Civic pageantry and public memory in the silent era commemorative film: *The Pony Express* at the Diamond Jubilee

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‘The Pony Express’ is one of the group of pictures we planned to make that would tell, in dramatic form, the absorbing story of this country’s growth. ‘The Covered Wagon’ told the story of the pioneers’ trek across the prairies. ‘The Pony Express’ will depict the hardships, the trials and the victories of the men who maintained communication with the outposts of civilization which those pioneers established in the Far West.

(Jesse Lasky, Paramount head of production, 1925)

[W. H. Fuller, chief counsel to the Federal Trade Commission, acknowledged] that under the public interest angle . . . pictures as a whole have been admitted to be a greater influence than the public schools upon the youth of the nation. The contrast was made, however, that the purpose of the schools was to build good citizens while pictures are shown for but one purpose – to build dividend.

(*Variety* story on the anti-trust proceedings, 1925)¹

Paramount’s historical Western, *The Pony Express* (1925), was one of a cycle of popular frontier epics released in the late silent era.² Capitalising on the tremendous success of Paramount’s *The Covered Wagon* (1923), several American producers released similar prestige features, including among others Fox’s *The Iron Horse* (1924), Paramount’s *The Vanishing American* (1925) and a Goldwyn production distributed by United Artists, *The Winning of Barbara Worth* (1926). Despite their popularity and central position in the studios’ production strategies during the mid-1920s, these movies remain underexamined in film studies literature.³ George Fenin and William Everson, for example, argue that *The Pony Express* was ‘ignored by the public’, achieving neither the huge box office returns nor the long-term impact of *The Covered Wagon*. Yet the film was considered one of 1925’s top moneymakers, and it also made the ‘Ten Best’

list in many trade journals as well as periodicals and newspapers.⁴ Other historians have simply substantiated producers' own claims that such movies were the first to present the West 'authentically', or suggest that they presage the 1950s' superwesterns in their appeal to adult audiences.⁵ These accounts fail to explain why the Western subject became so broadly popular as well as culturally sanctioned during the postwar era, nor do they fully account for the industry's avid promotion of the prestige frontier feature during this time.

In this chapter, I will discuss how American producers (especially Paramount) cultivated this cycle with a view toward exploiting its public relations utility. By transforming the erstwhile materials of dime novels into 'authentic' documents of national culture, the studios sought to legitimise their market dominance and burgeoning social power. As such, I argue that these films should be reconceptualised as key commodities of the heritage industry – what I call 'commemorative films' – during the period of New Era corporatism. Paramount carefully developed and marketed these movies in order to construct a new position for itself as a 'legitimate' purveyor and even guardian of historical memory. Other studios followed suit, hoping to sanction their product as an authoritative voice in the arena of historical representation. As Roberta Pearson notes in the preceding chapter, this was a much-contested domain during the early decades of the twentieth century, when racial nativist movements sought to control popular expressions of the nation's primogeniture. Here I take a case-study approach to understanding this process of mediation and negotiation by focusing on the postwar industrial and cultural contexts of *The Pony Express*, which premiered at California's Diamond Jubilee in 1925.

Initiatives by social and civic elites during the early 1920s to regulate the dominant form of entertainment in American life reveal the extent to which movies had become a site of struggle over who could legitimately circulate types of knowledge (for example, historical knowledge) that were invested with cultural power. Postwar xenophobia, on the ascent in domestic policies, often helped fuel such elites' anxieties about the putative control of the studios by 'nonnatives'. Further, the Federal Trade Commission was investigating Paramount's alleged monopolistic practices, viewed as undemocratic and 'alien' to the American free-market system. In response, the producers (largely under Paramount's leadership) established the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America

(MPPDA). While its public mandate addressed concerns expressed by cultural custodians about transgressive movie content, the MPPDA primarily sought to deflect criticism of the industry by adopting the strategies of the emergent public relations trade.⁶ As Richard Maltby has persuasively argued, discourses on censorship during this period were less about eliminating offensive material than about struggles to delineate ‘the cultural function of entertainment and the possession of cultural power’.⁷ Always ready to adopt modern business practices, the studios realised that their skillful marketing apparatus needed to encompass not just product, but producer; in the New Era, successful companies had to be refigured as both ‘economically efficient and socially beneficial . . . the economic realities of the industrial society [threatened by the instability of market forces] encouraged the use of specialists and auxiliaries, including publicity men’. Wartime experiences had shown how useful trade associations could be in securing not just economic stability but something equally valuable, public approval and endorsement.⁸ Consequently, under the MPPDA’s aegis, Paramount proactively targeted an adaptation of a wholesome frontier story, *The Covered Wagon*, for prestige treatment. For an imperiled mass-culture industry, upgrading the noncontroversial ‘horse opera’ to the status of national epics – commemorations in episodes in the American frontier metanarrative – was an opportune solution. As *Exhibitors’ Trade Review* noted,

[T]he biggest thing about [*The Covered Wagon*] is not its entertainment value, though that factor is absolutely certain and points the way to extraordinary box-office success. The biggest of all the big things about ‘The Covered Wagon’ is its emphatic Americanism. The picture gives this industry a push forward because it shows that the American story can be just as dramatic . . . than 9/10 of all the other kinds of stories, American or foreign . . . every person in the country should see it. It’s a prosperity picture, and the prosperity will not consist wholly of financial return. The bigger prosperity it will bring . . . will be in the form of a good-will check upon the greatest of all banks – the Bank of Public Opinion.⁹

Hoping to cash in on that ‘good-will check’ again, Paramount tried a variant of the formula in *The Pony Express*, which visualised historical events while interpolating fictional characters whose actions affect the course of nationhood. The film depicts the machinations of California Senator McDougal Glen (Albert Hart) to control the

Pony Express circuit. His alliance with the pro-slavery movement as well as a drive for personal power leads to covert strategies to rend California from the Union. By delaying the swiftest transmission of the results of the Lincoln election in November by the express riders, Glen hopes to foment a secessionist movement in the state which would result in the creation of a Republic of California. His plans are foiled by Frisco Jack Weston (Ricardo Cortez), a gambler who secretly learns of Glen's plans and joins the express service to make sure the message gets through to 'save California for the Union'. Stationed in Julesburg, Colorado, with his friend 'Rhode Island Red' (Wallace Beery), Jack falls in love with Molly Jones (Betty Compson), daughter of local religious fanatic Abraham 'Ascension' Jones (Ernest Torrence). Julesburg's de facto mayor, Overland Express agent Jack Slade (George Bancroft), is conspiring with Glen to subvert the election results. Slade's henchman, Charlie Bent, is a 'half-breed' scout who leads Sioux raiding parties against covered wagon trains moving westward, later splitting the proceeds with his boss. But just as the Pony Express rider arrives with news of Lincoln's election, Bent tires of Slade's manipulation and conspires with the Sioux to destroy the town. Frisco Jack manages to get the election results through while the army arrives to quell the Sioux attack. Slade dismisses Weston from the Pony Express service on a technicality, and despite his actions to subvert its purposes, Slade is promoted by the company for 'his honesty, loyalty and bravery', getting public credit for Jack's efforts. As the nation prepares for the outbreak of war, Jack and Molly marry.¹⁰

Like its predecessors, *The Pony Express* places a white couple at the forefront of this historical trajectory. Jack Slade's privileging of self-interest and acquisition over national commitment takes on an explicitly racial cast in the film. His opportunistic collaboration with the Indians to raid passing covered wagon trains functions as a local analogue to his anti-nationalist alliance with Senator Glen. Although he treats his 'half-breed' henchman with disdain, his enlistment of Charlie Bent – whose name suggests his racial sympathies are also out of alignment – implies their kinship rather than their difference. It is thus Slade's inability to respect the hegemonic relationship between whites and Others which is associated with the erosion of national unification.

At the same time, Slade is linked with Jack Weston; not only do they share a first name, both are aligned with national figures (Glen and

Lincoln), both are pursuing Molly Jones, and both have a 'secret mission' regarding the Pony Express. This paired structure in the classical Hollywood narrative is common, of course, but the ending of *The Pony Express* is not. Slade's public promotion contrasts starkly with his unpatriotic actions in obstructing the course of national unification, whereas Jack's efforts to 'save California for the Union' go unrecognised. In this way, the film offers spectators an object lesson in the motive power of a single individual's national sentiment. If Slade was the historical beneficiary of Jack's actions, *The Pony Express* offered contemporary spectators a more laudable Western progenitor committed to sovereignty of nation rather than pragmatic racial accommodation and economic opportunism. And by obscuring the Pony Express' historical origin as a business venture in favour of its role in ensuring Lincoln's mandate, the narrative motivates the emergence of the transcontinental connection not in commercial, but rather national, interests.

It is clear that Paramount designed this narrative as another statement of its commitment to Americanism; such films could help the studio refigure its position within public discourse as a legitimate purveyor of historical memory, with less interest in building 'dividend' than in creating 'good citizens'. While the director of *The Covered Wagon*, James Cruze, had achieved a solid reputation as a deft visualiser of historical chronicle, Paramount understood the importance of linking authorship with those elites who had participated in the debates over movies' social power. Consequently, they hired Henry James Forman, a Harvard-educated fiction writer and literary critic who had worked at several upscale magazines and was editor of *Collier's* during the war. While Forman may have been brought on the project for his research skills, or his ability to build a compelling story around the historical familiar of a racing express rider, it is likely that his class position as well as his 'white' racial identity were most appealing to the studio. Further, Forman was no doubt willing to participate in the 'cinema uplift policy' championed by the MPPDA; he is probably best known as the author of the 1933 summary of the Payne Fund research, *Our Movie-Made Children*, which reveal his opinions about the responsibilities of the industry to maximise the tutorial possibilities of the moving image. *The Covered Wagon*, he claimed, 'thrill[ed] audiences with pride in the courage and fearlessness of their forefathers, in the irresistible conquest of obstacles'. Writing a sequel to this cinematic document

offered Forman an opportunity to educate viewers about the historical foundations of national growth as a means to garner civic commitment. In turn, Paramount's cultivation of this writer for *The Pony Express* story demonstrated their commitment to avoiding 'unsuitable' stories for the screen, often the subject of controversy within public discourse.¹¹

Repeating the strategies of their promotional campaign for *The Covered Wagon*, Paramount's publicity narratives about the preparation of *The Pony Express* focused on the accuracy of the story. One such narrative, published in *Sunset*, a magazine about California history, offered readers a detailed account of the production circumstances. This piece is an artefact of studio-generated public relations, epitomising Paramount's tactic to maximise the 'authenticity' of their new cycle of historical Westerns. Subtitled 'Old-Timers May View Pony Express Thriller Without Being Outraged by "Things That Ain't So"', it was written (or ghost-written) by H. C. Peterson, 'an authority on the old West' hired by Cruze to ensure the production's accuracy in costume and setting. In a sense, Peterson constitutes a de facto 'witness' for readers to the history being (re)created on screen, endorsing Forman's efforts to 'thrill audiences with the fearlessness of their forefathers'. The article asserts the film's firm foundation in the historical record by asking a rhetorical question that implies the cinema's emergent position as a purveyor of historical memory: 'Is the motion picture public yet ready to accept a technically correct historical film, one showing events as they actually happened, or must it show them as the movie fan would prefer they should have happened?' In the course of his research, *Sunset* reports, Forman had discovered that 'documentary evidence on the story of the Pony Express was notoriously scarce, that the books on the subject left much to be desired, and that practically every man connected with that early mail service was dead'. His work on behalf of the film project therefore continued, in a transcontinental journey taking him from the Library of Congress and archives in New York through repositories in St. Joseph, Missouri; Cheyenne, Wyoming; Denver, Colorado; and Reno, Nevada. Then officials of the Wells Fargo Bank heard of the project. 'For old times' sake' – the Wells Fargo express company had purchased the original pony express franchise – the bank directed Forman toward Sacramento's California collection, the 'largest and rarest collection of pony express data in existence, data which made it possible for him to complete his story'. Here the

publicity narrative paralleled the filmic one: culled from sources all over the country, Forman's story could only be completed when he 'arrived' in California, just as the pony express riders had to 'make it' to Sacramento to create a transcontinental link.¹²

Paramount's drive to authenticate *The Pony Express*' historical mise-en-scène optimally served the goals of national chronicle, providing movie patrons with knowledge not readily available in the traditional literature on the West. The story of the pony express 'with its fearless riders [provided] a most fascinating possibility for the motion picture', and moreover cinema could restore this forgotten story to the public.¹³ The documents of visual culture, especially motion pictures, challenged the hegemony of the written word as the authoritative repository of historical memory. In fact, in the case of *The Pony Express*, the usual process of fiction-to-film adaptation is reversed: Forman's historical novel, *The Pony Express: A Romance*, derived from his research for the film, was published after the movie's premiere.¹⁴ Demonstrating the studio's disavowal of any economic imperative behind the prestige frontier feature, this text helped reinforce Paramount's promotional claims that their films offered patrons a viewing experience constructed as socially and culturally remedial. At the conclusion of the book's prologue, Forman asserts the tutorial value of this nearly forgotten struggle for contemporary America, especially its youth: 'To the youngsters today, after the Great War, the business of slavery and anti-slavery, secession and unionism, things that tore a nation asunder, are dead words read in a history book . . . who now thinks of that epic of American growth, the overland pony express, that did so much in saving both California and the Union'.¹⁵

This feature also distinguishes *The Pony Express*, film and novel, from the contemporary tradition of commemorative films: both texts strongly express a link between 'saving' California and the preservation of the Union. As historian David Glassberg has commented, the state has often viewed as lacking the strong sense of the past found in other regions of the country, such as New England or the South. 'For much of American history', he notes, 'California has represented a land of new opportunities, a place where Americans move to escape the past, not to find it . . . the California landscape appears to have sprung up yesterday, the material expression of a people rootless, placeless, always in flux'.¹⁶ Since the 1920s' nativist movements commonly constructed the American historical legacy as

edifying, capable of producing better citizens, the documents of that legacy were given greater cultural power. Not surprisingly, therefore, Hollywood's film producers – and Paramount in particular – had much at stake in cultivating in cinematic form a shared public memory of California's participation in the foundations of the modern nation. Correspondingly, the studio designed *The Pony Express*, from earliest conception to its premiere event, to revise the American movie patron's historical amnesia about the state. My comparison of preproduction materials with the extant print of *The Pony Express* suggests that, for Paramount, serving the interests of industry public relations was likely more important than that of 'authentic' historical chronicle. Despite Forman's extensive research on the 'lost' Pony Express story, he shared screenplay credit with the head of Paramount's scenario department, Walter Woods. Moreover, director James Cruze – described in one contemporary biographical sketch as having 'a corporation and not an artistic conscience' – contributed significantly to the script.¹⁷ Perhaps the most salient result of this collaborative effort was the addition of many more explanatory intertitles detailing how the Pony Express 'did so much in saving both California and the Union' – that is, how Jack's selfless actions served Lincoln's national mandate – offering regular reinforcements of the film's didactic function to commemorate the state's history.

Ultimately, however, the success of *The Covered Wagon* had demonstrated to Paramount the importance of controlling the publicity narratives about their commemorative films, more so than the specific features of the story itself. Principal photography on *The Pony Express* only took about six weeks, during which time the studio's exploitation apparatus worked overtime to create national interest in the production. One key tactic involved broad press coverage of trips by political figures and Western writers to the location filming, 'such was the attraction of the historical production of a famous story'. California Senator Samuel Shortridge watched the activities on the four rebuilt blocks of the old capital, while 'old-timers' from Salt Lake, Denver, and Montana as well as writers and historians such as Arthur Chapman and Rufus Steele visited the Cheyenne location. Attempting to generate patron interest in the 'Far West' theme, Paramount invited 'forty-two editors of Utah and Colorado', who observed the production and reported on its progress for state papers.¹⁸

However, the most noteworthy event, covered in both the trades and the popular press, was Vice President Charles Dawes' July visit to 'Camp Cruze', who by lucky coincidence was en route to San Francisco for the Diamond Jubilee celebration. Cruze even offered the Vice President the chance to turn the crank 'on one of the most important scenes'. Having seen when the 'wild West was still wild' during his boyhood in western Nebraska, Dawes commented, he could offer his sanction of the film's authenticity: 'I think you are trying to do a tremendous thing in making pictorial history. Today you can still make pictures which show the old West in accurate form. Fifty or one hundred years from now it will be impossible to do it.' Just as there had been a special screening of *The Covered Wagon* for Warren Harding at the White House during the summer of 1923, Dawes suggested a similar event be scheduled for President Coolidge when *The Pony Express* was completed. By 1925, Paramount had succeeded in achieving a position as an 'authoritative' national chronicler to the extent that they could secure endorsement by a *civic paterfamilias* of their heritage films prior to release, rather than after distribution and critical response.¹⁹

Of greatest importance to Paramount's goal to invite consumption of *The Pony Express* as an historical document of the nation's reunification was the selection of the premiere site. The studio's carefully orchestrated debut of *The Covered Wagon* in New York had proven how the controlled exhibition event could have tremendous returns, both financially and from the 'Bank of Public Opinion'. My research suggests that in fact the studio may well have designed the production to optimally fit the premiere setting: California's Diamond Jubilee celebration of the state's 1850 admission to the Union. Held in San Francisco in early September, the Jubilee had been widely publicised across the state since early in the year, and the boosters of the event had contacted Los Angeles' Chamber of Commerce in April to elicit their support of 'California's Jubilee Year'. The state's larger theatres had already been partially enlisted in the effort; ushers wore new uniforms in Jubilee colours during the summer and fall of 1925, and beginning in August managers set up brief radio talks about the Jubilee before showings.²⁰ In a move than seems more than coincidental, Paramount had recently acquired the 1,400-seat Imperial theatre, the city's leading extended-run venue, as part of their purchase of the Rothchild chain.²¹ Debuting *The Pony Express* during the Diamond Jubilee would help the studio

build fruitful associations (both short and long-term) between cinematic text and historical pageantry, offering patrons a suitable commemorative document as well as evidence of their commitment to Americanism. At the same time, the cultural work performed by the film – a onetime ‘lowbrow’ product now refigured within its premiere setting as document of public memory – camouflaged the studio’s continuing acquisition of exhibition outlets as a means to secure market hegemony.

Held from 5–12 September 1925, California’s Diamond Jubilee was probably the most extravagant statewide celebration of the decade. 9 September was Admission Day, ‘a holiday originated by the Pioneer societies to commemorate the anniversary of California statehood . . . [and] the occasion for ever more elaborate celebrations’.²² Over one and a half million people attended the Jubilee, at a time when the total population of California was four million. Multiple commercial and civic interests determined its features, designed to surpass previous state centennials by imitating the scope and ambition of the world’s fairs and expositions. Important early supporters included San Francisco’s Down Town Association and prominent editors and publishers of San Francisco newspapers, especially the *Chronicle*. From its inception, the Jubilee was clearly conceived as a vehicle of state boosterism, ‘directed toward [making the Jubilee] the cynosure of the eyes, not only of California, but of the world’, reported the official commemorative monograph.²³ Like the earlier expositions, the Jubilee’s primary *raison d’être* was to chart a specific historical trajectory for broad public consumption via interpretive staging, made particularly pressing by growing concerns about the economic and social power of ‘non-natives’. The Jubilee commemorative monograph is dedicated to three hereditary organisations who had sponsored the festival’s pageantry: ‘the Society of California Pioneers, the Native Sons of the Golden West and the Native Daughters of the Golden West’.²⁴

The dissemination of ‘authentic’ historical episodes in the state’s past was considered an essential function of the exposition, both in terms of public commemoration and civic education. Its centrepiece was the Admission Day march, the preparation for which required ‘absolute authenticity in detail, with reasonable allowances for colorful presentation’.²⁵ With over fifty-five thousand marchers and one hundred floats, the parade depicted incidents across four centuries of settlement in California, beginning with the ‘legendary period’ and

the successive depiction of Indian, Spanish and Mexican cultures. But all of these eras were simply prelude to the greatness to come, the 'American period', during which time there arrived in California 'the brave, the dauntless, the men of great hope and vision, with strong arm and clear head, relying upon individual exertion and native ability to conquer all hardships and dangers and build a nation'. Correspondingly, floats depicting these hardships of the American period constituted about one-half of the entire parade.²⁶ According to historian John Bodnar, such a design was common in historical commemorations during the 1920s. The patriotic campaigns of World War One and 'Americanisation' drives greatly influenced the expression of ethnic ancestry during the 1920s, resulting in 'colourful' but depoliticised representations of music or costume that 'neatly fitted into the larger pageant of American history [which] told of an inevitable and painless transformation of diverse folk cultures into a unified American culture'.²⁷

One observer's firsthand account of the parade illustrates well the ideological function of the Admission Day parade. Writing for *The Outlook*, Hugh A. Studdert Kennedy describes his experience this way:

From far and near men and women had come with their wonderful moving tableaux, designed to show how man's inventive genius, courage, and patience had here found their typical American expression . . . in San Francisco and throughout the State in Diamond Jubilee week . . .

And so for one glorious week [the San Franciscan] spent himself in telling himself and his neighbors and all the world how great things the idea that is California, that is America, that is, in the last test, the ideal of Anglo-Saxon thought and hope, had done for him and his . . . In all this last western movement of our race, which began three centuries ago, no greater barrier to progress was ever interposed than that which lay between the East and West in the days of the covered wagon . . . Thousands died on those weary marches – died of hardships and toil, starvation and cold. Many of those who rode or walked in the parades through the city or looked on along the route could tell of fathers and mothers who had 'crossed the plains'.²⁸

The Jubilee committee's selection of the Native Sons and Daughters to sponsor the Admission Day parade, rather than one of the many nationally known directors of such pageantry at the time, demonstrates the extent to which nativist views inflected the forms

of mass-produced historical representation during the decade. As John Higham has shown, the 'Americanisation' initiatives had strong patrons in the hereditary societies, founded in large part upon hostility toward foreign cultures and anxieties about immigrant 'swamping'.²⁹ Correspondingly, during this time the Native Sons and Daughters were much concerned that 'the glories of California's heroic period might be submerged by traditions of other men and places unless some organisation existed to keep alive the historic memories and preserve the spirit of California'.³⁰ They actively elicited the government's assistance in maintaining racial hegemony by demanding it 'enforce restrictions which will not only prevent California from being swamped by an influx of ineligible aliens but will put an end to the constant friction which unavoidably arises when the White race clashes with races of other colors'. As David Glassberg argues, '[h]istorical space in California of the 1920s was . . . white space, echoing the increasingly strident nativism of the Native Sons of the Golden West'.³¹

It would be hard to imagine, therefore, a more apt choice for the premiere of *The Pony Express*, Paramount's commemorative document of California history. But rather than develop alliances with the Jubilee committee, or any of the pioneer or hereditary societies, instead the studio publicised its collaboration with Wells Fargo, the financial institution headquartered in San Francisco, in developing the pony express project. The bank had provided the filmmakers with historical information in the interests of 'authenticity'. Yet such patriotic interest cloaks the studio's more pragmatic motivations: 'there was a decidedly practical angle', *Moving Picture World* commented, 'to [Paramount's eliciting] the bank's cooperation as well as the moral effect of the interest of this still powerful institution'.³² Securing Wells Fargo's patronage helped the studio market *The Pony Express* as 'authentic' in its publicity narratives by co-opting folk knowledge about the bank's role in developing the West and its connection to the frontier past. In turn, the film operated as a kind of public service announcement for the bank. Ultimately, Paramount had the most to gain in marketing this cinematic commemorative text; it visualised for Jubilee spectators the Pony Express' contribution to national unification, thus sanctioning California's subsequent rise as a commercial power in the present and, by extension, the film industry's new role as a de facto 'guardian' of historical memory.

Cover of *San Francisco Chronicle Sunday Magazine*, 6 September 1925

Working with Wells Fargo, Paramount developed an array of exploitation tactics for circulating *The Pony Express* under the Jubilee banner. Much of the publicity foregrounded the figure of the dedicated pony express rider as an emblematic California character, like the gold miner or the stalwart covered-wagon pioneer, whose efforts in the region had national import. The bank 'planted stories in the financial publications' while ensuring that the studio secured extra space in the local newspapers. The *Chronicle's* Sunday Magazine, entirely devoted to Jubilee festivities, featured on its cover a pony express rider, just about to pull up in front of the Wells Fargo & Co. office (see illustration above). Throughout September, the bank used similar iconography in its display ads, foregrounding accounts of Wells Fargo's commercial heritage framed in explicitly nationalist terms: 'Saint Joe to Sacramento – over plains and mountains, through storms, blizzards and hostile Indian country – to the Union's newest state from her sisters 2000 miles away rode the Pony Express, linking California to civilization'. Early in the Admission Day parade, Wells Fargo arranged for a rider to race madly all the way from Embarcadero to Market Street to hand-deliver a letter to Vice President Dawes on the reviewing stand. As the 'surviving unit' of the express company, Wells Fargo assumed control over the commodification of its historical properties, recirculating the 'relics' used in the location shoot for use in thirty Bay area store windows. The bank also built a 'reproduction of a frontier town in the days of the pony express' for the front of the Imperial theatre. The connections between *The Pony Express* and the Jubilee were made most concrete when, under the auspices of Wells Fargo, the film was named 'the official Diamond Jubilee picture' after a preview by the Jubilee committee.³³

As if to inaugurate the upcoming festivities, the studio arranged a gala premiere on the evening of 4 September, just before Jubilee week. Paramount carefully selected the Imperial for the opening, considered the city's finest extended-run theatre. Most importantly, the theatre was located at Market between 6th and 7th Streets, guaranteeing maximum marquee exposure since this spot was closest to the reviewing stand in front of the Civic Centre and City Hall, the heart of the festivities.³⁴ The premiere itself was equally orchestrated: 'society leaders, city officials, and prominent citizens in finance' and publishing were given gratis invitations to an event billed as a 'Hollywood-style' opening, complete with klieg lights,

throng of movie fans, and red-carpet arrivals of stars. Descriptions of that evening's program offer evidence of *The Pony Express's* niche as both historic document and public relations vehicle for the studio. Rather than the usual atmospheric prologue, a featurette of scenes taken during the making of the film preceded the feature, with Senator Samuel Shortridge testifying to the movie's veracity. The premiere screening went very well, *Variety* later reported, noting that the Imperial had its 'best week in eight months'. Interest in the film was so high that additional screenings were scheduled, an almost predictable result of the studio's meticulous efforts to constantly connect the movie with Jubilee themes.³⁵

If the historical pageantry of the Jubilee maximised the appeal of Paramount's latest epic for movie patrons, it is also clear that the industry's commodification of frontier imagery in the epics provided attendees with similarly powerful symbols of popular memory. During the festivities, earlier methods of staging the *mise-en-scène* of historical commemoration (the pageant, the parade, the tableaux) negotiated a hegemonic alliance with the competing representational form of the modern era, motion pictures. Witness the Jubilee's Covered Wagon Babies Revue, a string of automobiles that carried forty-five women and men who had been born in or under a covered wagon.³⁶ The Covered Wagon Babies were escorted to a screening at the Imperial, where decorated boxes in the theatre awaited them. Such an event parallels Paramount's previous efforts to substantiate the authenticity of their frontier epics by publicising the 'real-life' analogues to the fictional characters portrayed, in an effort to establish the film's provenance in the experiences of local residents. The *Chronicle* speculated that 'to younger San Francisco the "covered wagon babies" in particular provoked the thought that here were living, breathing men and women whose brave forebears spanned the continent in prairie schooners to take up their lives in the Golden State'.³⁷ As such, *The Pony Express's* position with respect to the Jubilee's pageantry was carefully mediated so that it served the interests of the hereditary societies in the 1920s: The cultural expressions of historical memory should be both nativist and tutorial. In turn, Paramount exploited the exhibition setting to challenge the social meanings attached to attending 'a Western', previously considered a lowbrow, mass-produced form. Spectatorship was transformed into an educational experience, consumption refigured as a patriotic, even civic duty. In the course of Jubilee events, the setting of the

Imperial itself became a preeminently 'historical space', and a 'white space' as well.

The critical response to *The Pony Express* in San Francisco city papers no doubt met the studio's expectations. Typical is George Warren's comment in the *Chronicle* that the film was a 'worthy successor' to *The Covered Wagon*, 'carry[ing] on splendidly the history of the planting of civilization in the Far West'. In the *Examiner*, Idwal Jones concurred while acknowledging the timeliness of the topic and the studio's strategy to elevate the 'lowbrow' product: "'The Pony Express' fans the local-patriotic mood of these days. It looks as if James Cruze is starting out to screen the "Taming of the West". The first installment was "The Covered Wagon". This is the second, and . . . it bears up excellently [and] is more exciting'. Curran Swint of the *News* thought it a 'great picture historically, with true epic sweep against which is set a moving, thrilling, humorous and emotional story', and the *Call* and *Daily Herald* reviewers pointed similarly to the story's educational value: discerning patrons, they claimed, should not miss this 'truly constructive picture', a 'lesson in visualized history'.³⁸ Such notices in city papers further piqued Jubilee spectators' interest in the film, offering a more fully narrativised version of the static tableaux comprising the pageant-parade.

As the studio had anticipated, the reviews of the film in the New York papers were generally good. Although several writers thought the movie fell short of the exemplary *The Covered Wagon*, many articulated the studio's 'preferred' reading by foregrounding the text's authenticity and nativist value as well as commending the producers' contribution to 'elevating' the cinema. In his influential review in the *New York Times*, Mordaunt Hall commented that

[t]his pictorial document, which causes one's heart to throb with delight, is another chapter in American history which is bound, as was the case with 'The Covered Wagon' . . . to stir all audiences to a state of intense pride for the achievements of the men of yore . . . Motion picture producers come in for their share of blame for unworthy films, and it is only just that they should receive full marks when they make such a sterling story as 'The Pony Express', which incidentally was produced by the Famous Players-Lasky Corporation.³⁹

Other major city papers broadly assumed the film's merit, largely on the basis of the premiere's success, although Paramount's success in

disseminating its publicity narrative was also clear. A long article in the *World* described the origins and conditions of the production, quoting Wyoming Senator Warren's sanction of the film as 'an accurate picture of my own country and my own time' while situating his response in relation to public discourse about the 'authenticity' of frontier narratives. The writer also described Forman's archival research and the careful reconstructions of Old Sacramento and Julesburg.⁴⁰ As *The Pony Express* opened across the country in the fall and winter of 1925, reviewers in newspaper and mass-market periodicals responded in similar ways, and apparently movie audiences did as well.⁴¹ By this time, it would appear that the combination of Paramount, James Cruze, and 'historical Western' were becoming trade labels for 'painless history', offering movie patrons not just prestige entertainment but lessons in the foundation of contemporary national growth and development.

At least one reviewer, however, offered what might be described as a 'resisting' reading of *The Pony Express*, wryly noting that '[i]t is rumored that there are some people who will be antagonized by the men this photoplay intends to glorify, upon being presented with the information, via a subtitle, that "The riders of the pony express saved California for the Union". But such persons, of course, are under the suspicion of being unfriendly to that cultural capital, Hollywood'.⁴² This comment, albeit tongue-in-cheek, implies an awareness of how public discourse about that 'cultural capital' might be shaped by the specific projects the studios chose to cultivate. In the case of *The Pony Express*, Paramount clearly worked with the exploitation possibilities of the Jubilee historical pageant in mind. Such a selective distribution had multiple advantages: it was economically efficient, since the studio would not have to finance a marketing campaign but rather co-opt the Jubilee committee's months of advertising and promotion in California. Essentially, Paramount could reap all the benefits of the controlled exhibition setting while incurring little of the cost.

At the same time, the studio had complex motivations in marketing the epic Western cycle during the 1920s. The work of cultural historians like John Bodnar and David Glassberg can help film scholars understand not only why Paramount chose the Diamond Jubilee debut setting, but also the cultural origins of and economic contexts within which emergent New Era corporations like motion picture companies promoted 'authentic' historical memory in the guise of

popular film.⁴³ In *Remaking America*, a study of the relationship between national industries and historical commemoration during the twentieth century, Bodnar argues that such events were devised by 'a rising industrial elite' of entrepreneurs, business owners, professionals, and civic leaders during the late nineteenth century who sought to regulate the forms of public memory available for broad consumption as a means to legitimate economic ventures in the present.⁴⁴ Both Bodnar and Glassberg point to the 1876 American Centennial as a widely imitated template: politicians 'employed narratives of local community development alongside the religious rhetoric of nationalism to forge a united community of believers out of residents with diverse ethnic, class, and regional backgrounds'.⁴⁵ However, by the turn of the century, industrial and professional elites emerged as the boosters of such events. Accordingly, these festivals often charted the 'progress' of American capitalist enterprise. But in international fairs as well as smaller state centennials, organisers also fomented specific interpretations of the past as a key tactic to justify their economic achievements in the present. In particular, the first two decades of the century saw a proliferation of historical pageants throughout the country, where thousands of Americans enacted varieties of dramatic public rituals that presented, usually in tableaux style, chronicles of local and state historical development. Such pageantry combined the 'patriotic and religious themes of the historical oration, revised for an age of mass spectacle, with a growing interest in the past as a source of communal traditions that could offer emotional respite from the consequences of modern progress'.⁴⁶

Placed within these contexts, Paramount's selection of the Jubilee as the debut site for *The Pony Express* reflects the complexity of the industry's incentives to produce and disseminate documents of historical memory during the 1920s. Constructed as a chronicle of both California's ascendancy in the West and the nation's eventually-victorious struggle to reunify, the film offers in cinematic form pageantry's use of historical episodes to commemorate the legacies of the frontier past for a contemporary industrial society. But, as Bodnar has argued, forms of public memory always emerge discursively, within existing structures of social and cultural power that negotiate struggles for expression among multiple rivals.⁴⁷ This explains why Paramount chose to work with Wells Fargo, since the alliance would help deflect potential criticism by the hereditary

groups governing the pageant that the studio – most prominent within public discourse as controlled by ‘nonnatives’ – was an inappropriate, and possibly inauthentic source of historical knowledge. Further, as Paramount expanded during the late teens and early 1920s, acquiring theatre chains across the country and developing the distribution networks needed to keep them profitable, the studio sought to legitimise this coast-to-coast access by cloaking their product within pageantry’s rhetoric of national unity. Like the business and civic leaders of the corporate age who became involved ‘in the sponsorship and coordination of activities designed to shape and promulgate versions of the past for mass consumption’, Paramount’s cycle of epic frontier features helped ‘foster specific interpretation of powerful historical symbols’⁴⁸ – in this case, the artefacts of California historical memory – for those ‘under suspicion of being unfriendly to that cultural capital, Hollywood’. As such, *The Pony Express* was part of the studio’s long-term strategy to align itself with those industrial elites who produced and regulated public forms of historical memory as a means to sanction their pursuit of a national market, as well as garner prosocial rewards.

Notes

- 1 The quote by Lasky is from ‘Cruze’s Next for Paramount Will be “The Pony Express”’, *Moving Picture World* (4 April 1925), p. 484; Fuller’s comment appeared in ‘Line of Famous Defense in Government Hearing’, *Variety* (25 November 1925), 28.
- 2 At the time of *The Covered Wagon*’s release (early 1923), Paramount’s corporate name was Famous Players-Lasky. For simplicity’s sake, I will refer to the producer as ‘Paramount’, although the name was officially changed in mid-1925, when *The Pony Express* was in production.
- 3 One difficulty is that many of the epic Westerns produced during the 1920s are considered lost or exist only as incomplete versions, most notably *The Covered Wagon*. According to *Classic Film Collector*, ‘Only the re-edited versions of these films exist, for they were condensed by Kodascope many years ago and the original complete negatives disappeared’ (Spring 1976), 19. Contemporary reviews of *The Pony Express* indicate that the film ran about 110 minutes (ten reels), whereas the present version available from video vendors is a little over an hour long. Since in this chapter I am interested in a reception analysis which encompasses the institutional and economic dimensions of consumption, how the industry solicited and constructed

- patrons for its products, and an account of the exhibition as a social space, lack of access to a complete print does not substantially impact my argument.
- 4 G. N. Fenin and W. K. Everson, *The Western From Silents to the Seventies* (New York, Grossman, 1973), pp. 135–6; ‘Ten Best Pictures of 1925’, 1926 *Film Daily Yearbook*, pp. 417–25.
 - 5 See K. Brownlow, *The War, the West, and the Wilderness* (New York: Knopf, 1979), p. 223; R. Koszarski, *An Evening’s Entertainment: The Age of the Silent Feature Picture, 1915–1928* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), p. 248.
 - 6 For a detailed discussion of these issues, see chapter 1 of my dissertation, ‘The West Before the Cinema Invaded It: Famous Players-Lasky’s “Epic” Westerns, 1923–1925’ (University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1999).
 - 7 R. Maltby, ‘The Production Code and the Hays Office’, in T. Balio (ed.) *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 41.
 - 8 A. Raucher, *Public Relations and Business, 1900–1929* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1968), pp. 65–6.
 - 9 Editorial, ‘A Big Achievement’, *Exhibitors’ Trade Review* (31 March 1923), p. 878; see other trade editorials in *Moving Picture World* (24 March 1923), p. 401, ‘Some Inside Stuff’, *Film Daily* (20 May 1923), p. 2.
 - 10 Paramount selected the players for *The Pony Express* carefully. For example, casting Ricardo Cortez (formerly ‘Jacob Krantz’, born in Vienna) may well have been designed as a ‘concession’ to California’s Spanish heritage.
 - 11 See Forman obituary in the *New York Times* (4 January 1966), p. 27; entry in *Who’s Who in America* (Chicago: Marquis, 1939), p. 925; also Henry James Forman, *Our Movie-Made Children* (New York: MacMillan, 1933), pp. 2, 31, 53.
 - 12 H. C. Peterson, ‘Filming a Real “Western”: Old-Timers May View Pony Express Thriller Without Being Outraged by “Things That Ain’t So”’, *Sunset* (November 1925), pp. 37–9, 97–9.
 - 13 Peterson, ‘Filming a Real “Western”’, p. 38.
 - 14 H. J. Forman, *The Pony Express: A Romance* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1925). According to the Paramount script files for *The Pony Express* (Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Los Angeles) Forman was paid the substantial sum of \$33,500 for his work. In comparison, Emerson Hough received \$8,500 for the rights to *The Covered Wagon*. This indicates how valuable (in all senses of the word) the frontier-themed prestige picture had become to the studio.
 - 15 Forman, *The Pony Express*, pp. 9–10.

- 16 D. Glassberg, *Sense of History: The Place of the Past in American Life* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), pp. 168–9.
- 17 J. Tully, 'James Cruze', *Vanity Fair* (December 1927), p. 116.
- 18 'Vice-President Charles G. Dawes Watches James Cruze, Directing "The Pony Express"', *Moving Picture World* (15 August 1925), p. 751; 'Dawes Helps Direct Movie in Wyoming', *New York Times* (25 July 1925), p. 6; 'National Affairs', *Time* (3 August 1925), p. 7.
- 19 Dawes' reference to a screening at the White House also suggests at least the possibility of an informal arrangement between Paramount and MPPDA head Will Hays – a former member of the Harding cabinet and still active in national Republican politics – in regard to promoting *The Pony Express*. At Hays' behest, Warren Harding had engaged in similar activities for *The Covered Wagon* during 1923.
- 20 *California's Diamond Jubilee* (San Francisco: E.C. Brown, 1927), pp. 16, 18, 56.
- 21 'More for Famous', *Film Daily* (30 June 1925), p. 1.
- 22 Glassberg, *Sense of History*, p. 181.
- 23 *California's Diamond Jubilee*, p. 9.
- 24 *California's Diamond Jubilee*, p. 7.
- 25 *California's Diamond Jubilee*, pp. 19, 26.
- 26 *California's Diamond Jubilee*, pp. 24, 80.
- 27 J. Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 71.
- 28 H. A. Studdert Kennedy, 'California and Her Diamond Jubilee', *The Outlook* (23 September 1925), pp. 114–15.
- 29 J. Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860–1925*, 2nd edn (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992), pp. 236–7.
- 30 E. J. Lynch, 'Native Sons Vital Factor in State's Progress', *San Francisco Examiner* (5 September 1925), p. 9.
- 31 Lynch, 'Native Sons', p. 11; F. Cutler, 'The Order of Native Sons of the Golden West', *Official Program of the 1925 Diamond Jubilee*, p. 26 (located in California Historical Society's San Francisco ephemera collection, 'Admission Day – 1925'); Glassberg, *Sense of History*, p. 193.
- 32 "'Pony Express" Another Big Western Hit', *Variety* (9 September 1925), p. 23; 'Tied Pony Express to California Fete', *Moving Picture World* (10 October 1925), p. 478.
- 33 See, for example, the Wells Fargo ad in the *San Francisco Examiner* (5 September 1925), p. 2; for a description of the publicity tactics, see "'Pony Express" Has Great World Premiere in 'Frisco', *Moving Picture World* (26 September 1925), p. 346; 'Story of Old West Fits in With Jubilee', *San Francisco Chronicle* (4 September 1925), p. 13.

- 34 The parade route began at the Embarcadero and moved down Market Street, turning west on Fulton toward the City Hall/Civic Center quadrangle. The Imperial was located on Market at Jones, just before the curve onto Fulton.
- 35 See for example in the *San Francisco Examiner*, 'Formal Opening for "Express"' (1 September 1925), p. 15; "'Pony Express" Film to be Jubilee Feature' (4 September 1925), p. 5; 'Huge Crowd Sees Premiere of New Film' (5 September 1925), p. 3; I. Jones, 'Pony Express Proves to be Historical Melodrama' (5 September 1925), p. 14. In the *San Francisco Chronicle*, see G. Warren, "'Pony Express" Stirring, Appropriate Jubilee Feature, Imperial Stages Realistic Bit of the Old Wild West' (5 September 1925), p. 4; 'Imperial Enjoys Crowded Houses for New Film' (7 September 1925), p. 9; "'Pony Express" on Long Run' (11 September 1925), p. 13; "'Pony Express" Makes Big Hit' (12 September 1925), p. 9; 'Early Days of Stage Coach Story Told' (19 September 1925), p. 7. For the box office results for *The Pony Express*, see *Variety* (16 September–7 October 1925); Senator Shortridge's speech is excerpted in "'Pony Express" Has Great World Premiere in 'Frisco', *Moving Picture World* (26 September 1925), p. 346.
- 36 Both *The Covered Wagon* and *The Pony Express* had focused on the strategic significance of a wagon train's 'cargo' of infants. In the first film, an aged man, while cooing over a newborn, comments to the pioneers that it is 'more important to get these babies across than it is the grown folks – they're the real Empire Builders'. And later, an actual birth in a wagon is implied. In *The Pony Express*, a female toddler named 'Baby' is the lone survivor of one of Charlie Bent's raids on a passing wagon train. She later identifies him as the perpetrator when she sees him in Indian dress. Molly and Jack take her to Sacramento, forming a familial unit that brings a future 'Empire Builder' to the farthest reaches of the West, and the state's capital.
- 37 See "'Covered Wagon Babies" Revue', in *California's Diamond Jubilee*, pp. 77–8; also 'Dinner Tonight for '49 Babies', *San Francisco Examiner* (8 September 1925), p. 4; 'Covered Wagon Babies Meet', *San Francisco Examiner* (9 September 1925), p. 2; "'Wagon Babies" Will be Feted', *San Francisco Chronicle* (8 September 1925), p. 5; 'Pioneers Live to See Glories They Wrought', *San Francisco Chronicle* (10 September 1925), p. 7.
- 38 G. Warren, "'Pony Express" Stirring, Appropriate Jubilee Feature', *San Francisco Chronicle* (5 September 1925), p. 4; I. Jones, "'Pony Express" Proves to be Historical Melodrama', *San Francisco Examiner* (5 September 1925), p. 14; capsule reviews in 'San Francisco First to Applaud Cruze's "The Pony Express"', *Exhibitors' Trade Review* (19 September 1925), p. 18.

- 39 M. Hall, 'A Smiling Villain', *New York Times* (14 September 1925), p. 16.
- 40 A. S., 'Dancer on Horseback', *New York World* (20 September 1925), 3M; see excerpts from other New York dailies in *Film Daily* (22 September 1925), p. 6.
- 41 See, for example, reviews in Chicago dailies: P. Wood, 'Cruze Makes "Pony Express"', *Herald and Examiner* (28 September 1925), p. 9; 'New Phase of West's Growth Shown in Good Movie', *Evening American* (30 September 1925), p. 27; 'If You Don't See This One It's Your Loss', *Chicago Tribune* (29 September 1925), p. 33; see also the brief summary of other Chicago dailies' response in *Film Daily* (18 October 1925), p. 13.
- 42 Anonymous *Theatre* review (December 1925), p. 32.
- 43 Bodnar, *Remaking America*, especially chapters 1–2; D. Glassberg, *American Historical Pageantry: The Uses of Tradition in the Early Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990).
- 44 Bodnar, *Remaking America*, pp. 28–30.
- 45 Glassberg, *American Historical Pageantry*, p. 14.
- 46 Glassberg, *American Historical Pageantry*, p. 283.
- 47 Bodnar, *Remaking America*, pp. 13–20, 245–53.
- 48 Bodnar, *Remaking America*, p. 114.