

Historic San Francisco Film Emerges After 95 years

Posted By: [Thomas Gladysz](#)

It is a short film with a long history.

On January 21, the [Niles Essanay Silent Film Museum](#) in Fremont will show *Twin Peaks Tunnel*, a short film made in San Francisco nearly a century ago. Few alive today have seen this rare cinematic time capsule which depicts a key moment in the development of The City. Saturday's screening marks the world premiere of a recently completed restoration of the historic film, which has not been publicly screened in 95 years.

In 2009, a worn copy of *Twin Peaks Tunnel* was one of 57 films chosen for preservation by the National Film Preservation Foundation. The San Francisco-based group helps preserve the nation's motion picture heritage, including endangered films from the silent era.



Frames from *Twin Peaks Tunnel*

Three years in the making, and shot in the years after the great earthquake and fire which leveled The City, *Twin Peaks Tunnel* was intended to promote the development of Western portions of San Francisco. An original copy of the 1917 film, now in the possession of the Niles film museum, is described by preservationists as an “unique historical and cultural artifact.”

The two preservationists who won a grant to restore the short film are David Kiehn and Robert Byrne.

Kiehn, one of the founders of the Niles Essanay Silent Film Museum, [made news](#) in 2010 – including an appearance on *60 Minutes* – when he determined that another historic film, the well known *A Trip Down Market Street*, had not been shot in 1905 as had long been believed – but in 1906, just four days before the great earthquake and fire. Kiehn pinned down the date through a combination of historical research and an examination of little noticed details in the film.

Byrne is an East Bay film preservationist and President of the Board of Directors of the [San Francisco Silent Film Festival](#). Byrne is also the author of [Starts Thursday!](#), a blog which documents the art and history of motion picture coming attraction slides.

According to Byrne, the value of *Twin Peaks Tunnel* lies not only in its rarity, but also in the historical detail contained within its moving images. “This film is an amazing time capsule of Bay Area history, and we’re thrilled at the prospect of returning it to the screen.”

Twin Peaks Tunnel was shot by the Pathescope film company for a local real estate firm. It documents construction of what was then claimed to be the longest municipal tunnel in the world. The film includes footage of the construction of the tunnel and the clearing of Sutro Forest, as well as development of the West Portal, St. Francis Wood, and Westwood Park neighborhoods. City officials, engineers, workers and ordinary citizens are also seen in the film.

Various civic and business concerns promoted the tunnel, and work on the project received considerable coverage in local newspapers. One article from the time in the *San Francisco Chronicle* even referenced the film, then still a work in progress. “The completed film will comprise what realty men believe to be one of the most comprehensive moving pictures of civic development ever flashed on the screen.”



A screen capture from *Twin Peaks Tunnel*

Not all, however, went smoothly. There were delays and cost over runs connected with the project. And, three workers died after an explosion rocked the tunnel in 1917. Once completed, the opening of the *Twin Peaks Tunnel* in February of 1918 was big news. And thousands turned out for the official ceremonies. [John C. Ralston’s recently published *This Date in San Francisco* details the events of February 3, 1918 - the day San Francisco Mayor Sunny Jim Rolph drove the first streetcar through the tunnel. Rolph was a force behind the development of much of San Francisco’s transportation system in the early years of the 20th century.]

Today, *Twin Peaks Tunnel* is considered a “sponsored film.” Akin to industrial films and even the television commercial of today, such films were made for organizations and businesses in order to promote a cause or product. The better sponsored films, and the ones with widespread appeal, sometimes even enjoyed public exhibition.

That was the case with *Twin Peaks Tunnel*, according to Kiehn. His research has uncovered the film was produced for the Baldwin and Howell Real Estate Company, located on Kearny Street in San Francisco. Newspaper advertisements also indicate that the film was first shown on October 13, 1917 – most likely in a San Francisco storefront. It was popular enough to be continuously screened for weeks thereafter. The film’s extended run was unusual for the time, as most motion pictures shown in theaters ran for just a few days or a week, seldom longer. It’s thought *Twin Peaks Tunnel* has not been seen since. “Due to its now obsolete 28mm format, it was probably seldom, if ever, screened after its initial exhibition period,” Byrne stated.



Vintage newspaper advertisement

In 2009, an original 28mm print of *Twin Peaks Tunnel* was donated by a private collector to the Niles Essanay Silent Film Museum. Byrne said that the Baldwin and Howell markings on its box and packing material associated with the print indicate that the copy the museum received was the same print originally shown in San Francisco. Examination of the print supports this conclusion, Kiehn said, since their print features original splices between individual shots as well as between the film's inter-titles.

A fair amount of work was done to restore the film. The print had yellowing, some splices needed repair, and there was dirt and scratching. Fortunately, no chemical decomposition had taken place, and the film's sprockets were in generally good condition. *Twin Peaks Tunnel* has an approximate length of 1,087 feet, with a running time of about 19 minutes.

Because of its obsolete format, and due to the fragility of the original stock (which is now in the Niles film vault), the 28mm film was transferred to 35mm. And now that this phase of their project is complete, both Kiehn and Byrne are excited to see it on the big screen. Byrne stated "The film's premiere will be as eye opening for us as it will be for the audience."

The [National Film Preservation Foundation](#) preservation grant awarded the local film preservationists provides support to create a film preservation master and two access copies of each work. Films saved through the NFPF programs are made available for on-site research and are seen widely through screenings, exhibits, DVDs, television broadcasts, and the internet. According to Kiehn, that's the plan for *Twin Peaks Tunnel*. After its debut in Niles, the film will be made available to a worldwide audience through the [Internet Archive](#). That website is also home to the Prelinger Archives, which houses a large collection of similar sponsored films. There, *Twin Peaks Tunnel* will join related footage of the opening of the tunnel shot in 1918.

Also on the January 21 bill are a feature and two other short films. On Saturday, the Niles Essanay Silent Film Museum celebrates seven years of showing films with a screening of *The Garden of Eden* (1928, Feature Productions), starring Corinne Griffith, Louise Dresser, and Lowell Sherman. This witty romantic comedy, which follows the adventures of a beautiful singer, was directed by Lewis Milestone. The feature will be preceded by *The Palace of Arabian Nights* (1905, Star Films) by Hugo star Georges Méliès, *The Lucky Dog* (1921, Amalgamated Producing) with Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy, and the newly restored *Twin Peaks Tunnel*. Kiehn will be on hand to introduce. Future showings of *Twin Peaks Tunnel* are planned for February and June.

Thomas Gladysz is a Bay Area arts journalist and early film buff. In 1995, he founded the [Louise Brooks Society](#), an internet-based archive and international fan club devoted to the silent film star. Gladysz has

contributed to books, organized exhibits, appeared on television and radio, and introduced the actress's films around the world.

<http://blog.sfgate.com/tgladysz/2012/01/19/historic-san-francisco-film-emerges-after-95-years/>