

In what would be the most expensive scene in silent film history, Buster Keaton constructed a bridge, set it afire, drove a steam train onto it--and then had everything collapse into a river 34 feet below. Keaton only had one chance to get the shot right, and he nailed it.

BUSTER KEATON'S LAST STAND

Production for *The General* involved guns, bombs, fires, and the blowing up of a bridge. When the filming was over, the comedic actor's career was in tatters. Forty years later, the movie was hailed as a masterpiece.

PERSONAL FAVORITE

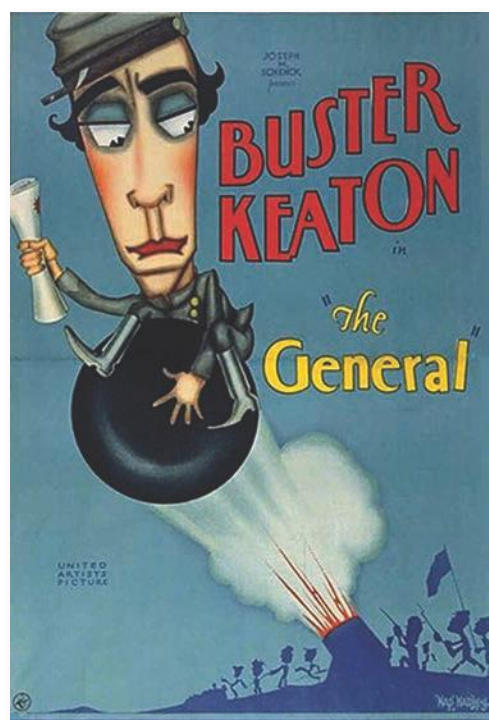
By JULIAN SMITH

ON JULY 23, 1926, ONE OF THE MOST FAMOUS ACTORS IN THE world stood nervously by a river in rural Oregon, ready to shoot a scene that could change the course of his career. The 30-year-old Buster Keaton's deadpan comedic genius and nail-biting stunt work had already put him alongside legends like Charlie Chaplin and Harold Lloyd. His goal today was to shoot the pivotal scene in *The General*, a comedy-romance-action film based on a real event from the Civil War.

Keaton's Hollywood crew had pulled into the tiny logging town of Cottage Grove two months earlier, 18 freight cars full of Civil War cannons, stagecoaches, prairie schooners, props, cameras, and over 1,200 costumes. Carpenters built an entire fake town, residents lined up to play bit parts, and hundreds of national guardsmen were recruited for battle scenes. Cottage Grove—the Pacific Northwest, for that matter—had never seen anything like it. Keaton oversaw the entire operation personally, from writing the script to setting up and filming stunts where one slip could be fatal. He did all this despite injuries, lawsuits, forest fires, and budget overruns.

Today was the day for a shot that would make or break the entire production. A steam locomotive, the movie's namesake, was to roll across a burning trestle, which—if everything went as planned—would collapse at exactly the right moment and dump the train into the Row River. At a cost of \$42,000—equivalent to more than \$600,000 today—it would be the single most expensive shot in silent-film history. And there was exactly one chance to get it right.

By 3 p.m., thousands of spectators had gathered in the sun under the pine trees that lined the riverbank. After making sure that half a dozen cameras were in position and ready to be cranked, Keaton gave the order, and with a hiss of steam the *General* began to roll.



The General features a famous stunt where Johnnie Gray (played by Keaton) clings to a cowcatcher on the front of a steam locomotive. At the last second, he heaves a railroad tie to clear another tie placed across the tracks by thieves--robbery and train wreck narrowly averted!

THE FIRST THING YOU SEE WHEN DRIVING INTO Cottage Grove today is a two-story mural of Buster Keaton crouched on the cowcatcher of a train. It covers one side of the former Bartell Hotel, where the actor lived during the summer of 1926.

I step over a historic plaque set in the sidewalk—Keaton again—and sit down to breakfast at Buster's Main Street Cafe, now occupying the first floor of the building. The walls are covered with movie posters: *Animal House*, *Stand by Me*, something about hoboes starring Lee Marvin and Ernest Borgnine. All of them filmed in this quiet city of 10,000 at the southern edge of the Willamette Valley, 125 miles south of Portland.

The mural, the plaque, the café: it's clear that Cottage Grove is most proud of one film. Almost a century ago, on the cusp of the Great Depression, *The General* briefly turned the town into a tiny Hollywood, 830 miles north of the real thing.

"Buster left a lasting imprint on the community," says Lloyd Williams, the former president of the Cottage Grove Historical Society, sitting at his desk in a corner of a local history museum. "When I was a kid growing up in Cottage Grove, I often heard people say, 'My dad was an extra for Buster Keaton,' or 'I watched Buster film the big crash scene on the Row River.'"

Williams has agreed to show me where some scenes from Keaton's favorite of his films, a classic of silent cinema, were shot around town. After a peek at a scale model of the *General* that sits in a glass case on a bookshelf, we climb into his car and start off.

Buster Keaton first stepped into the spotlight at age five as part of his parents' vaudeville show. His father tossed little Buster around with such abandon that he was arrested multiple times for alleged child abuse. But it was all part of their act, and Buster had already proved he was a tough kid. At six months old, he fell down a flight of stairs and crawled away unharmed. (The event was said to have inspired Harry Houdini, his godfather, to give him the nickname 'Buster.')

When he was two, a cyclone sucked him out of an upstairs window and left him in the street below unharmed.

Keaton got his education onstage—he was kicked out of public school on his first day for being disruptive—and as a child he was already performing multiple times a day, six days a week, in theaters around the country. After parting ways with his parents, he started appearing in silent films alongside stars like Fatty Arbuckle. Throughout the 1920s, the age of classic slapstick cinema, he made dozens of short films and features, which propelled him to worldwide fame.

Keaton pushed the technical envelope as a performer and a director, pulling off stunts and shots that others considered too risky or simply impossible. An immortal sequence in *Steamboat Bill*, in which a small window is the only thing that keeps him from being crushed by a collapsing building, is still referenced today. He seemed impervious to pain, despite too many on-set accidents to count: broken ankles, near-drownings, even a broken neck that went undiagnosed for years.

In 1926, Keaton was looking for a follow-up to *Battling Butler*, his highest-earning film to date. He came across the story of the Andrews raid, the only locomotive chase of the Civil War. In April, 1862, a Union raiding party slipped across the

battle lines and headed for Marietta, Georgia. They commandeered a steam train named the *General* while the crew and passengers were eating breakfast, then raced northward with other trains in pursuit. The raiders pried up rails, cut telegraph lines, and tried—unsuccessfully—to burn a bridge behind them. Confederate troops captured them after an 87-mile chase. Of the 24 Union raiders, 8 were executed; 19 later received the Medal of Honor.

Keaton loved trains, and he envisioned expanding the story into a rolling action film with helpings of romance and comedy. "The slapstick stuff is gone," he said. "The movie public demands drama, punctuated with comedy." The *General* itself was on display in Chattanooga, Tennessee, but emotions in the South were still too raw to put up with the production of a comedy set during the war, which had ended just 61 years earlier. Instead, location scouts found the small mining and timber town of Cottage Grove, Oregon. The community of 3,000 had vintage logging trains available for filming and forest scenery that could stand in for Georgia if you didn't look too closely. It even had a set of parallel train tracks in the center of town that would be invaluable for certain shots.

Studio executive Joseph Schenck, Keaton's brother-in-law, agreed to a budget of \$400,000, or about \$5.7 million today. Keaton was so excited that he didn't even have a finished script when he bundled up his wife and two sons in Beverly Hills and left with them for Oregon.

The film production in Cottage Grove was the biggest thing to hit the town in living memory. "COTTAGE GROVE BECOMES HOLLYWOOD OF OREGON FOR 10 WEEK PERIOD!" blared the *Cottage Grove Sentinel*. The crew of about 60 began scouting locations, building sets, recruiting locals, and securing trains. The Oregon, Pacific and Eastern Railroad supplied two vintage locomotives, and a third engine was found and modeled into the *Texas*, one of the pursuers.

Keaton and his family moved into the Bartell, the only hotel in town, turning it into the production's de facto headquarters. As carpenters set to work constructing sets, local women gathered nervously outside the hotel for a chance to play supporting roles. "Bobbed haired, bobbed-skirt flappers are going to learn first hand how sweet and demure were the maids of long ago about whom their grandmothers like to talk," the local paper noted, "every one of them probably inwardly hoping that she can make such a showing that she will be called to Hollywood." Half the town's population was eventually hired to work behind the scenes or appear as extras.

Keaton had chosen his 24-year-old costar Marion Mack, an actress and one of the Sennett Bathing Beauties—a group of women who performed in bathing suits for short films and promotions, who had been recommended by his sister-in-law's hairdresser because she had "the bearing and features for a southern belle of the Civil war days," the paper reported. (Supposedly, the decision consisted of a curt "She'll do.")

Within a week, the film crew had built a replica of Marietta in the heart of Cottage Grove. The false-front town had over a dozen buildings, including a railway depot, a hotel, a barroom, general stores, a city hall, and a bank. In keeping with Keaton's order to make everything "so accu-

rate it hurts," the buildings were modeled after engravings in a book written by one of the Union raiders, period-accurate down to the wallpaper.

The weather was as sultry as a Georgia summer when filming began on June 7, "as though Nature was helping make everything realistic," the *Sentinel* wrote. Early each morning, the railroad line through town was closed off and the steam trains were moved into place for filming.

The *General* is essentially one long chase scene. Keaton plays train engineer Johnnie Gray, who has "only two loves in his life"—his locomotive and his girl, Annabelle Lee. When Union spies steal the *General* in Marietta with Annabelle aboard, Johnnie gives chase by handcar, bicycle, and eventually another train. After he rescues both, he and Annabelle race back to Marietta, with the spies on his tail now, to warn the

because the parallel tracks were only about half a mile long, shots of Keaton driving the locomotive or running along the tops of train cars could be no longer than about 15 seconds.

To make an entire sequence, Keaton had to stitch together dozens of these short shots. And since every shot required multiple takes, and sometimes half a dozen, this meant moving everything—actors and cameras and props and backgrounds—back to the start and setting up again, over and over, day after day, week after week. It could take two hours to set up a single shot, costing what would be almost \$6,000 per hour today.

It was tedious work, but that didn't keep people from as far away as Portland from coming to watch the action. All were welcome as long as they kept out of view of the cameras. "If the crowds jam in too close," the *Sentinel* wrote, a

earned him the nickname The Great Stone Face.

Every Sunday throughout the summer, townspeople and crew members would gather at Kelley Field, a short walk from the siding, to play baseball for paying crowds. "Keaton fishes and plays ball with the same energy that he puts into the making of a picture," the newspaper observed. "He is the star of his team...nimble and alert." Sometimes he called for a quick game when he needed a break to mull over a particular shot or plot point.

Cultural relations peaked when a member of the company and a local woman fell in love. They planned to have a quiet wedding in Eugene, but as soon as Keaton heard, he had the wedding party "kidnapped" and brought to the Bartell Hotel. After a pastor performed the ceremony, members of the film crew carried the bride and groom on their shoulders to a tearoom called the Gray Goose, where the couple was seated at a small table perched on top of a larger table for guests. "Buster, himself, provided a most courteous and obliging waiter being especially attentive to the bride," the *Eugene Guard* wrote, even after he put a screen around the newlyweds and charged people a quarter to peek inside.

When she wasn't filming, Mack rode around town on a bicycle, dressed in overalls with a cap pulled over her brown curls. "Riding is just by way of keeping up the exercise and allaying any fear of adding weight," the paper noted, "which is, of course, the nemesis of all film stars."

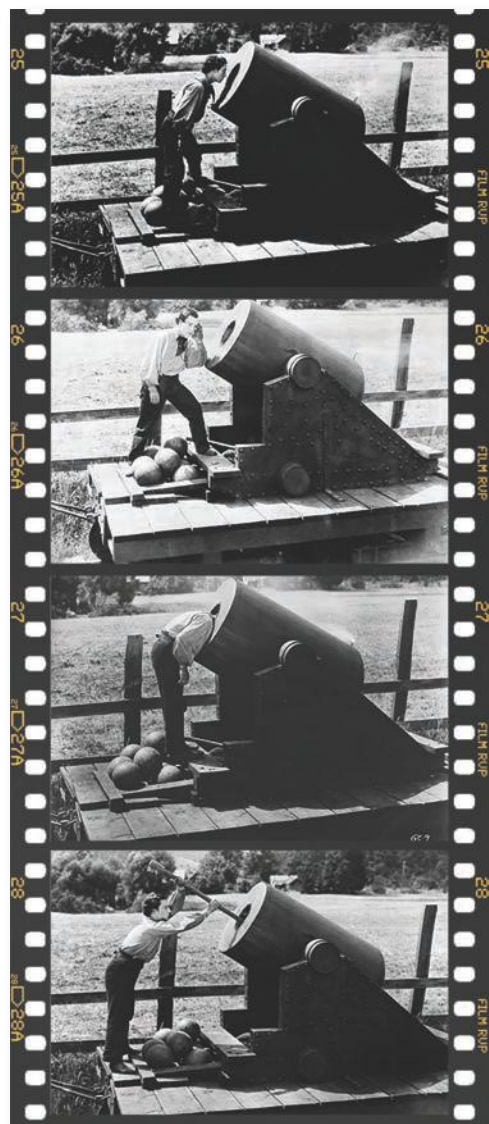
In contrast to their on-screen infatuation, Keaton treated her coolly during filming. It was dispiriting, she said later, until she realized it was "mostly just shyness." It didn't help that he never used stunt doubles for her rougher scenes, as he had promised. In one cringeworthy moment during the rescue, she is hiding inside a sack that Keaton dumps on the floor and steps on. For another scene, he failed to warn her that a gush of water out of a pipe was going to hit her in the face with enough force to knock her over. Her spluttering reaction in the finished film is genuine. She reportedly became so upset at one point that she punched him in the face, leaving a black eye that brought filming to a halt for a few days.

"Visualize this as an open field," Williams says. We're standing in a small grassy area behind a Safeway where the parallel tracks once lay. They're long gone, replaced by a bike trail that leads out of town and up the Row River. "If you can imagine from that corner to down there, all those action scenes, he had to get up to speed, make all the shots match, then go back and start back up."

"That's Hansen Butte," he continues, pointing to a distinctive hill to the south. "You see that over and over in the film. He had to change the camera angle so it didn't look like he was going over the same ground again and again."

We can see the hotel and its mural just a few blocks west. "Wherever he was," Williams says, "he wasn't far from the hotel. It was pretty easy to mobilize the troops."

Our next stop is Kelley Field, where the film crew and local teams played baseball. It's still in use almost 100 years later. When a player in 1926 twisted his ankle on the rough ground, Keaton donated his team's half of ticket sales toward smoothing out the field and buying a new backstop.



PHOTOS © BUSTER KEATON PRODUCTIONS
Johnnie (Keaton) and Annabelle Lee (Marion Mack) stoke a locomotive's wood-burning steam engine. A title card in the film declares Annabelle and the *General* as Johnnie's "two loves."

Confederates of an impending Union attack. It's one of the first true action movies—a *Mission: Impossible* for the Roaring '20s, just with more swooning and pratfalls.

A good part of the film consists of tracking shots of Keaton and Mack aboard the moving train, which is why the parallel tracks in the center of town were so crucial. Cameramen could set up their Bell & Howells on a flatcar rolling on the secondary track, called a siding, and film the train going down the main line.

Some scenes were shot from a rebuilt automobile driven on a road that ran along another part of the line. Others were filmed aboard the train itself or from a rolling platform on the track in front of or behind the train. But most of the tracking shots were made from a flatcar. And

member of the crew "or Buster himself courteously requests, 'Will you please stand back so as not to cast a shadow on the picture?'"

The script was still a work in progress. Keaton always said he worried most about the beginning and the end of a film and figured the middle would take care of itself. He had "gag men" to help come up with funny scenes and dialogue, and one actor who had fought in the Spanish-American War and the Boxer Rebellion lent a hand in planning the battle scenes.

The residents of Cottage Grove certainly appreciated the money the production was bringing in. But even beyond that, relations with the film company couldn't have been better. Keaton proved to be far friendlier and far more outgoing than the solemn on-screen persona that had

TEMPERATURES ROSE TO 105 DEGREES AS FILMING continued into July. The number of on-set accidents also grew. Keaton had years of experience performing his own stunts, but *The General* introduced the hazards of rolling 26-ton locomotives and large battle scenes complete with bombs and gunfire.

A train wheel ran over a brakeman's foot, resulting in a \$2,900 lawsuit. When a casting director was shot by a blank cartridge, "he jumped out of his shirt and came near leaving the rest of his clothes behind," the *Sentinel* reported. Keaton himself was knocked out cold when he stood too near a firing cannon.

Other stunts went smoothly, including the white-knuckle sequence that inspired the mural on the hotel. In it, Keaton is riding on the cowcatcher holding a railroad tie as the train approaches another tie that the thieves have laid across the track. At the last second, he throws the one he's holding, hitting the other in the exact right spot to knock it out of the way. It was an incredible feat of timing and dexterity; the smallest slip could have thrown him under the wheels.

Forest fires have always been a danger during Oregon's hot, dry summers. The film crew had prepared for the possibility, building a firefighting engine that could shoot four streams of water at a time. But the summer of 1926 was unusually hot, and the wood-burning trains sparked numerous blazes in the dry forests and fields along the track.

It took 600 men to fight one especially large fire, many of them in the blue and gray uniforms of Civil War soldiers. Actors, cameramen, production managers, and other volunteers used their coats to beat out the flames. Keaton, without a jacket, took off his pants and fought alongside them in his underwear. Other fires throughout the county filled the air with smoke, at times making it impossible to shoot.

The complexities of filming on location, amplified by Keaton's perfectionism and insistence on historical accuracy, caused production costs to soar. There were rumors in Hollywood that the film's budget had ballooned to \$750,000. Schenck was furious, and he pressured Keaton to wrap things up as soon as possible.

Speculation about the train-wreck scene had flown around town since the day filming began. It was the climax of the movie, a kind of shot no one had ever tried before. Keaton was determined to do it for real, not in miniature.

Location scouts had combed the state looking for a suitable bridge with no luck, which meant that Keaton would need to build one from scratch. They found a spot 15 miles east of town called Culp Creek, where the Row River flowed over a set of rocky rapids with steeply sloping banks on both sides. It took less than two weeks to build a 215-foot-long trestle 34 feet above the river. Engineers also built a dam just downstream to make the water deeper.

On July 23, Cottage Grove declared a local holiday so everyone could watch the filming. Some 600 autos trundled along narrow mountain roads, and two special trains ran to the site. Eventually, between 3,000 and 4,000 people gathered ("maybe...as large a single audience as the picture ever will have," the *Sentinel* snarked), leaving the town virtually empty. Some spectators camped out the night before.



PHOTOS © BUSTER KEATON PRODUCTIONS

Despite being Keaton's personal favorite, *The General* was a box-office disappointment in 1926. Today, however, the movie is regarded as a comic masterpiece. Orson Welles called it "perhaps the greatest film ever made."

With the cameras rolling, dozens of actors on horseback charged down the riverbank as the *Texas* raced onto the burning bridge. Just as it reached the middle, the span buckled and gave way, tumbling the locomotive into the river in a hissing cloud of steam and smoke. The train whistle howled and died.

Keaton was "happy as a kid," the *Sentinel* reported, and later posed for photos standing on the wreckage. At least one local woman wasn't as thrilled; she didn't know the train engineer was a dummy and fainted when the papier-mâché head floated past.

The next two days were set aside to shoot the climactic battle scene, in which the armies clash after the bridge collapse. First, 500 extras from the Oregon National Guard dressed as Union cavalry and infantry poured down the riverbank into the water. Rifles cracked, cannons boomed, and the air and ground erupted with explosions.

The movie's chief powderman oversaw the frighteningly realistic barrage, setting up 900 charges filled with gunpowder measured to a fraction of an ounce. ("From appearances he has enough bombs on hand to exterminate several good-sized armies," wrote the newspaper.) When those shots were finished, the extras changed into Confederate uniforms and charged in the opposite direction.

Despite the careful planning, nine men were hurt by explosions, falls off horses, and

near-drownings in the dammed river, which was supposed to be knee-high but turned out to be much deeper. A field hospital treated the injured as if it were a real battle.

But when the dust cleared, Keaton had the footage he needed.

After the battle, there were only fill-in scenes left to shoot. The town held a farewell picnic and dance for the film crew in the main park. By the light of Chinese lanterns, members of the company danced, sang, and recited Shakespeare monologues. One man played the piano wearing 12 pairs of mittens, the *Sentinel* wrote, and every performance was "heartily encored."

Most of the filming in Cottage Grove wrapped by mid-September. After months of edits, the movie was ready. At an advance screening in California in November, *The General* received standing ovations, the paper reported, and it was "the first time in many moons we witnessed an audience applauding and whooping when the Confederate army had the Union soldiers in full retreat." Cottage Grove audiences had to wait nearly three months—until the end of January, 1927—for their chance. While there's no record of the reception, it's easy to imagine that local audiences were thrilled to see their city—and in many cases, themselves—up on screen.

The response outside the state was far different. Keaton's shift toward drama wasn't well

received by audiences and critics who expected more laughs. "The General is far from funny," complained *Variety*. Some felt the Civil War was no subject for a comedy. "Many of his gags are in gruesomely bad taste," wrote *Life* magazine. A scene in which a Union soldier is impaled by a sword that Johnnie flings by mistake, tame by modern standards, especially didn't go over well. The film also didn't live up to financial hopes, earning back, domestically, just two-thirds of its final \$750,000 budget.

After the disappointment of *The General*, the studios demanded that Keaton have a business manager to rein in expenses. Hollywood was about to go through a tumultuous period: the advent of films with sound was soon coinciding with the shock of the Great Depression. Keaton had always run his own show, writing and acting in and directing pictures. But that creative control would be diminished after his next film, and after the early 1930s he mostly played bit parts. For a man who had never really faced failure in his entire life, *The General's* reception must have been devastating.

And yet, today it is recognized as a masterpiece of American cinema. Orson Welles called it "the greatest comedy ever made, the greatest Civil War film ever made, and perhaps the greatest film ever made." It was shown at the 1965 Venice Film Festival, and during a media event the entire press corps gave Keaton a standing ovation. His widow later said it left him in tears. In 1989, *The General* earned a place on the U.S. National Film Registry alongside *Casablanca*, *Citizen Kane*, and *The Wizard of Oz*.

On my last day in Cottage Grove, I drive up Row River Road toward Culp Creek in search of the place where the bridge scene was shot. Williams has hinted at the location, but since it's on private property, a discreet solo visit seems like the best option. My cell signal dies as the road winds into the forest along the former rail line. Smoke rises from the chimneys of small houses with mossy roofs. One bend in the road suddenly looks familiar: it's where a curve in the tracks saves Johnnie from being blown up by his own cannon, one of the funniest sequences in the movie.

I pull over at a promising spot, scramble down the riverbank, and squint upstream. I play the bridge scene on my phone for the hundredth time—a moment of future shock—and try to line up the boulders in the river and the hills in the background. Eighty years earlier, I could have just looked for the wreckage of the train, which was a tourist attraction until it was salvaged for scrap during World War II. Eventually, judging by the curve of the hills and the placement of certain boulders, I think I've found the right spot.

I imagine Keaton standing in victory on the wreckage of the *Texas*, triumphant at having pulled off the crowning shot of his career. In spite of *The General's* lukewarm reviews and failure to turn a profit, Keaton later said, "I was more proud of that picture than any picture I ever made." It would take decades for the rest of the world to catch up, but that moment was his. ■

Julian Smith is the coauthor of Aloha Rodeo: Three Hawaiian Cowboys, the World's Greatest Rodeo, and a Hidden History of the American West and an executive editor at Atellan, a story studio.

