Silent films recovered: These new releases are oldest in a long time

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In a large mahogany box embellished with silk pockets and Cyrillic lettering, 10 lost pieces of America's cultural heritage recently landed in Culpeper, Va. - thanks, in a roundabout way, to the Soviet Union and a bureaucratic penchant for filing.

The box, a gift from the Boris Yeltsin Presidential Library to the Library of Congress, contained digital copies of 10 silent films that had been thought to be lost to history. The titles, such as "Valley of the Giants," produced in 1919, and "The Call of the Canyon," produced in 1923, may seem unfamiliar, but the movies were made by some of the era's biggest names.

"We knew going back to the '60s and '70s that [the Russians] had American films, but no action was taken," said Patrick Loughney, chief of the Library of Congress facility in Culpeper where the movies are being stored. "These are important films by significant directors and actors. They are great discoveries."

The movies were delivered late last year through a Russian-American working group on library cooperation, and they represent the first installment in a cache of up to 194 early American films that will eventually be repatriated. There are classics by directors who include Cecil B. De Mille and Sam Wood and gems starring such actors as Mary Pickford.
and Sessue Hayakawa.

Exactly how Russia ended up being the sole proprietor of precious American films is something of an accident of history.

More than 80 percent of American movies made in the silent era, which ran from about 1894 to 1929, no longer exist. The silver nitrate stock on which they were recorded decomposes unless stored properly, and Americans at the time didn't value film preservation. In many cases, the only reason archivists know certain movies existed is because the titles were dutifully copyrighted.

The Soviets, however, were more diligent.

Between 1913 and 1941, about 1,300 American films were distributed in Russia, which became the Soviet Union after the 1917 revolution. While the Russians and Soviets did not appreciate all that they received - many of the films included warnings that they depicted a "moral and social situation" that was "reprehensible" - they were relatively good at making sure that what they had was kept in good condition in a state film archive.

"When you read the titles of these films and see what they are about, you get the impression they were created not in the last century - 100 years ago - but only yesterday in Hollywood," said Vladimir I. Kozhin, head of the Russian presidential property department, speaking at a hand-over ceremony for the movies last October. "The films are all about general human values. The films are about that which is eternal."

One of the films is "You're Fired," a 1919 full-length movie directed by James Cruze and starring Wallace Reid and Wanda Hawley. The movie is about a wealthy ne'er-do-well who has to prove he can hold down a job to win the approval of his girlfriend's father.

Not the most startlingly original storyline, but a wonder merely because it survived.

"Some of the shots are so sharp," said John Carter, a film restoration technician at the Library of Congress, running a segment of the film. "This is amazingly clean. The Russians did a lot of work before copies were made."

The movies are being stored at the Packard Campus for Audio-Visual Conservation in Culpeper, and filmmakers may get a chance to see them at the campus's theater, an exquisite copy of a 1920s Los Angeles cinema that is open to the public free of charge.

The facility, completed in 2007, is a 415,000-square-foot complex that incorporates a huge blast-proof bunker originally designed to keep up to 100 Federal Reserve employees, and billions in coin and currency, safe from Soviet nuclear attack.

Now the Cold War complex is a cold-storage site preserving the reels of old Hollywood for time immemorial, or at least the next several hundred years. The bunker has 128 vaults containing 140 million feet of nitrate stock, part of the largest collection of film, audio and television material in the world. And the Russian gift is a sparkling addition, librarians said.

The Russians are keeping the original reels but are making digital copies of the movies.
the Americans want.

"The library is committed to reclaiming America's cinematic patrimony," said Librarian of Congress James Billington, who thanked the Russians for "making this cultural recovery effort possible."

The Library of Congress has presented the Boris Yeltsin Presidential Library with a list of Russian films in its possession, including rare documentary footage from the 1920s and 1930s. Loughney said the Russian library was also interested in film of major Russian cultural figures who fled the Soviet Union, such as the dancer Mikhail Baryshnikov.

Film librarians in Culpeper have begun the work of restoring the movies found in Russia. Each of the returned films was spliced with Russian inter-titles - the boards that appeared during silent movies to show a piece of dialogue or explain a scene.

Library conservationists will attempt to find the original text. If it can't be found, the boards will be translated into English to re-create something close to the original wording.

Loughney said lost films continue to surface in the most unusual places. A 1927 John Ford film, "Upstream," was recently found in New Zealand, he noted.

"There are potentially hundreds of films out there," Loughney said. "We hear rumors of things in China."
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