



# Alexander Black

*Cinema Pioneer*

November 22, 2009    PACIFIC FILM ARCHIVE



Alexander Black and his grandchildren  
in frame scans from *The Magic Circle*  
(1923)



## A PIONEER'S LEGACY

“Jack of all trades, master of many”: I believe this description of Alexander Black from his youngest son, Malcolm, sums him up well. Just as his brother-in-law once described him as a “giant of a man” (we can only assume he was not describing his five-foot-eight-inch, 125-pound frame), the person and achievements of Alexander Black loom large in the lives of our family to this day.

Alexander's legacy to the family is at times a mixed blessing. On the one hand, we take great pride in his prodigious works and, in particular, his contribution to the history of motion pictures. On the other hand, the knowledge of his many achievements—from publishing his own newspaper, *The Young Idea*, at age eleven (not to mention printing it on his own press, selling advertising, and registering it at the Library of Congress), to his success as a newspaperman, as a photographer, and later as a novelist—set the bar somewhat high. I heard numerous times as a child that my great-grandfather “invented motion pictures.” Being an avid moviegoer, I thought this “fact” was pretty cool, even if there didn't seem to be much factual evidence at my fingertips. I was largely unaware of the particulars of Alexander's professional life until I read his autobiography and started delving deeper into who he was and the nature of his accomplishments, personal and professional.

Unfortunately, I don't have much first-hand information to give me a sense of what Alexander was like in person. The last person who knew him well in my immediate family was my father—named after Alexander—who passed away over twenty years ago. From long-ago conversations with him and other, more distant relatives, I have been able to piece together a picture of a family man who doted on his grandchildren, who in turn remember him fondly. From the tributes paid to him by his own children I come away similarly impressed. To my dismay, Alexander never shared much about his personal life in his memoirs, which were dedicated to his many and varied professional pursuits. However, on the professional front, Terry Ramsay's chapter on the picture play in *A Million and One Nights* is terrific; there is a well-indexed collection of notes and correspondence at St. Lawrence University, from which Alexander received an honorary degree late in life; and, of course, there is his autobiography, *Time and Chance*, plus any number of *Who's Who*-style biographies.

As I have come to understand more of the whole life that Alexander lived, filled with industry, ambition, creativity, and luck, I have learned to appreciate his creative legacy. He was never an opportunist, but one who followed his own path, and I continue to be impressed with what Alexander created, and indeed mastered, during the course of his life.

Outside of his family, I don't think he's been given his due. I hope that the efforts by PFA, including the preservation of the films in this program, will ultimately lead to a broader recognition of the contributions made by Alexander Black, “Grandfather of Picture Plays.”

**Carlyle H. Black II**

*Program Notes*



Hand-colored glass magic lantern slide from *Miss America* (1897)

## THE SLIDES

On October 9, 1894, at the Carbon Studio on 16th Street in Manhattan, the writer, photographer, and magic lanternist Alexander Black premiered *Miss Jerry*, his first “picture play.” The much-anticipated event attracted a crowd of noted intellectuals and artists, including novelist William Dean Howells, painter William Merritt Chase, theater critic Brander Matthews, and Brooklyn mayor Seth Low. They gathered to discuss what was essentially a feature-length moving slide show, but one that walked in close step with the emerging cinema. This new form consisted of a series of still images of actors posed, photographed, and projected on a screen. Black read an accompanying narrative and dissolved from one slide to the next every twenty seconds in order to suggest movement.

The event was meant to provoke as much as entertain. It raised questions about the future of motion pictures at a time when the American public was gleaning its first glimpses of photographed movement on rotating disks and in peephole devices. Black sought input from his circle of writers and visual artists on how best to present this new kind of performance on his national lecture tours. On their advice, he fine-tuned the format and would spend the next decade performing his picture plays at community centers, schools, and museums across the eastern United States. Although largely overlooked today, during the silent film era these performances were continually mentioned when writers posed the question, “who invented the cinema?”

Black spent the better part of his life promoting the possibilities of photography, film, the magic lantern, and popular illustration to a public whose curiosity was sparked by these technologies. From the late 1880s through the silent era, he published extensively on photography, motion pictures, and the arts, founded organizations dedicated to their promotion, and edited one of the largest illustrated newspapers in the country, the *New York World*. The administrators of the schools and institutes where Black presented his illustrated lectures were concerned about the potential corrosive effects of new media on respectable culture. They sought to preempt the perceived dangers of film and photography by using them to motivate learning and uplift taste. In catering to these concerns, Black was more than an avid producer of images: he helped to establish the cultural traditions that promoted the art and craft of moving pictures. To follow Black’s career as a magic lantern lecturer and journalist is to encounter the early intellectual history of moving-image art.

The PFA program features reproductions of posters and slides from Black’s nonfiction lectures *Life Through a Detective Camera* (1889) and *Miss America* (1897), as well as scenes from the picture plays *Miss Jerry* (1894), *A Capital Courtship* (1896), and *The Girl and the Guardsman* (1899).



Frame scan from *Europe I* (1928)

Frame scan from *The Magic Circle*  
(1923)

Frame scan from *Chilmark: A  
Florethel Film Fantasy* (1927)

## THE FILMS

Moving ahead thirty years from the picture-play days, we find Alexander Black a guest of honor at the influential Amateur Cinema League's inaugural meeting in 1926. Largely retired, he was still making moving images, now using the new 16mm film stock that Kodak had released for the amateur market. The silent films in the PFA collection (most of them edited and titled) were made between 1923 and Black's death in 1940, and represent a wide range of subject matter. This collection provides a rare coherent grouping of amateur films made by a cinema pioneer.

### **Travelogues: *Europe I* (1928)**

The travelogue was one of the most popular genres for amateur filmmakers. With the advent of the relatively portable 16mm format in 1923, camera enthusiasts could take their motion-picture devices around the world with ease. *Movie Makers*, the journal of the Amateur Cinema League, regularly published articles advising readers about the best ways to capture exotic landscapes and ancient architecture in moving images. These films were screened in homes and at amateur cinema clubs and other small gatherings. Several of the 16mm films in PFA's Alexander Black collection are travelogues; of these, *Europe I* is among the most carefully constructed. It includes printed intertitles to narrate the journey, footage of air and sea travel, a phantom ride in a gondola, and footage of Black himself feeding pigeons in Venice.

### **Fantasy Films: *The Magic Circle* (1923) and *Chilmark: A Florethel Film Fantasy* (1927)**

Instead of seeing the amateur family film as a limiting form, Black seems to have found within it a range of themes and possibilities to explore. Some of his films not only document family events, but consider the idea of ancestral memory in a self-reflective way. In Black's two "acted" story films, themes of family and heritage inspire magical transformations. In *The Magic Circle*, made on 16mm stock, Black imagines his grandchildren appearing around him in a swirl of double-exposed trick cinematography. *Chilmark: A Florethel Film Fantasy* combines ancestral memory with reincarnation when the main character falls asleep, sees nymphs dancing in the same landscape hundreds of years in the past, and confronts his previous incarnation herding sheep and wearing fur. The trick effects and the particular fantasy elements in each of these films recall early cinema. If family history and origins are common themes of home movie making, the films in this collection develop these themes in a playful and thoughtful way.

### **Kodachrome Reflections: *And So to Edinburgh* (1935–37) and *Alexander Black: Grandfather of Picture Plays* (1919/1946)**

PFA's preservation of Black's films has so far rescued two Kodachrome reels, which offer examples of how Black used color to reflect on themes of family memory and on his position in motion picture history. In *And So to Edinburgh*, the color compositions literally explore the environment of Black's ancestors. The intertitles announce

each new setting where an ancestor was born, lived, or worked. At the end of the film Black signals the return to New York with an intertitle and a shot of his partner silhouetted against a window with the Statue of Liberty in the background. He then turns to a newer grand landmark of his home city with six shots in Kodachrome of the recently constructed Empire State Building at different times of day and night. Each shot is photographed from the same position (from the east) in order to create an effect of transformation. Here the famous magic lanternist uses new color motion picture technology (already testing how the film responds to night shooting) to evoke an old magic lantern effect, the dissolving view of a cityscape. Thus, the transforming view stands between experiment and traditional craft, harking back to Black's earliest lantern series.

*Alexander Black: Grandfather of Picture Plays* takes this historical reflection a step further. A family collaboration by Alexander Black and his son Malcolm, the film could best be described as an amateur documentary that combines home movies and found footage. The latter comes from the Paramount Screen Magazine film *The Evolution of the Picture Play* (1919), made on the twenty-fifth anniversary of Black's first picture play performances. It includes restaged picture play scenes and performances by Black and Tracey Tisdell. To make the homemade documentary, the Blacks used a reduction print of the Paramount film, reedited it, and framed it with 1938 Kodachrome footage of Black addressing the camera and reading a 1919 letter from Paramount President Adolph Zukor affirming Black's status as a cinema pioneer.

The film represents three nested periods in Black's life, referencing his work in three different but related fields: the lecture circuit, the film industry, and amateur film clubs. In the color scenes, an eighty-year-old Alexander Black introduces black-and-white footage of himself at age sixty writing a novel. In this reedited footage, Black looks up from his writing to introduce scenes in which he and Tracey Tisdell restage their 1895 picture play performance. Tisdell projects magic lantern slides, within a studio documentary, within an amateur film. The Kodachrome supplements at the beginning and end of the film are far from superfluous. Color marks the present day, a point from which to look back into the black-and-white past.

Black's work always bore an odd relation to the present tense. In the 1890s his lantern performances suggested a hypothetical future for emerging motion picture entertainment. A generation later his lantern shows were rediscovered as a high point in the early days of amateur motion-picture craft. His position in film history, engineered in no small way by Black himself, changed dramatically depending on the time and place of his latest rediscovery. *Grandfather of Picture Plays*, with its color-coded interlacing of personal history and media history, reflects on precisely this process. It reminds us of the rich context that continues to motivate the effort to preserve Alexander Black's films.

**Kaveh Askari**

ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF FILM STUDIES, WESTERN WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

## PRESERVING ALEXANDER BLACK'S FILMS AT PFA

In 2006, scholar Kaveh Askari contacted PFA about a collection of early amateur 16mm films shot by Alexander Black, who, as I would later learn, played a major yet underappreciated role in the birth of cinema. We made arrangements to meet with Alexander's great-grandson Carlyle H. Black II, who had been safeguarding these family treasures since 1972. Carl had been entrusted with the films while visiting his great-aunt Ruth Black, the wife of Alexander's youngest son Malcolm, in New Jersey. Over the ensuing thirty-four years, which included several moves to different houses in Northern California, Carl stored the films as safely as possible, careful not to subject them to extremes of temperature and humidity.

On March 7, 2006, Kaveh and Carl, lugging a sturdy brown metal container that looked like a construction worker's lunchbox, arrived at PFA to meet with some of the staff and introduce us to the world of Alexander Black. With their passion and eloquence, they quickly convinced us of the importance of the collection, and we agreed to accept the films in order to inspect and assess them. After we promised Carl that we would handle his films with extreme care and store them securely, he turned them over to us reluctantly—I could tell this act of letting go was a little difficult for him.

Carl's collection consisted of sixteen 400-foot reels of 16mm film; most of these were edited camera reversal original footage, a mixture of color and black-and-white, dating from the 1920s and 1930s according to the edge codes. PFA staff inspected the reels and determined that they were all too fragile, shrunken, and unique to be viewed safely on equipment that utilizes a sprocketed film transport. Consequently, in order to assess the contents of the reels, Kaveh and I peered at film frames through a loupe at one of PFA's inspection benches equipped with manual rewinds, and through this slow process, we were able to identify several priority candidates for preservation. *Alexander Black: Grandfather of Picture Plays* (1919/1946), a homemade documentary that incorporates an excerpt—the only known extant footage—from *The Evolution of the Picture Play*, Adolph Zukor's 1919 production celebrating Black's contributions to the birth of motion pictures, became a priority based on its content and the fact that the film was severely deteriorated due to vinegar syndrome. The dream narrative *Chilmark: A Florethel Film Fantasy* (1927) was another easy selection as a very early example of amateur avant-garde film. *And So to Edinburgh* (1935–37) was shot on very early Kodachrome stock, and although it is severely faded, we thought that a preservation lab could potentially restore the color to its original glory.

In early 2007, as we strategized about preservation funding, we learned that Carl's aunt (Alexander's granddaughter), Judy Stearns, held an additional nine reels in her Massachusetts home. Judy graciously agreed to ship them to PFA for inspection. This collection included the severely shrunken and deteriorated 16mm edited reversal original of *The Magic Circle* (1923), Black's loving, fantastical tribute to six of his grandchildren that employs multiple exposures and stop trick photography. This film represents one of the earliest amateur films in existence—Kodak introduced

16mm film stock to the amateur market in 1923—and became an essential addition to our preservation proposal.

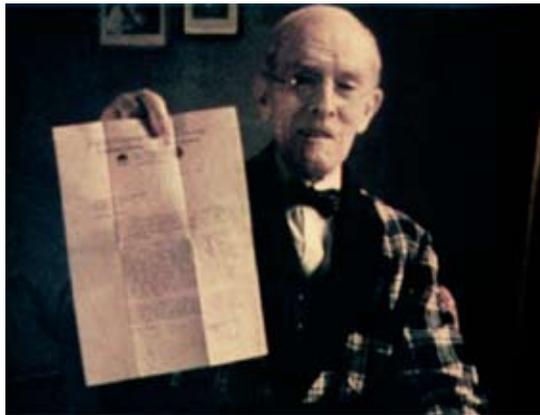
In autumn 2007 PFA received a Lab Partnership Grant from the National Film Preservation Foundation to preserve six films from the Alexander Black Collection. Colorlab of Rockville, Maryland, renowned for their expertise in preserving the most severely deteriorated films, generously donated in-kind lab services for this project. Under the careful guidance of lab director Russ Suniewick, Colorlab was able to create new negatives using a liquid gate optical printer. Proprietary techniques were used to restore color fading when applicable and to remedy other visual defects caused by warping, shrinkage, and vinegar syndrome. Each preservation negative yielded an approved polyester answer print and release print, as well as a Digital Betacam master.

If funding permits, we hope to preserve additional films by Alexander Black. Of particular interest is a roll of 16mm Kodacolor travel footage of the southeastern United States shot in 1926, two years prior to Kodak's official 1928 release of Kodacolor—the first color motion picture film system for the amateur market.

**Jon Shibata**

ASSISTANT FILM ARCHIVIST

**Films in the Alexander Black Collection were preserved by PFA with the cooperation of Carlyle H. Black II and family. Preservation was supported by a National Film Preservation Foundation Lab Partnership Grant with preservation services by Colorlab.**



ABOVE Frame scans from *Alexander Black: Grandfather of Picture Plays* (1919/1946)

COVER, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP Two frame scans from *Chilmark: A Florethel Film Fantasy* (1927);  
Frame scan from *Europe I* (1928)

BACK COVER Frame scan from *The Magic Circle* (1923)



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