

# LOMPOC PICA YUNE — INTELLIGENCER

THE OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER OF THE W.C. FIELDS FAN CLUB



HAPPY 125<sup>TH</sup> BIRTHDAY W.C. FIELDS  
BORN JANUARY 29, 1880

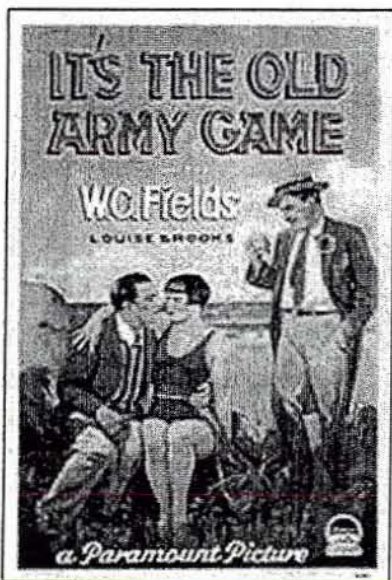
Issue Number 24 - Winter 2005



**ON LOCATION IN  
FLORIDA: W.C. FIELDS  
AND IT'S THE OLD  
ARMY GAME (PART 1)**

**By Lisa Bradbury**

On a Saturday morning in the winter of 1926, a crowd of nearly 500 people gathered in Ocala, Florida hoping to catch a glimpse of W. C. Fields, who was in the city to begin filming the silent feature film comedy, *It's the Old Army Game*. The spectators



would have the honor of witnessing a milestone in Fields' movie career—his official debut as a "star." Although Fields had appeared in several earlier films, this was to be his first starring role in a feature under his new contract with Paramount Pictures. Paramount's parent

company, the Famous Players-Lasky Corporation, held a ceremony before the crowd and film crew. Fields stepped out to applause, dressed in a costume of pajamas (his attire for the "back porch" sequence in the film). By one account, the ceremony proceeded as he broke a bottle of wine over a bouquet of flowers which had been presented to him. In another account, more in line with prohibition, the bottle contained ginger ale and was broken over a plank. Whatever the details, newsreel and still cameras recorded the ceremony with the pictures reportedly rushed back to New York to publicize the event. Famous Players-Lasky, producing films at the Paramount Astoria Studios in Long Island, New York, chose Ocala, a city seventy-five miles northwest of Orlando, for location filming during the winter months due to the mild weather, year round sunshine, and proximity to New York by train. *It's the Old Army Game* would be the fourth film Famous Players-Lasky would make in Ocala within a year. While Fields was filming in Ocala, Famous Players had another crew in Palm Beach filming *The Palm Beach Girl* starring Bebe Daniels. An Ocala newspaper expressed the city's enthusiasm for the movie company: "Ocala will give the company a hearty welcome and Mr. Smith of the Chamber of Commerce will order on the

finest kind of weather we hope. The filming of these pictures in and around Ocala is a big advertisement for Ocala and we hope that every assistance asked will be given to Mr. Fields and his company." W. C. Fields' talents were not unknown to the citizens of Ocala as two films in which he appeared—*Sally of the Sawdust* and *That Royale Girl*—had recently been shown at Ocala's Temple Theatre. Driving south from New York in



his Lincoln, Fields arrived in Ocala on the afternoon of February 26. He was accompanied by friend Bill Grady and a female companion referred to as "Mrs. Fields." The drive south was uneventful until crossing the Georgia border into Florida where the Lincoln suffered three tire blowouts. In a telegram to E. W. Wingart, the movie company's business manager, Fields stated, "The rubber had no chance to become acclimated to the nice warm weather of the sunny south."

Upon arriving in Ocala, Fields checked into the Harrington Hall Hotel. Other members of the

movie company had arrived earlier by train and were already making themselves at home. The hotel register revealed the names of the cast and crew, which included the director, Edward Sutherland, and cast: Louise Brooks, Blanche Ring, William Gaxton, Mary Foy, Mickey Bennett, Elise Cavanna, George Currie, Little Lord Roberts, W. P. Lewis, Pete Raymond, and Jim Bradbury. *It's the Old Army Game* takes its title



from the shell and pea con game which is demonstrated in a sequence of the film. W. C. Fields stars Elmer Prettywillie, a small town druggist. Louise Brooks plays his assistant, Marilyn. When Bill Parker (William Gaxton), president of the High-and-Dry Realty Co., catches a glimpse of Marilyn while passing through town, he decides to stay and set up business with Prettywillie as his vice-president.

*(Continued in LPI No. 25, April 2005)*

*Lisa Bradbury is a film historian living in Florida. Thank you Lisa!*



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THE OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER OF THE W.C. FIELDS FAN CLUB  
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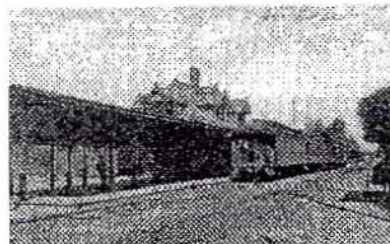
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**ABOUT THE COVER:**

The cover of this issue is a reduction of an original drawing by artist Bill Levers. The drawing was created exclusively for the fan club. Thank you Bill! Signed, numbered, limited edition, full size prints of the cover are for sale for \$25.00 each plus \$5.00 postage. Send your check payable to "W.C. Fields Fan Club" in the amount of \$30.00 to the fan club address.

**ON LOCATION IN  
FLORIDA: W.C. FIELDS  
AND IT'S THE OLD  
ARMY GAME (PART 2)**  
By Lisa Bradberry

In a twist on the Florida real estate boom, Parker's business is to sell New York lots to Floridians. Fields would recreate



several of his stage sketches from The Comic Supplement in the film: the "Back Porch," the "Drug Store," and the "Picnic." Much preparation went into

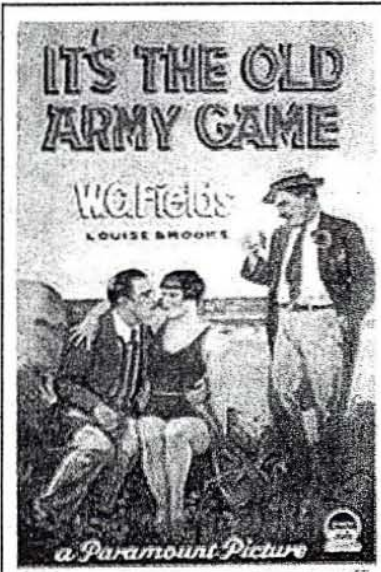


choosing the locations and building the sets for It's the Old Army Game. A three-story back porch set was constructed at the rear of the Hi-Way Hotel. Other major locations included a train station, the Court Pharmacy, the city streets, and Silver Springs (a picturesque natural springs park—Florida's first tourist

attraction) about 7 miles outside of Ocala. An old-fashioned horse-drawn, steam fire engine had been purchased from the Jacksonville Fire Department and restored specifically for scenes in the film. For interior scenes at the Court Pharmacy, and during those occasional cloudy days when extra light was needed, lighting equipment was furnished on loan from a Miami studio. Chief cameraman, Alvin Wyckoff, had a crew of six cameramen so several units could film simultaneously at different locations in the city. February 28 marked the first of three days spent filming at Silver Springs. Hundreds of people gathered to watch Louise Brooks and William Gaxton perform in several scenes featuring a glass bottom boat ride and later feeding a deer. Director Eddie Sutherland was injured in a boating mishap, spraining his arm. (Note: A video version of the movie viewed by this author did not include any Silver Springs scenes. Either they were missing or cut from the final print). Since W. C. Fields was not required for any of the scenes at Silver Springs, and construction on the back porch set had yet to be completed, he took the opportunity to drive through Marion County, spending some time in the country. On March 3, Fields



would begin the first of several days filming scenes on the newly constructed back porch set. His character attempts to get some sleep in a porch swing, but his attempts at slumber are thwarted by a vegetable vendor, a man offering to sharpen scissors, and the iceman. He also has an altercation with a screaming baby played by twenty-nine year old, thirty-seven inch tall actor, Little Lord Roberts, who it was reported had been an actor at Paramount for two years and appeared in several movies including Lon Chaney's lost film, The Miracle Man. "Mrs. Fields" was on hand to watch as W.C. performed before the cameras. It was reported, "She stated that she is very fond of Ocala and hopes that she may again have the pleasure of coming to the city." It was said that from the beginning, Fields elicited laughter from all those who came out to see him, and it was certain he would be a favorite in Ocala. On March 5, one of the most hair-raising scenes of the film was staged. This occurred in the film's opening sequence when Elise



Cavanna's character is racing her to car to Prettywillie's drugstore. The car just misses being hit by a speeding train. It was revealed that the car and train were actually traveling at slow speeds while being filmed, but the final result appears to be more perilous. Wearing a dress and hat, Harry Thompson, a driver with the White Ring Taxi Company, doubled for Ms. Cavanna as four cameras recorded the action. The car actually came within two feet of the train as it crossed the tracks. Other filming which occurred during the following days covered the Court Pharmacy interiors, the fire engine, and the Ocala street scenes. The interior of the Court Pharmacy was to be replicated at the Astoria Studios after the cast and crew returned to New York. There was also talk of building a duplicate of one of the glass bottom boats from Silver Springs. On Saturday night, March 6, the cast and crew were honored with a banquet held by the Ocala Realty Board at the Harrington Hall Hotel. In all, there were one hundred people

present. As part of the entertainment, Eddie Sutherland called upon some of his movie cast to perform; they sang or did vaudeville comedy bits. Unfortunately, for those in attendance, W.C. Fields was absent. He had been spending the day fishing at Homosassa Springs some forty miles away, and it was said car trouble prevented him from making it back to Ocala in time for the banquet. After long hours filming, the cast and crew found some time for recreation, holding a series of baseball games on a vacant lot adjacent to the back porch set. The first game was held late one Sunday afternoon. Although it was raining, a large crowd gathered to cheer on their favorite team— either the Paramount Wildcats with W. C. Fields pitching—or the Grady Lillies, named for Bill Grady. Wingart, the business manager mentioned earlier, now called by his baseball nickname, "Babe," proved to be a powerful base runner for the Lillies. The teams really got into the spirit of competition as mock "negotiations" were being held for the sale of Wingart's "contract" to the Wildcats. During the first game, it was evident that "Fields had the Lillies at his mercy the entire game," which was called after seven innings due to nightfall.

The final score: Wildcats 33, Lillies 12. On Wednesday night, March 10, the Ocala Elks Lodge initiated nine members of the Famous Players-Lasky company into its membership. It is unknown whether Fields was included. The production wrapped in Ocala after 18 days with plans to go on to Palm Beach for two days' filming before returning to New York. One Ocala newspaper offered the director's departing remarks: "Edward Sutherland said he was

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well pleased with the work that has been done in Ocala. 'Ocala people have been very good,' Mr. Sutherland said, 'and have given their services wherever needed to act as extras.' 'The city authorities have been exceptionally kind,' Mr. Sutherland added, and declared that, 'the Famous Players are indebted to the town



fathers for many courtesies.' The police department and Chief Morgan were also praised by Mr. Sutherland for their efficient aid in handling crowds." Ocala bid farewell to the movie company: "The Famous Players have made many friends in Ocala, and Ocala will always welcome them." On Saturday, March 13, W. C. Fields and his companions left for Palm Beach ahead of the rest of the movie company, which took a special train. In her book, Lulu in Hollywood, Louise Brooks stated that filming took place in Palm Beach at the Stotesbury estate. It appears this was the location for the "picnic" scene where Fields and his movie family wreck the immaculate lawn of an unsuspecting homeowner. While the movie company was in Palm Beach, it was learned the city was hosting a special edition of the Ziegfeld Follies. A rather distinguished portrait of W. C. Fields appeared in The Palm Beach Post above the following caption: "W. C. Fields will be the guest of honor at tonight's performance of Ziegfeld's Palm Beach Nights at the Montmartre Theater. Fields, who is now in Palm Beach making The Old Army Game, a picture for Famous Players, has been under Flo Ziegfeld's management for 16 years and is now receiving the largest salary ever paid a

comedian for motion pictures. Last season he was co-starred with Will Rogers in the Ziegfeld Follies." After filming was completed in Palm Beach, the company departed for Miami to board a ship back to New York. Fields once again took to the road in his automobile for the drive north. After interior scenes were completed at the Astoria studio, It's the Old Army Game was released in May, 1926. Fields went on to make his next two films at the Astoria Studios in New York. In 1927, Fields followed Famous Players-Lasky west when it was decided to move the operations to Paramount Studios in California. It's the Old Army Game was significant beyond W. C. Fields' debut in a starring role. Fields and Eddie Sutherland became good friends, and the director would go on to work with Fields again on several films. Sutherland also began a personal relationship with Louise Brooks which would result in their marriage during the summer of 1926.

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*Lisa Bradberry is a film historian living in Florida.  
Thank you Lisa!*