially among





Above: Barbara Allen (played by Helen Mundy) rejects the advances of Jason Warwick (played by Silas Miracle). (Helen Mundy/Donald Ramlow Collection) Opposite page: Prior to its premiere, Jesse L. Lasky was skeptical about Stark Love's potential; in subsequent years, the film was destroyed by its own studio. Here, Lasky gathers with other officers of the Famous Players-Lasky Corporation. From left to right are Lasky, Adolph Zukor, Samuel Goldwyn, Cecil B. DeMille and Al Kaufman. (Library of Congress)

film enthusiasts. Additionally, Brown wrote an account of the making of *Stark Love*, "The Paramount Adventure." Although it remained unpublished during his lifetime, he circulated the story through lecture appearances and interviews with film historians. Unfortunately, one of the stories he perpetuated through the years—as was advanced during the film's original publicity cam-

aign—declared that all the actors in the movie except for Helen Mundy were real mountaineers.

After the initial excitement of *Stark Love's* rediscovery in 1968, the film drifted back into obscurity. Forty years later the film remains essentially unknown except among film scholars and those fortunate to have seen it in rare public screenings. *Stark Love's* small following is due in large part to its initial, limited theatrical release and its eventual relegation to the archival shelf. As of this writing, it has never been released on VHS or DVD. Forty years ago, Brownlow wrote these words as the last paragraph in his article about *Stark Love*: "The fate of this picture was the fate of so many unusual films since—it was pushed out and quickly forgotten. But such films have a habit of returning—even after forty years. Perhaps Hollywood destroys its past to prevent such returns? Perhaps it fears its ghosts?" Whatever the reason for its obscurity, *Stark Love* remains virtually unknown, despite its many virtues. **AH**