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Romaine Fielding as he appeared in a Lubin Company publicity still.
Courtesy Romaine Fielding, Jr.

EARLY FILM MAKING IN NEW MEXICO:
ROMAINE FIELDING AND THE
LUBIN COMPANY WEST

ROBERT ANDERSON

IN JANUARY 1909 a group of the most prominent film companies in the world founded the Motion Pictures Patents Company. This alliance alleviated the patent rights disputes which had been tying up silent film profits in costly courtroom litigation. By 1912 several of these firms had accumulated sufficient capital to allow their film crews to travel across the United States looking for temporary film locations. What differentiated the Lubin Film Company from the six other American firms in the Motion Pictures Patents Company was the decision of Sigmund Lubin to establish a permanent branch of the Lubin Company in the Southwest. The result of this action was twofold: Lubin's film troupe became the first to take advantage of the excellent year-round climate of the Southwest; and Romaine Fielding, by capitalizing on this region's scenic beauty, initiated a major trend in American cinema—realism.

It all started when D. W. Griffith's Biograph film troupe began a one-week stay in Albuquerque. On May 29, 1912, the forty-member company departed by train from Los Angeles to New York. Five months earlier, the company, along with five other prominent American film concerns, received a letter from the New Mexico Bureau of Immigration outlining the cinematic possibilities of the forty-seventh state. Enclosed in this correspondence were photographs of potential in-state places of interest. This letter influenced Griffith to stop over in Albuquerque.

Although the stay was of short duration, the company completed two films before continuing to New York.¹ Of the six firms notified in January, Biograph was the first to film in New

Mexico. Since the company's stopover was so brief, however, Griffith's troupe made a very small impact on the state. This was not to be the case when the next film company, the Lubin Company of Philadelphia, located in Silver City in May of 1913.

In April 1913 Romaine Fielding, manager, director, actor, and writer for the Lubin Company West, came to Santa Rita, New Mexico, to reconnoiter possible locations for future filming. Robert Fielding,² an engineer for the Chino Copper Company at Santa Rita, had told his half-brother of the unique mining scenes there and lured Romaine over from Nogales, Arizona, where the Lubin Company West had established temporary headquarters. Romaine, who had not seen Robert in fourteen years, was easily persuaded to stay on.³

Early in May Romaine began looking for accommodations in Silver City for his twenty-four troupe members, but he returned by train to Nogales without any apparent success.⁴ Fielding was impressed by the mining operations around Silver City but remained undecided regarding the location of his future headquarters. Throughout 1912 the Lubin Company West had been stationed in various Arizona localities. As much as Romaine wanted to be near his half-brother, because of the lack of adequate accommodations, it appeared his company could not make the change.

Robert now began a determined search for satisfactory quarters for Romaine's outfit, and in less than ten days he had found them.⁵ Silver City began to buzz with excitement. Old time "Indian fighters" were offering their services to the film-maker so he could be the first to capture cinematically what a "real Indian fight" looked like. In Nogales Fielding had largely concentrated on Mexican War pictures, and as of yet had not decided on what types of photodramas to attempt in Grant County. He also had more immediate problems as much of his equipment was stranded in the desert, piled on two constantly faltering Buicks.

While waiting for his movie paraphernalia to arrive, Romaine decided to rent the adjoining Burnside and Carter residences for the additional space and convenience they offered. By the end of the week, Lubin West carpenters—headed by scenic artist F. E.

Hull—were constructing the outdoor stage on which the indoor sets would be placed, and operations began to flow smoothly. Fielding, in the meantime, always his own best public relations man, talked to Silver City residents and invited them out to see the making of moving pictures.⁶

The company did indeed begin its filming in Silver City by making a “Cowboy and Indian” type of western. On the initial day of filming, horseback riders were recruited from around town and “several hair raising stunts” were practised. The following day a large crowd of interested spectators gathered on the northeast corner of Texas and Spring streets to observe an unidentified Lubin Company stunt man being thrown through the window of the Red Onion Saloon. On Monday, the third day, Fielding went to the northwestern portion of town to film the burning of the deserted Consland house. Once again a large crowd was present. Lehn Engelhart, a boy of thirteen at the time, remembers the event clearly: “They burned an old frame house down and there was a young boy about fourteen or fifteen that came to the rescue of his mother. There were flames in front of the camera shooting the smoke and fire out in front of the house; it was very spectacular.”⁷

In three days Fielding had captivated and fascinated the Grant County area with his realistic cinematic efforts. Romaine, however, was referring to this “Cowboy and Indian” film as a “romance,” and Silver City inhabitants were becoming curious. By June 3, less than a week after the first filming was completed, people were clamoring to see the finished product. Such a showing was impossible since the film was sent to Philadelphia for processing, and it usually required at least sixty days before a Lubin Company West production was ready for national release and distribution. This did not stop a writer for the *Silver City Independent* from making known his feelings to a local movie theater owner, Abraham. He told the proprietor of the Princess Theater that if he “don’t land some of these local pictures right soon there is liable to be several deaths from pure unadulterated curiosity.”⁸

Fielding fever was spreading throughout the town. The director was causing quite a stir at Schadel's Bakery and Restaurant. He was a regular for lunch there, usually ordering the daily specials. More than six decades later, Henry Schadel remembers:

Romaine seemed to like the leading lady [Mary Ryan]. Whenever she was in, as a rule, he would eat his meals with her. Otherwise he would eat by himself. He seemed to separate himself from the rest of the bunch, except for the leading lady. There was a distinction between himself, the leading lady, and the rest of the group. He had an outstanding appearance so the waitresses liked to serve him.⁹

Schadel's was the only restaurant in Silver City at that time; therefore, the Lubin Company's stay meant a dramatic increase in its business. Henry, the owner, was

glad to see him come in. Silver Citizens would come in just because Romaine was in there. They liked to be in the restaurant when Romaine was there, you know how ordinary people are, they like to be near a celebrity. Naturally it was a drawing card for the business. Big crowds would follow him around. In them days, to have a picture made in Silver City was quite important, outstanding. We was glad to have it happen here.¹⁰

Romaine was doubly popular with the waitresses. Not only was his appearance "outstanding," but he instantly had acquired the reputation of being a big tipper. Oftentimes after eating or during breaks in filming, Romaine could be seen wearing full cowboy regalia walking down Main Street charming children and adults alike. When asked why he decided to be an actor, he admitted to his fans that he only did it because he was a "publicity hound."¹¹ Silver City had never met anyone quite like Romaine Fielding, and they loved him.

The director and main force of the Lubin Company West was forty-five when he began filming in Silver City, but observers invariably referred to him as "young looking." Town residents were not only impressed by his appearance but also by his "speech

and diction."¹² Fielding claimed to have received a bachelor of arts degree from the University of Minnesota and a medical degree from Columbia University. Unfortunately, because of the absence of records in these institutions covering degrees granted in the 1890s, his claim cannot be verified or refuted. He, however, also told press and fans alike that he was born in Corsica, when both he and Robert had been born in Riceville, Iowa.¹³

After finishing the "romance," Fielding began to film a picture which required extras as labor agitators. He chose two Silver City residents, Mason Kelly and E. A. Blevins, to be in the photodrama as leaders of the labor movement and two hundred other extras to represent a mob. In addition, two thousand spectators appeared on the scene to witness the action taking place south of town. The initial takes for Fielding's latest effort were of great interest as the Lubin Company dynamited a narrow gauge railroad and two large water tanks.¹⁴ Once again Lehn Engelhart was present:

There was one railroad bridge that went up to this smelter which was on a pan off the Santa Fe. It was an old wooden bridge with a pan about a hundred yards—three or four hundred feet. They blew that up. They had put a box of dynamite and wired it underneath this bridge. The fuse didn't ignite the cap, so Romaine Fielding grabbed a thirty-thirty rifle and hit the damned thing the first time and blooey it went up.¹⁵

"Rioters and spectators" were covered with a shower of splinters and rocks but no one was injured.¹⁶ The following day an old oil house near the smelter was also blown up as part of the bridge scene.

On commenting on this day of filming, *The Moving Picture News* informed its readers that

Mr. Fielding . . . finds the country around here [Silver City] the richest in material of any section he has visited so far, and he is surely making the best use of it. Nothing escapes his keen, penetrating observation and everything is grist that comes to his mill, which proves the genius of the man.¹⁷

Romaine was proving himself a master at choosing film locations, and perhaps even more importantly, he was the first American director to practice what he liked to call "physical and mental realism." This dedication to realism led him actually to destroy buildings where other film-makers of the period were content to rely on the phony gimmickry of the studio back lot.

The same week in which the dynamiting occurred, the *Silver City Independent* ran a feature article entitled, "Romaine Fielding a Revolution of Human Energy and Endurance." Under the headline the journalist expressed the town's feeling towards the actor:

Silver City has been visited by big men in the past, authors, artists, actors, capitalists and businessmen—the men who do things—but when the town met up with this man, Romaine Fielding, it achieved an entirely new and startling experience. He works about twenty hours a day at a pace that would put the average man over the brink in a week. He carries the thousand details of his work in his head and keeps the man straight who is trying to keep it all down on paper. He handles a mob of anywhere from a hundred to a thousand, shows them how to act, keeps them from getting hurt and acts in the scene himself. In two weeks he knows more about the scenery within twenty miles of Silver City than those who have lived here thirty years. When he wants a ruin he finds one quicker than anyone can find it for him, or he makes it. Then, where after two weeks of this strenuous work the ordinary man would drink a quart of booze and try to sleep, Fielding orders a quick shave and sits down to write the sceanario [sic] for another play, having in the meantime ordered a rehearsal of it for 9 o'clock the next morning. Fielding is a new experience; he is a revelation in the masterful act of getting things done.¹⁸

It was shortly after June 17 when Fielding heard that the DuPont Powder Company was coming to Santa Rita to dynamite over three hundred thousand cubic yards of dirt which was overlying precious copper ore. The DuPont Company was bringing over \$7,000 worth of explosives, and Romaine was bringing his cameras. Announcements were made that the blast would take place on Wednesday at 12:15 P.M., and "practically the entire population of Santa Rita turned out to witness the advance Fourth

of July demonstration." The roar of the blast was heard plainly sixteen miles away in Silver City.¹⁹ Fielding took pictures of the spectacle, but neither Henry Schadel nor Lehn Engelhart remembered observing the explosion in any Lubin Company film.

In the week following "the largest single blast ever discharged in New Mexico," Fielding began staging a battle between 200 men dressed as *insurrectos* and 22 clad as Mexican troops. The action took place on Chihuahua Hill outside of town and ended with a building being left in ruins. One must wonder how many buildings were destroyed by Fielding during his stay, as every week he found a new structure to engulf in flames. Lubin's Western director was so committed to total realism that he would settle for nothing less.

While filming *The Clod* on Chihuahua Hill, Fielding employed numerous Mexicans as extras. Henry Schadel recalls, "lots of Mexicans . . . got in on the picture, sometimes a hundred or more."²⁰ On Chihuahua Hill, Lehn Engelhart witnessed "a Mexico Mexican fall off his horse into a prickly pear bush. He looked like a porcupine when he got out of it. Hell, they wouldn't send him to a doctor or anything, they just plucked him with pliers."²¹

In *The Clod* Fielding was attempting to portray visually the conditions then existing in Mexico. His leading character Pedro Méndez was a peasant caught up in a revolution he could not understand. After his family was killed by Federalists, Pedro joined the Revolutionists only to be slain on the field of battle. *The New York Dramatic Mirror's* review found *The Clod* to be

A most propitious subject for the camera to exploit . . . acquainting the public with existing conditions in our sister republic. Apart from its instructive value, the piece is a masterly bit of stagecraft that emphasizes General Sherman's definition of war. Romaine Fielding's pantomime, as *The Clod*, is flawless.²²

With the filming of *The Clod* just underway, rumors began spewing forth from the Albuquerque press stating that Fielding and the Lubin Company were going to relocate in the Duke City. By July 8 the *Albuquerque Morning Journal* was happily an-

nouncing that the move was confirmed. Silver Citizens dismissed the rumors outright. Fielding himself did not enter into the newspaper debate, instead he concentrated on finishing still another war scene between the *insurrectos* and the regulars, this time at Boston Hill. By mid-July the final charge was captured on film, and the action appeared so realistic "that some spectators hid themselves behind large rocks during the heavy fighting." Naturally, another house went up in flames in front of "several hundred of the curious."²³

Fielding now left Silver City for a sightseeing trip to Albuquerque. The troupe remained behind, apparently using the break to recuperate from the heavy two-month schedule of acting just completed. Romaine toured Albuquerque with H. E. Sherman and Joseph Barnett of the Barnett Amusement Company. Sites visited by the film maker included the Isleta Indian Pueblo and the Sandía Mountains. It was during his visit to the Duke City on July 23 that he was informed of winning the second annual *Motion Picture Story Magazine* award for the Most Popular Player. The actual prize was to be unique but was not specified.²⁴

Fielding received a telegram announcing his victory from Eugene V. Brewster, the managing editor of the magazine. It reads as follows: "*The Motion Picture Story Magazine* desires to congratulate you on having won its popular player contest, with over half million votes to spare. The public has shown its appreciation of your fine work on the screen." Shortly after obtaining the first telegram, he received another. This one was sent from Lubin Company officials in Philadelphia. It read: "Just received telegram from *Motion Picture Story Magazine*, stating that Romaine Fielding wins Popular Prize contest easily. You have our heartiest congratulations and best wishes. Lubin & Lowry."²⁵

Sigmund "Pop" Lubin, owner and head of the Lubin Film Company, had ample reason to be proud of his premier photographer receiving 1,311,018 votes. To put the actor's enormous popularity into perspective, the combined votes received by Carlyle Blackwell, Francis X. Bushman, G. M. "Broncho Billy" Ander-

son, Arthur Johnson, Mary Pickford, Blanche Sweet, and Pearl White did not equal Romaine's tally.²⁶ *Motion Picture Story Magazine* referred to the votes which poured in for Romaine as an "avalanche" that "quite overwhelmed our organization." Judging from the ballots submitted for the Lubin star, the magazine declared that "Romaine Fielding is as popular in Europe as he is in America."²⁷ Months later the magazine stated, as final summation to the event, "One thing is certain, Romaine Fielding has won a decisive victory."²⁸

Albuquerque was ecstatic! America's most popular actor appeared to be ready to relocate his troupe within the limits of Bernalillo County. But this was not to be. Fielding left Albuquerque, drove northeast towards Las Vegas, then headed back to Silver City and announced that his new headquarters would be established in the Meadow City, Las Vegas, New Mexico. He had decided to travel to San Miguel County after receiving two letters from Las Vegas. The first came from Simon Bachrach and the second from the Las Vegas Commercial Club. Bachrach's letter had described the scenic conditions of Meadow City so favorably that Romaine decided to have a look for himself. He told Mayor Taupert of Las Vegas that "As soon as I had reached the high point of the scenic highway I had settled my plans for settling in any other place in New Mexico. Your city is great. I like the people and in fact everything is fine, bully!"²⁹

Although he was soon to be leaving Silver City for another New Mexican town, Silver City newspapers continued to praise the film maker. Among the accolades thrown his way was this analysis of the man and his art:

He has been able to get upon the moving picture screen the real spirit of the west. His dramas are not only thrilling representations of western life, but they go to the very heart of things; they get the atmosphere of lives spent in the vast expanses of the world. Therein lies the genius of the man. He understands the real difference between the west and the east.³⁰

Just before departing for Las Vegas, Fielding was interviewed by a representative of the *Silver City Enterprise*. Romaine told the journalist: "I know and like the people of the southwest, they are my kind. I understand them, they understand me. We work together beautifully, and I get better results here than any other place in the country." The reporter then expressed the hope that Romaine would return in the future. To which he replied, "I expect to work in the southwest for the next ten years and during that time will find occasion to bring my company to Silver City often, for mining pictures."⁸¹ Unfortunately, this was not to be the case, as Fielding left the Lubin Company less than thirty months later to form his own short-lived Cactus Film Company. He never again made movies in or visited Silver City.

In terms of Fielding's overall career, the filming in Silver City was a continuation of his dedication to realism, which had begun a year earlier when he directed his first photoplay. Winning the most popular player award confirmed his position among his cinematic contemporaries and allowed him the artistic freedom to become more involved in producing pictures with pro-Mexican and prolabor themes. Isolated in the distant Southwest, Romaine Fielding continued to give American and European audiences what they wanted—physical and mental realism.

NOTES

1. *Albuquerque Morning Journal*, June 4, 1912.
2. Romaine and Robert had the same father, Chester Blandin. Romaine was born William Grant Blandin, but adopted Romaine Fielding as his stage name. Robert at this time went by the surname of Fielding because of Romaine's popularity. Robert, for various reasons, used many surnames throughout his lifetime. Among them were Allen, Burdette, Harlow, Blandon, and Fielding.
3. "Lubin Picture Company Here in Ten Days," *Silver City Independent*, April 22, 1913.
4. "Picture Company Manager Visits Silver City," *Silver City Independent*, May 13, 1913.

5. "Lubin Picture Company Here Wednesday," *Silver City Enterprise*, May 23, 1913.
6. "Lubin Picture Company Now Located Here," *Silver City Independent*, May 27, 1913.
7. Lehn Engelhart, interview by Phillip St. George Cooke (New Mexico Film Historian), Albuquerque, New Mexico, Feb. 11, 1970.
8. "Making Moving Pictures," *Silver City Independent*, June 3, 1913.
9. Henry Schadel, interview, Silver City, New Mexico, Jan. 9, 1976.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Engelhart, interview, Albuquerque, New Mexico, July 24, 1975.
12. *Ibid.*; Mrs. Henry Schadel to writer, June 17, 1975.
13. As a result of the extensive research by Romaine Fielding, Jr., into his father's background, he has clearly established his father's birthplace and date as Riceville, Iowa, May 22, 1868.
14. *Moving Picture News* 8 (Sept. 1913): 19.
15. Engelhart, interview, Albuquerque, New Mexico, Feb. 11, 1970.
16. "Lubin Stock Company Enact Drama Sunday," *Silver City Enterprise*, June 13, 1913.
17. *Moving Picture News* 8: 19.
18. "Everlastingly at It," *Silver City Independent*, June 17, 1913.
19. "Twenty-five Tons of Dynamite Discharged in Blast at Santa Rita," *Silver City Independent*, June 27, 1913.
20. Engelhart, interview, Silver City, New Mexico, Jan. 9, 1976.
21. Engelhart, interview, Albuquerque, New Mexico, Feb. 11, 1970.
22. *The New York Dramatic Mirror*, Oct. 1, 1913, p. 32.
23. "Bloody Battles," *Silver City Independent*, July 15, 1913.
24. "Fielding Popularity Contest," *Silver City Enterprise*, July 25, 1913.
25. "Romaine Fielding Most Popular in 'Movie' World," *Albuquerque Morning Journal*, July 27, 1913.
26. *Motion Picture Story Magazine*, Oct. 1913, p. 109.
27. *Motion Picture Story Magazine*, Aug. 1913, p. 128.
28. *Motion Picture Story Magazine*, Sept. 1913, p. 117.
29. "Motion Picture Company is on the Ground," *Las Vegas Daily Optic*, Aug. 8, 1913.
30. "Romaine Fielding Wins Popularity Contest," *Silver City Independent*, July 29, 1913.
31. "Lubin Stock Company to Leave for Las Vegas Next Week," *Silver City Enterprise*, Aug. 1, 1913.