

HOLLYWOOD

Comes to Knox County

By John White, Ed. D.

In the spring of 1926, twenty-nine-year-old Karl Brown stepped off the train at Barbourville, Kentucky. He was a young man on a mission. Having worked in the movie business since his early teens, Brown had been given a tremendous break — to direct his first feature film for Famous Players-Lasky Corporation (later Paramount Pictures, Inc.). His experience to this point included a foundational stint as film developer for the early color film studio Kinemacolor; formative years progressing from assistant cameraman to cameraman for D.W. Griffith's company; then, most recently, five years as exclusive cinematographer for the colorful and prolific James Cruze. Together Cruze and Brown had made twenty-one pictures, including the phenomenally successful western *The Covered Wagon* (1923).

The Covered Wagon was filmed on the desolate prairie of Snake Valley, Nevada, with a movie crew numbering more than one hundred twenty, one thousand extras to play Western settlers, seven hundred Indians, and four hundred Conestoga wagons. The result was a starkly realistic depiction of life on the frontier.

Karl Brown's camera work was widely lauded by critics and, according to film historians, the movie "set a visual standard," heralding the arrival of the "epic western." The film, which cost less than \$800,000 to make, grossed nearly \$4 million.

The success of *The Covered Wagon* enabled Brown to convince Paramount vice president Jesse Lasky and general manager of production Walter Wanger that a movie about real-life mountaineers could be successful. He made the case that *The Covered Wagon* was about the exterior lives of American pioneers — the big vistas of the West. He wanted to make a movie about the interior lives of pioneers — "what happens inside those cabins."

Eventually he was given \$50,000 to make a movie, entitled by the studio *Stark Love*. To help realize his quest for authenticity, he wisely enlisted the legendary outdoor writer Horace Kephart who suggested he film in the Unicoi Mountains of Robbinsville, North Carolina. At the time, the Tallassee Power Company was building the Santeetlah Dam on the nearby Cheoah River. In the course of construction, property had been bought to accommodate the resultant lake, thereby leaving dozens of empty cabins which could be used for a movie set.

Also through Kephart, Brown came up with a storyline for his previously unscripted photoplay. *Stark Love* is heavily influenced by the "Blood Feud" chapter of Kephart's *Our Southern Highlanders*. Indeed, the photo plates from the original edition of *Highlanders* come to life in Brown's movie.





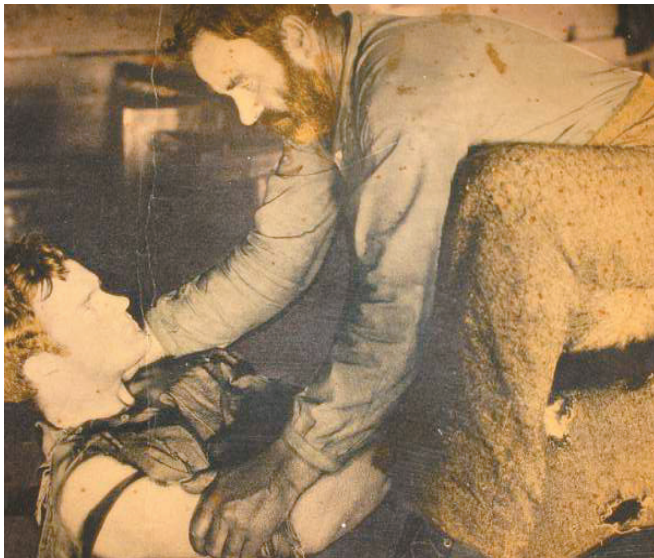
The narrative of *Stark Love* is a simple one. A young man, Rob Warwick, is a misfit in his mountain community. Most of the men of Wolf Trap Creek hunt, fish, make whiskey, and loaf. They expect the women of their society to perform the hard work — child rearing, housekeeping, gardening (which includes plowing of the fields), even preparation of game.

Rob, however, is a “white sheep among mountain wolves.” He prefers to spend his idle time reading books. Also, he recognizes the plight of women in the mountains. He witnesses the decline of his beloved mother and is determined that his friend, Barbara Allen, will not suffer the same fate. He devises a plan to travel to the college far away in the valley and secure a place for Barbara.

While Rob is away on his journey, his mother dies. Rob’s father, Jason, is confounded by the challenges of caring for a household of young children. He needs a new wife. Unaware of his son’s affection for Barbara, he bargains with her father for her hand in marriage.

The spring rains have come and the creek by the cabin is near flooding when Rob returns from his journey. Upon his arrival to Wolf Trap, he not only finds that his mother has passed away but his father has taken Barbara as his wife. Rob tries to reason with his father to let Barbara go. After talking fails, a mighty brawl ensues. Rob is thrown from the cabin as the flooding creek rages. Since Rob’s defense of her honor falls short, Barbara grabs an axe by the fireplace and defends herself. She backs Jason away as she leaves the cabin and rescues Rob just as the floodwaters reach their crest. They are washed downstream by the powerful rapids. Rob and Barbara survive the tide to walk into the valley, and start their new life.

In the hands of a less capable director, *Stark Love* would have been the worst sort of melodrama. But under Karl Brown’s care, it remains a stunning record of early twentieth century Appalachia, considered by many to be a masterpiece of the silent cinema.



The fight between Rob and his father, Jason, is one of the movie’s most memorable images.

Photo courtesy of John White, Ed.D.

Knox County

After casting the lead roles of Barbara Allen and Rob Warwick, Karl Brown still had not found actors to portray the key roles of Quill Allen and Jason Warwick. Brown does not record in his memoirs why he chose Knox County, Kentucky, as a place to look for actors. Perhaps Kephart, who mentions feuds in Eastern Kentucky in *Our Southern Highlanders*, also knew about Knox County and recommended it to Brown. Yet one may speculate that another Kentucky writer, Charles Neville Buck, may have played a part in the decision.

Buck was a popular writer of action-packed novels featuring feuding Kentucky mountaineers. His novel, *The Flight to the Hills*, was being made into a Clara Bow vehicle at Paramount about the same time Brown was filming *Stark Love*. The Clara Bow movie was renamed *The Runaway* and released in 1926.

Historian Charles Reed Mitchell notes that *A Pagan of the Hills* was another Buck novel adapted for Hollywood. Pearl White chose the story as the basis for her 1921 Fox movie, *The Mountain Woman*, which was filmed in Knox County, Kentucky.

Buck had been an unofficial advisor regarding Kentucky film locations, so it may have been that Jesse Lasky passed word on to Brown about Knox County, or Brown consulted Buck himself, or Brown on his own simply decided to look on the north side of the Cumberland Mountains. Regardless, in 1926 he found himself in Barbourville.

Silas Miracle’s grandson, Coolidge Smith, recalls that a man named Mayes was approached by Karl Brown on the courthouse square. Brown told him that he was looking for actors to be in a movie he was making.

“Well, Tom Brogan and Silas Miracle are the two you’ll be wanting,” said Mayes.

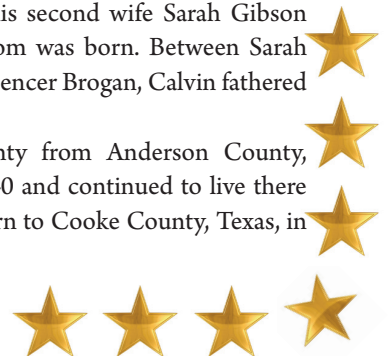
Silas and Tom were familiar figures on the square. Silas didn’t drink whiskey but he enjoyed making it behind his house near Bryant’s Store. He would load a few jars in saddlebags, sling them across his mule and go to town to deliver his wares to a few preferred customers. Tom Brogan was at the top of the list.

Tom Brogan

In the credits for *Stark Love*, you will see Helen Monday’s named spelled “Mundy,” and you won’t see Tom Brogan’s name at all. He was renamed “Reb Grogan” for the screen. Such were the ways of show business in the 1920s.

Tom was of Irish descent, born in Knox County on July 12, 1875, the youngest son of Calvin Brogan, a wagon maker. Calvin was sixty years old and his second wife Sarah Gibson Brogan was thirty-three when Tom was born. Between Sarah and his first wife Mahala Payne Spencer Brogan, Calvin fathered at least eleven children.

Calvin moved to Knox County from Anderson County, Tennessee, some time before 1840 and continued to live there most of his life except for a sojourn to Cooke County, Texas, in the 1880s.



Tom Brogan was a cabinet maker and by all accounts a very smart man. He was a “whiz with numbers” according to his granddaughter Carmen Gregg. He also was a “character,” a well-known storyteller and “election philosopher” in Barbourville who would saunter over to the courthouse steps, let out a shrill whistle and all who wanted to hear a good story would come running. This is evidenced in an article published in Barbourville’s *Mountain Advocate* in 1949, near the end of Tom’s life:

The Chamber of Commerce dinner featured bear steaks. Donor of this main item was John Brogan, who’s now located in North Carolina, not far from good bear country. He’s a marksman who’ll take second place to none, not even his father Tom, who established his reputation as a bear hunter many years ago. You don’t have to be too old to recall Tom’s exploits when he was a star in the silent picture, Stark Love, produced in the North Carolina mountains nearly thirty years ago by the Lasky Famous Players, who later produced Covered Wagon and other hits. Brogan and a fellow Knoxville mountaineer, Silas Miracle, stole the show with their exploits. In the picture one of Tom’s stunts, if you can call it, was a winning fight with a full grown and vicious bear, not of the zoo variety but flushed from his den in the Graham county mountains. Tom, in recalling his experience, stated locale of this scene was only eight miles from where his son is now stationed. Brogan made personal appearances at a number of large cities in connection with the showing of Stark Love and recalls that it showed continuously in New York for four months, a record up to that time. At the end of this period he was glad to escape the lights of Broadway and get back to the Kentucky mountains.

Like many great storytellers, Tom was prone to exaggeration. For instance, there is no documentation of a bear fight in Karl Brown’s or anyone else’s memoirs. It certainly is not a scene from the movie as Tom recounted. Also, the movie’s run at the Cameo theatre began February 27, 1927, and ended four weeks — not four months — later. Whether or not that was a record is debatable.

Additionally, it is doubtful that Silas and he had an opportunity to invest in the film as he told the same newspaper reporter on another occasion. However, Tom may have made public appearances at “a number of large cities” on behalf of the movie. John Montoux of the *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, in a review of the film, mentions a “long-bearded Abraham” who mounted the stage, introduced himself as a mountaineer, and delivered a speech before the picture ran.

Regardless of the validity of Tom’s tales, they made for interesting copy in the *Mountain Advocate*, which were their purpose.

His portrayal of Quill Allen in *Stark Love* also was an exaggeration — of himself. For one thing, he dressed better, as did all the key actors. His wife Elisabeth Johnston Brogan was upset that he would portray a ragged mountaineer on screen. She was from Lexington, well-read, and prim and proper.

The Brogans stressed education in their household. They did not allow their six children to miss school at harvest time like most young people of that time and place. Tom’s brother John

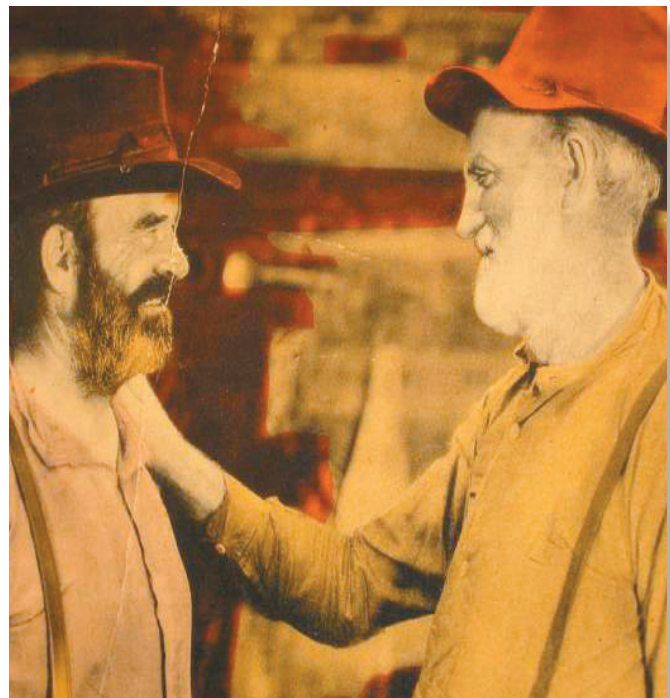
was a founding stockholder in the corporation of citizens that established Union College in Barbourville. At least three of Tom’s children — William Greene, Virginia, and John — and a grandchild he raised, Ponjola Smith Carlisle, attended Union.

Despite his wife’s protests, Tom was born to play the role of Quill Allen. “I’m a star,” he said. “Aw, you’re just playing yourself,” was her reply. To her point, although his costume was Hollywood-issue, the twenty-gauge Ithaca shotgun that he carried in the movie was probably his own.

Brown was very pleased with Tom. He considered him “a white-haired stubbly white-bearded natural comedian.”

However, Tom Brogan was not all mirth and light. Once during a property line dispute with a neighbor, he crawled over the fence and slit the man’s throat with a corn knife. For this he was obliged to spend a year in jail. The light sentence may have been due to the harsh words the neighbor had directed at Tom’s wife. Violence in the mountains was considered justified if it meant defending your family honor. Kephart called this “the law of the wilderness.”

According to Carmen Gregg, “Tom Brogan always seemed larger-than-life as seen through my mother’s eyes. He seemed to live life to the fullest and was a jack of all trades: farming, carpentry, medicine making, hunting, whittling, playing harmonica, and of course story telling. I think he took part in the movie, not for monetary gain, but as an adventure and to further his story-telling. He never seemed to care that much for material things as long as he had a roof over his head, a good shotgun, a good knife, good whiskey, enough food for his family, a good woman to stand beside him, and of course a good story to tell.”



Knox County’s Silas Miracle and Tom Brogan appear in *Stark Love*.

Photo courtesy of John White, Ed.D.



Silas Miracle

Silas was most always bare-foot. A huge, burly man, he was known as very fleet of foot. Coolidge Smith says, “There was never a cow that could outrun him.”

Although Silas was known as a kind, soft-hearted man, he had a familial connection to one of the most brutal murders in Knox County history.

Silas’s father Henry Calvin had four brothers, two of whom were his son’s namesakes. Reverend Silas Miracle was a highly respected man in Bell County, known for his genuine religiosity and for his powerful oratory. Reverend Miracle preached at the Cannon Creek Primitive Baptist Church where Henry Calvin was an elder.

Calvin had been a revered name, handed down for several generations of the Miracle family. Henry Calvin was a local magistrate and went by “Calvin.” The Bell County, Kentucky, town of Calvin, is named for him. Silas had named his own youngest son Henry Calvin. But after cousin Calvin Miracle was electrocuted following his arrest for murder, Silas’s son forevermore went by “H.C.”

Silas Miracle’s lineage can be traced to Heinrich Felix Merckel born in 1643 in Germany. Silas’s great-great-great grandfather Lorentz Merckel migrated from Germany to New York sometime before 1721. He eventually moved to Pennsylvania. Lorentz’s son Frederick anglicized the surname to “Miracle,” and he, along with three sons, eventually settled in modern-day Bell County, Kentucky. Frederick was a prosperous man. On his trek south, he recorded deeds for large tracts of land in North Carolina and paid taxes on property in Tennessee.

Henry Calvin was born on Little Clear Creek, Knox County, and moved from there to Bell County where Silas was born in 1874. Silas eventually moved to Poplar Creek in Knox County and lived there his entire life.

Silas was a subsistence farmer. He and his wife Polly Jane Foley grew corn and hay which they used to feed mules, cows, and hogs.



Polly Jane Miracle

Photo courtesy of John White, Ed.D.

They also grew beans, potatoes, and a garden. They bought very little. They used a fireplace for heat and there was no indoor plumbing.

Silas was not a hard worker. He had a sense of adventure and liked to wander. Accordingly, he was not a prosperous man. Still, he was considered by his friends to be “savvy.” Unlike his father, he was an indifferent church-goer, yet he was a sympathetic and soft-hearted sort.

Pete Davis was a crippled Cherokee man who helped Silas make medicine from herbs and whiskey from corn. When Silas was dying, he made clear that he wanted provision made for Pete. Pete lived with the Miracles until his death in 1956 and is buried near Silas.

Although, Silas was generally a peace-loving man, he did carry a revolver — a .32 caliber American Eagle Luger in a shoulder holster — and, on at least one occasion, he resolved to use it. Like his friend Tom Brogan, he had a property line dispute with a neighbor and, if forced, he was prepared to settle the quarrel with his gun.

Myphrey Bennett had earned a reputation as an overbearing man. On occasion, he was known to threaten a neighbor when kinder words seemed inadequate.

On August 1, 1913, Silas walked out the door with a loaded pistol. As he left, he turned to Polly Jane and said, “If I see Myphrey Bennett today I will have to kill him.” Polly pleaded with him not to take his gun but he kept walking to the barn where he saddled his horse and rode off. Later that day Polly was standing in her kitchen when she heard a gun shot. She looked out the window across the valley less than a quarter of a mile away and she saw a man staggering in the county road. Another shot and she saw him fall to the ground. Polly recognized the man as Myphrey Bennett. He was being shot from ambush and she could not see his assassin. She fainted in her kitchen convinced that Silas had killed a man.

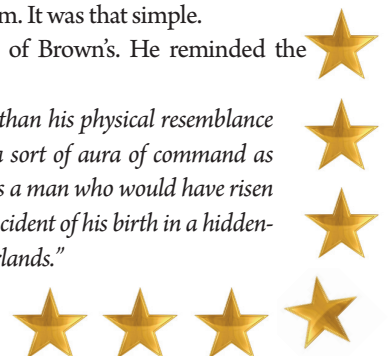
When Polly Jane regained consciousness she saw Myphrey’s killer who was now in the road. She recognized him and realized that Silas was not the assassin. She also knew, and it was well known in the community, that Myphrey Bennett had killed the man’s dog. The dog had been trying to dig out a groundhog on Myphrey’s property and Bennett had shot him.

The avenging dog lover, who had saved Silas from a violent confrontation, after being arrested, was not convicted by a jury of his peers. They regarded the murder as justifiable homicide.

Polly was just fifty and Silas was fifty-two when Karl Brown rode up to their farm in 1926. The story passed down is that Brown came to Barbourville by train then rode the nine miles to Silas’s farm on horseback, the only way into Poplar Creek. Brown then talked Silas into going back to North Carolina with him. Silas left for a period of time, then returned to life on the farm. It was that simple.

Silas became a personal favorite of Brown’s. He reminded the director of Ulysses S. Grant:

“There was more to Silas Miracle than his physical resemblance to General Grant. He emanated a sort of aura of command as part of his inner makeup. Here was a man who would have risen to high command, except for the accident of his birth in a hidden-away corner in the nearby Cumberlands.”



Epilogue

Tom Brogan and his wife Elisabeth Johnston Brogan stressed to their children the importance of education. Accordingly, three of their family became respected teachers and two were war heroes. Their daughter Virginia, an Army surgical tech in World War II, taught English and special reading internationally for more than thirty years. A son, William, was highly decorated for his service in the 325th Glider Infantry of the 82nd Airborne Division during WWII. He received a Purple Heart and three Battle Stars during service in Sicily, Italy, Normandy, and France. While convalescing in an Italian hospital, he was exposed to Italian opera, especially the coloratura soprano, Amelita Galli-Curci. This inspired him to enroll in Union College on his return to Kentucky and to major in music education. William Greene had a long career as choir director at Everett High School in Maryville, Tennessee.

Tom Brogan died a year before William's graduation from Union, on March 5, 1950 at age seventy-four.

Silas Miracle's family engraved upon his gravestone, "He Was a Kind Father and a Friend to All." He died of cancer in June, 1939. He was sixty-three years old.

Nearby in Croley Cemetery stands the marker of his son H.C. H.C., like Tom Brogan's children, graduated from Union College and became a school teacher, as well as a successful country storekeeper. H.C. married Mary Zelma Hopper, whose mother, Nannie Belle Bennett Hopper, was Myphrey Bennett's niece. H.C. and Mary had three sons: Chester, Harold, and H.C. Jr.

Harold was a state police detective in Harlan County, Kentucky, for many years. He brought over 300 capital cases to trial.

H.C. Jr. attended the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music then opted for a career in the United States Air Force. He was also a scratch golfer who won the 1966 World Wide Air Force golf tournament.

Chester Miracle enrolled at Berea and graduated in 1954 with a degree in math and physics. He then was accepted at Auburn University where, in 1956, he earned his master's degree.

Chester then attended the University of Kentucky where, in 1959, he graduated with a Ph.D. Dr. Miracle has taught mathematics at the University of Minnesota for nearly fifty years.

Horace Kephart remains a revered writer among outdoorsmen and lovers of Appalachia. Three of his books: *Our Southern Highlanders*, *Camping and Woodcraft*, and *Camp Cookery* are still in print. A recently uncovered adventure novel, *Smoky Mountain Magic* was released in September during the same week that Kephart was featured in Ken Burns' series on our National Parks. Kephart was a key figure in the establishment of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Mount Kephart is named in his honor.

The best source to find out more about the writer is Western Carolina University's Hunter Library. Along with the Mountain Heritage Center, they co-sponsor an extensive on-line exhibit dedicated to Kephart's life and works.

Karl Brown won the respect of Paramount executives after the critical acclaim of *Stark Love*. Cecil B. Demille himself requested Brown to direct a very special project, a film that would star his long-time mistress, Julia Faye. The name of the picture was *His Dog*. And it was. It ruined Brown's career as a director. He turned to writing, first for the screen, then for television. Late in life, Karl Brown won fame and respect as a memoirist. He made a living in a hard town for eighty years. He died at the age of ninety-four.

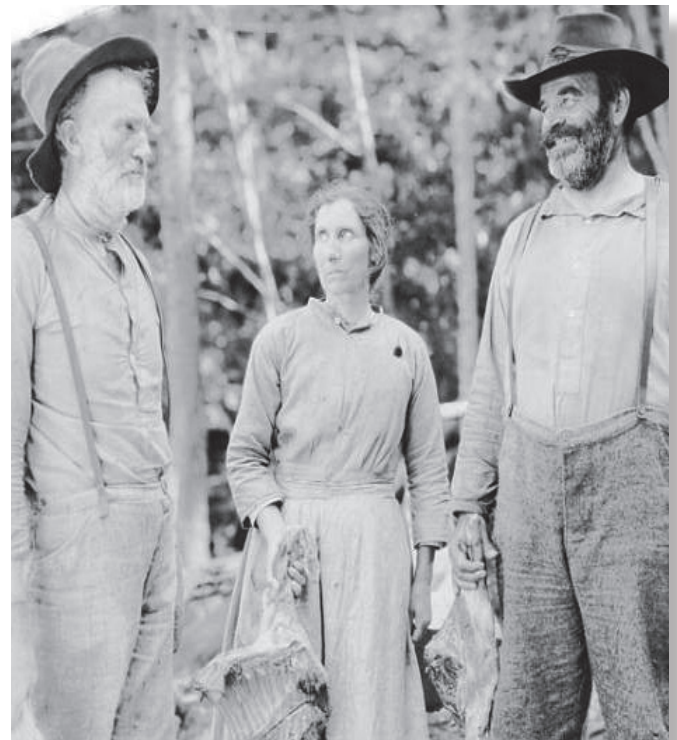
Stark Love. When Brown returned to Hollywood, he found that Jesse Lasky himself had recommended the film be shelved. The studio boss couldn't see spending money to promote a film he believed would do no business. How was a film about mountaineers going to compete with Clara Bow in *The Fleet's In*?

Again, the intrepid Karl Brown stood up for himself. He challenged Lasky to allow him to find a theatre and premiere the movie at his own expense. Lasky was incredulous. He asked, "How can you do so foolish a thing?"

Brown explained that he had spent the last twelve months of his life making a picture he believed in and he wouldn't "let it die without first giving it a fighting chance to prove itself one way or another."

Brown was talking to a man, Lasky, who as a youngster had lost his inheritance prospecting gold in the Yukon. A man who, afterwards, worked his way up from a clarinet act in saloons and vaudeville to become founder of a motion picture company. Lasky was impressed.

"All right. If that's the way you want it. Good Luck." Lasky let him pay.



Tom Brogan and Silas Miracle

Photo courtesy of John White, Ed.D.



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. *The New York Times* proclaimed it, “The most unique motion picture ever made!” Their critic, Mordaunt Hall, extolled the “ethnographic value” of the movie. *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*’ 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 had won an audience for his film.

Although critically successful, it did not play well in Middle America. It didn’t help that Paramount mounted a rather tepid publicity campaign. “It gumshoed into an intimate theatre on rubber heels,” wrote Motion Picture Classic.

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. Brown lamented his movie’s fate:



Karl Brown and Tom Brogan

Photo courtesy of John White, Ed.D.

“Many of my friends such as Laurence Stallings, Ben Hecht and Robert Sherwood, expressed regret that I could not have waited a few years to get the sound of the mountaineers’ voices, who spoke Elizabethan English, and the magnificent colours of the mountains in spring, when the mountains are solid masses of azaleas and rhododendrons in full bloom — a sight of breathtaking beauty not to be found elsewhere.

The real cause for genuine regret is that I made the picture at a time when the screen was heavily censored and that some of the more powerful scenes were banned by the censors. I regard the picture as a pallid ghost.”

Shortly after its last run, Paramount likely burned the film, as it burned all but thirty-seven of its one thousand and fourteen silent feature films for their silver content. For many years the film was considered lost.

Then in 1968, Kevin Brownlow met Myrtil Frida who introduced him to the movie *Stark Love*.

After the film’s re-discovery, Brownlow sought out the film’s director. By this time, Karl Brown had totally disappeared from the Hollywood scene 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.

Brownlow began visiting Brown and through his encouragement, the elderly director decided to pen his memoirs, *Adventures with D.W. Griffith*, which became quite popular, especially among film enthusiasts.

Additionally, Brown wrote an account about the making of *Stark Love*, *The Paramount Adventure*. Although it remained unpublished during his lifetime, he circulated the story through lecture appearances and through interviews with film historians.

Due to the intellectual curiosity and compassion of Kevin Brownlow, Karl Brown’s silent masterpiece found a new audience and, thankfully, *Stark Love* is not forgotten.

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?”

About the Author

Dr. John White is a writer, historian, and filmmaker who has written extensively about the 1927 Paramount film *Stark Love*. His articles have appeared in historical journals such as *The Journal of Military History*, *Film History*, and *Alabama Heritage*. He is a Visiting Research Professor at Tennessee Technological University.

He has completed a documentary about *Stark Love* and is preproduction for a film about Paramount founder Jesse Lasky and Tennessee war hero Sergeant Alvin York.

A graduate of Auburn University, he now lives in Atlanta with his wife, playwright and civic leader Melita Easters.



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Kentucky Native Katie Pickard Fawcett Releases Book

Katie Pickard Fawcett grew up in Kentucky, graduated from Union College, and spent time as a social worker in Knox County. For the past thirty-plus years she has lived in Washington, D.C., working as a writer/editor and has been published in a number of magazines, journals, and newspapers. Her first novel was released on February 9, 2010. *To Come and Go Like Magic* was published by Knopf Books for Young Readers/Random House Children's Books. The story is set in eastern Kentucky in the mid-1970s. The book has received excellent early reviews from *Publishers Weekly*, *School Library Journal*, *READ Magazine*, *Booklist*, and the *Washington Times*.

In April Katie attended the Red Bud and Quilt Festival at Union College. Later in the month, a book launch party was held for her in the Washington, D.C., suburbs at a shop that sells handcrafted gift items from across the United States. Katie participated in a book signing along with another local author, and the shop owner donated a portion of the proceeds from the sale of all gift items in the shop, as well as the regular monthly donations for gift wrapping, to the Kentucky Humanities Council upon Katie's request.

