

A 1920 silent film shot in New London gets restored — and screened



A scene from “The Church with an Overshot Wheel” with New London’s Old Town Mill in the background. (Contributed)



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Back in the early 1900s, director Joseph Byron Totten established his own movie studio in Voluntown. One of his productions was an adaptation of an O. Henry short story — and a primary filming location was the Old Town Mill in New London.

The film, titled “The Church with an Overshot Wheel,” was one of 94 O. Henry stories produced in the early 1900s by the Vitagraph Co. of America. Vitagraph had a six-year contract with Doubleday and the heirs of William Sidney Porter — which is O. Henry’s real name — to make the adaptations.

Of those 94, only two remain.

Suzanne Harle, who is founder and executive director of the Stonington-based Green Planet Films, began a long search for “The Church with an Overshot Wheel” after she learned about it and its local connections in late 2018.

Having found it and funded its restoration, Harle will screen it on Oct. 22 at the Mystic Film Festival. It’s the only surviving silent film produced in this region by Totten.

At the center of “The Church with an Overshot Wheel,” which runs 21 minutes, is a grain miller who converts his mill (which is the Old Town Mill in the movie) into a church after losing his daughter. It stars Ethel Fleming – who later married her high school sweetheart Ray Kroc, who bought McDonalds and made it into a fast-food behemoth.

Harle says the city scenes in “The Church with an Overshot Wheel” were filmed in Westerly, and others were shot around Totten’s property in Voluntown.

Totten was an actor and playwright in New York City who got the movie bug and was inspired by the success of director D.W. Griffith. Totten wanted his own film studio, and when he found a farmhouse in Voluntown, he decided to set up his filmmaking enterprise there.

An interesting lead

Harle had just moved back to Stonington in 2018 after living in the San Francisco Bay area for 38 years, and she was at the farmers market at the Velvet Mill. Steven Slosberg — a former Day columnist who knew Harle was involved with film — approached her and said there was a great movie-related story at the Studio Farm table at the market. Dick and Dot Wingate, whose family owns Studio Farm, were manning the booth that day.

Dick Wingate explained that a film director, Totten, used to live at what is now their farmhouse.

“It was like, ‘Oh! Well, this sounds kind of interesting,’” Harle recalls.

Harle distributes nature and educational films to schools and libraries and wasn’t involved with silent films but says, “I like history, growing up here in Norwichtown, surrounded by the historic homes.”

She went to see the Wingates’ farmhouse. Dick Wingate showed her documents from and information about Totten, which inspired her to delve into research.

“I was thinking it would be so cool to find an old silent film for this area and show it. But it just took research and research. (There were) maybe 30 films that were made in this area, and I was just trying to find one,” she says.

That’s not as easy as it sounds; it’s estimated that 80 percent of all silent films have been lost.

Harle eventually found her way to the Rhode Island Historical Society, which had had a screening of “The Church with an Overshot Wheel.” But that version was a copy of a copy. An official there said they had an MP4 of a 16mm that was produced from the original film. The MP4 was made in the early days of digital, which means the technology was much less advanced than it is now. The suggestion was that Harle find the original, which would produce the best print.

Harle recalls thinking, “I have to get this!”

Discovery and restoration

While attending the DOC Film Festival in New York City, Harle saw a movie about preservation called “Film: The Living Record of Our Memory.” That led her to the production’s website, which provided a list of film databases and institutions. But she still couldn’t find “The Church with an Overshot Wheel.”

“I kept coming up empty-handed until I got into the Academy Film Archive — that’s in Los Angeles. (The organization that oversees the archive) puts on the Oscars. I went on that (site), and I go, ‘Oh, my God! There it is! It’s there! And it’s been digitized but not restored,’” she says.

While someone at the archives told her it was in pretty good shape, Harle still wanted it restored; “I want it to be black and white, I don’t want it (to have) a red tint.”

Green Planet Films was prepared to pay for the restoration, using grant money from CT Humanities. It ended up costing a lot less than Harle expected — \$2,800.

Music to her ears

A friend of Harle’s who is involved in silent films told her she should have a score composed for “The Church with an Overshot Wheel.” Silent films used to be accompanied in theaters by a pianist playing music.

Wanting to keep everything in Connecticut, Harle Googled Connecticut silent film composers and found Donald Sosin, who lives in Lakeville.

“He’s very prestigious in this realm,” she says.

Harle sent him a message, and within three minutes, he replied — while in a dentist’s waiting room — to say he’d do it.

“He made this beautiful score that goes with the film. It’s a perfect score. It’s just so exciting,” she says.

Sosin will accompany the screening at La Grua with a live piano performance of the score.

In the walls

Harle notes that the Wingates had opened the walls of the farmhouse and found about 100 documents in there from Totten.

Harle and co-producer Gabriella Radujok had the papers all scanned and went through each one. They included everything from fan mail to receipts to ads for Totten’s films. They are in the process of making a short documentary about finding the movie. Local filmmaker Chris Kepple is the cinematographer/editor.

As for the Oct. 22 screening, Harle says, “I have seen the film many times before, of course, but the highlight will be screening the film to a local audience with live musical accompaniment by Donald Sosin ... just as films were shown in those times. We are thrilled that audiences will once again be able to see a locally produced silent film — especially since it is the only one found by Joseph Byron Totten.”

IF YOU GO

What: Premiere of the newly restored “The Church with an Overshot Wheel”

As part of: Mystic Film Festival

When: 5:30 p.m. Oct. 22

Where: La Grua Center, 32 Water St., Stonington

Tickets: \$12

For tickets: mysticfilmfestival2022.eventive.org

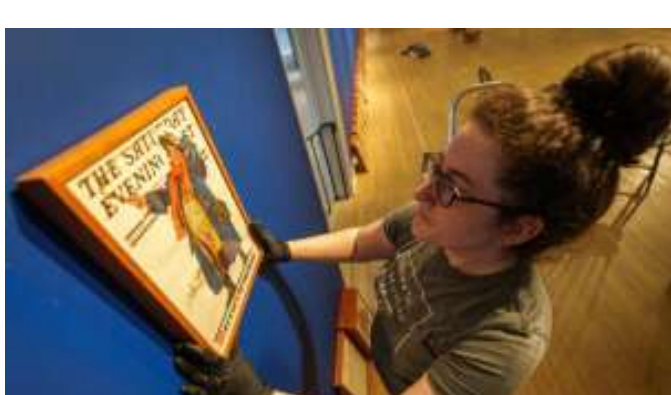
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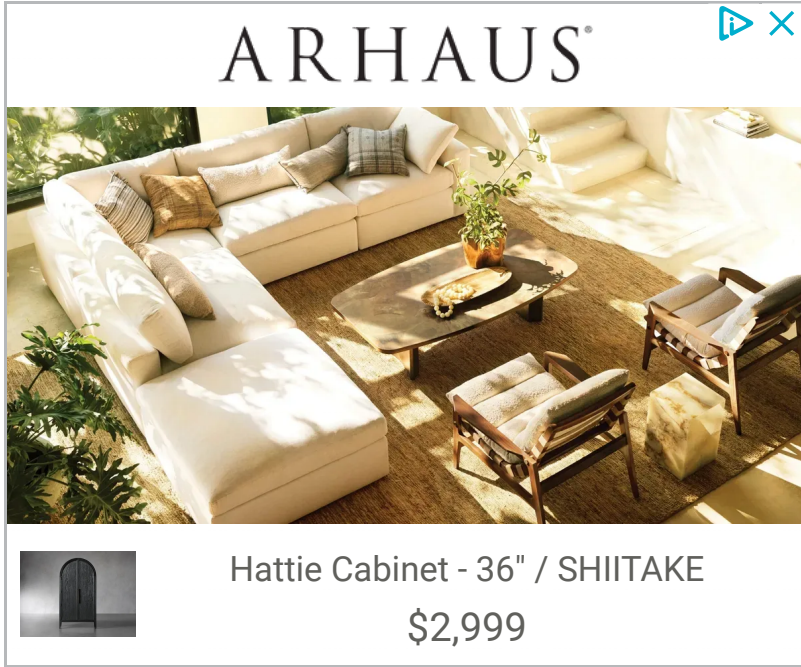
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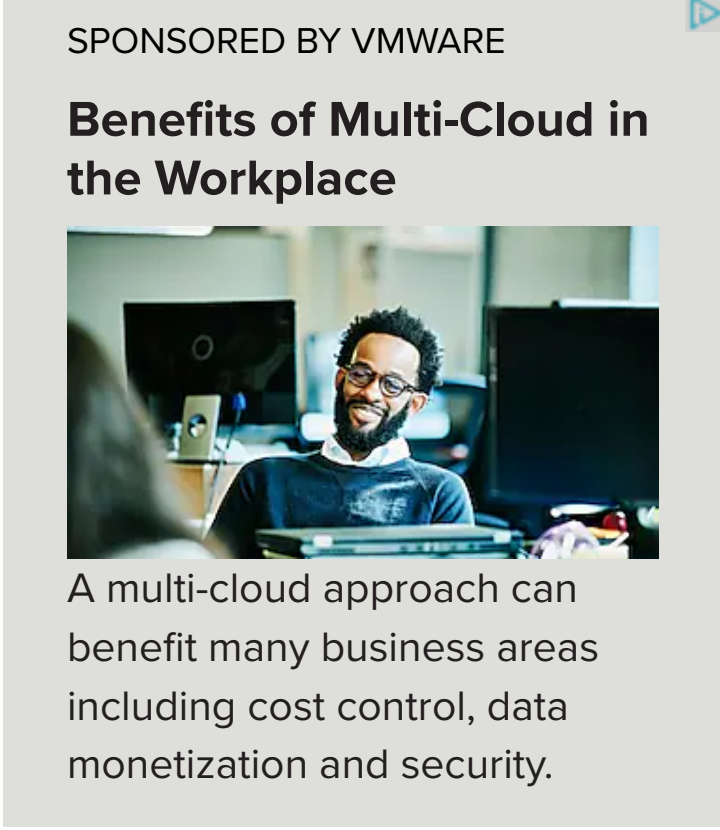
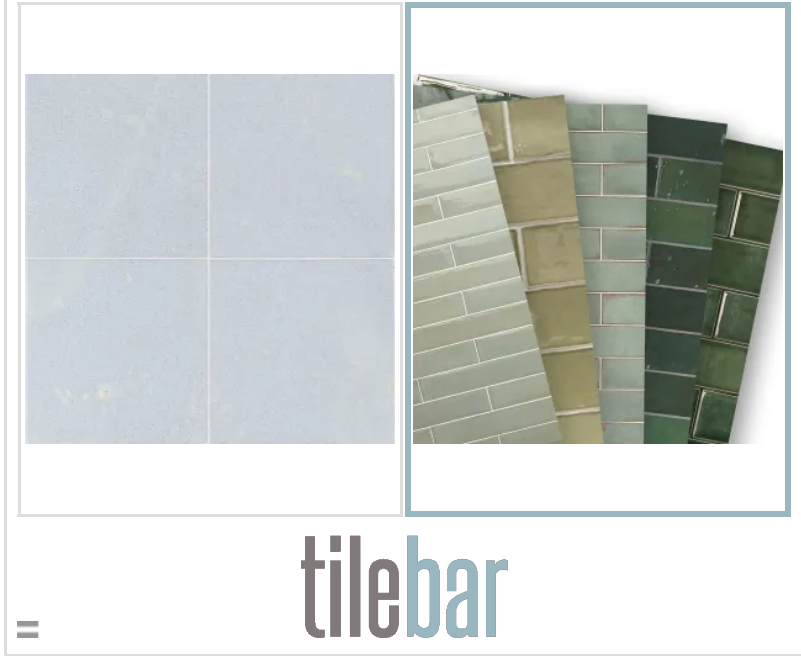
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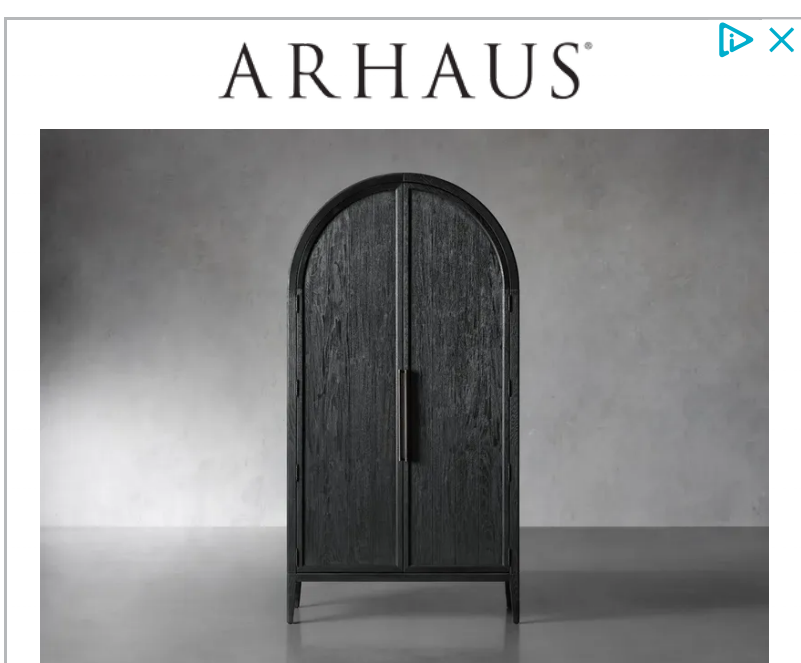
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