

THE IRON HORSE

USA 133 mins 1924 Cert PG

Director: John Ford
Producer: William Fox
Screenplay: John Russell & Charles Kenton
Director of Photography: George Schneiderman
Music: John Lanchbery (new score)
Titles: Charles Darnton

Cast:

George O'Brien [Dave Brandon], Madge Bellamy [Miriam Marsh], Charles Edward Bull [Abraham Lincoln], Cyril Chadwick [Peter Jesson], Will Walling (William Walling) [Thomas Marsh], Francis Powers [Sergeant Slattery], J. Farrell MacDonald [Corporal Casey], James Welch [Private Mackay], George Wagner [Colonel William F. Cody], Fred Kohler (Sr.) [Bauman], James Marcus [Judge Haller], Gladys Hulette [Ruby]; Walter Rogers [General Dodge], John Padjan [Wild Bill Hickok], Clark Gable had a bit role.



Born Sean Aloysius O'Feeney on 1st February 1894 in Maine, he was the 13th and youngest child of Irish immigrants. At the age of nineteen he abandoned University, and joined his elder brother Francis among the pioneer film community of the still-obscure Californian village of Hollywood. Francis had changed his name to Ford, and Sean did the same, calling himself first Jack Ford and then, as he became established as a director within a community becoming steadily more ordered and more respectable, he took the name John Ford in 1923.

After making mainly 2 and 3 reels, Fox Film studios turned to the 30 year old John Ford to film their response to Paramount's *The Covered Wagon*, *The Iron Horse* was John Ford's 50th film and remains his most celebrated of the silent era.

Its theme of enterprise and achievement, its open-air locations and setting in a vigorous and pioneering past proved just the subject to stimulate the young director's talent. The sheer scale of the film surpassed all other Westerns of the silent era (it ran on eleven reels), and established Ford as one of the leading directors in the industry.



The main story of *The Iron Horse* (1924) involves the building of a transcontinental railroad and culminates in a re-enactment of the famous union of the Union Pacific and Central Pacific railways at Promontory Point, Utah in 1869. However, *The Iron Horse* also involves a cattle drive, an Indian attack, a saloon brawl, and the Pony Express. In addition, Wild Bill Hickok, Buffalo Bill, and Abe Lincoln make appearances. The basic situation is filled with suspense as the railroad workers hammer spikes into rails and lay down the iron rails, struggling to be the first to complete their stretch of railroad tracks.

Ford had an eye for historical detail in the making of the film, which was made on location in the Sierra Nevada, and included herds of 10,000 cattle and 1,300 buffalo. The Old West was recreated off camera as well; the film was made in subzero Nevada in January of 1924., and a good-sized town was built in order to support the movie's huge cast and crew (over 6,000 people altogether). A circus train of 56 coaches was required to transport the production to the site. This was the largest movement of people and equipment for an on-location project from Hollywood.

The conditions that greeted them were authentically primitive. It was so cold that the extras quickly began sleeping in their costumes. Finding the train to be flea ridden, they moved into the sets and began living exactly as the characters they were portraying. The female extras especially suffered from the rugged conditions. A frontier mindset seemed to take over many of the cast & crew; the circus tent, which doubled as both the movie saloon and the crew's commissary, eventually had to have the bottles removed from the tables to discourage the many fights which kept breaking out.

Ford used 35 Chinese men as extras in the film, noteworthy because they had all actually worked on the old railroad some fifty years earlier.

Furthermore he got hold of the original locomotives, the Jupiter and the 116, that appear meeting head to head in Andrew Russell's famous photograph of the joining of the tracks at Promontory Point, Utah. Ford re-creates the scene with the real trains, with his cast posing around just like the workers in the Russell photograph.

(However according to at least one website run by a rail fan "Look for the big error, the U.P loco in the film is shown as number 116 opposite Jupiter, the title caption card also claims this, but checking all historical details I find repeated reference to the U.P loco as being numbered 119!")



The resulting movie is one of the great silent epics. However, the drama isn't overshadowed by the weight of the movie's historical importance. In *The Hollywood Western*, William K. Everson wrote, "*The Iron Horse* is big and sprawling, but unlike so many historical super Westerns ... it doesn't allow itself to slow down into stiff sprawling tableaux."

In common with the practice of the time, scenes in the film were shot multiple times and/or with two (or more) cameras. One negative was assembled in California for the home market, with another assembled in England for its market. There are some striking differences...

Ford's camera is significantly closer in the US version, giving its audience more intimacy. For example horses rushing by have a more visceral impact. One scene involving the hero escaping Indians is shown in a long shot on the UK version, whereas the US version each moment is closer to filling the frame. A grave scene is in long shot entirely in the UK; in the US print the same scene is in full shot, cutting to the long shot for the fade out.

Other anomalies see two character's names changing: Fred Kohler's villainous Bauman is named Deroux in the US, with James Welch's Private Mackay originally called Private Schultz.

However the most significant difference sees Ford's dedication to Abraham Lincoln, who granted permission to the Intercontinental Railroad project, changed in the UK film to "Dedicated to the honour and memory of George Stephenson, the Scottish engineer, and to the men of every nationality who have followed his footsteps since England led the way by opening the first railway in 1825"



To play the lead role, Ford chose the relatively unknown George O'Brien. Ford was stunned by the acting abilities of his new star and convinced Fox executives to put him under contract.

Throughout the latter days of silent films, O'Brien had great success as a leading man and starred in some of the best films of the era. Nicknamed "The Chest" for his strong, muscular build, he was also a popular physique model, as these 1920s Fox studio shots amply demonstrate!

(No star of today would agree to such photos, so their effect on 1920's audiences can only be imagined)



Critics of the day celebrated *The Iron Horse's* sense of drive and national achievement. A *New York Times* editorial declared, "this ambitious production dwelt trenchantly upon the indomitable energy, resourcefulness, and courage of those who spanned the continent with steel. Little does one realize in these days of modern comforts, the tirelessness of those Americans who shed their life's blood with a smile in the race to get first to the goal with rails and ties...an instructive and inspiring film, one which should make every American proud."