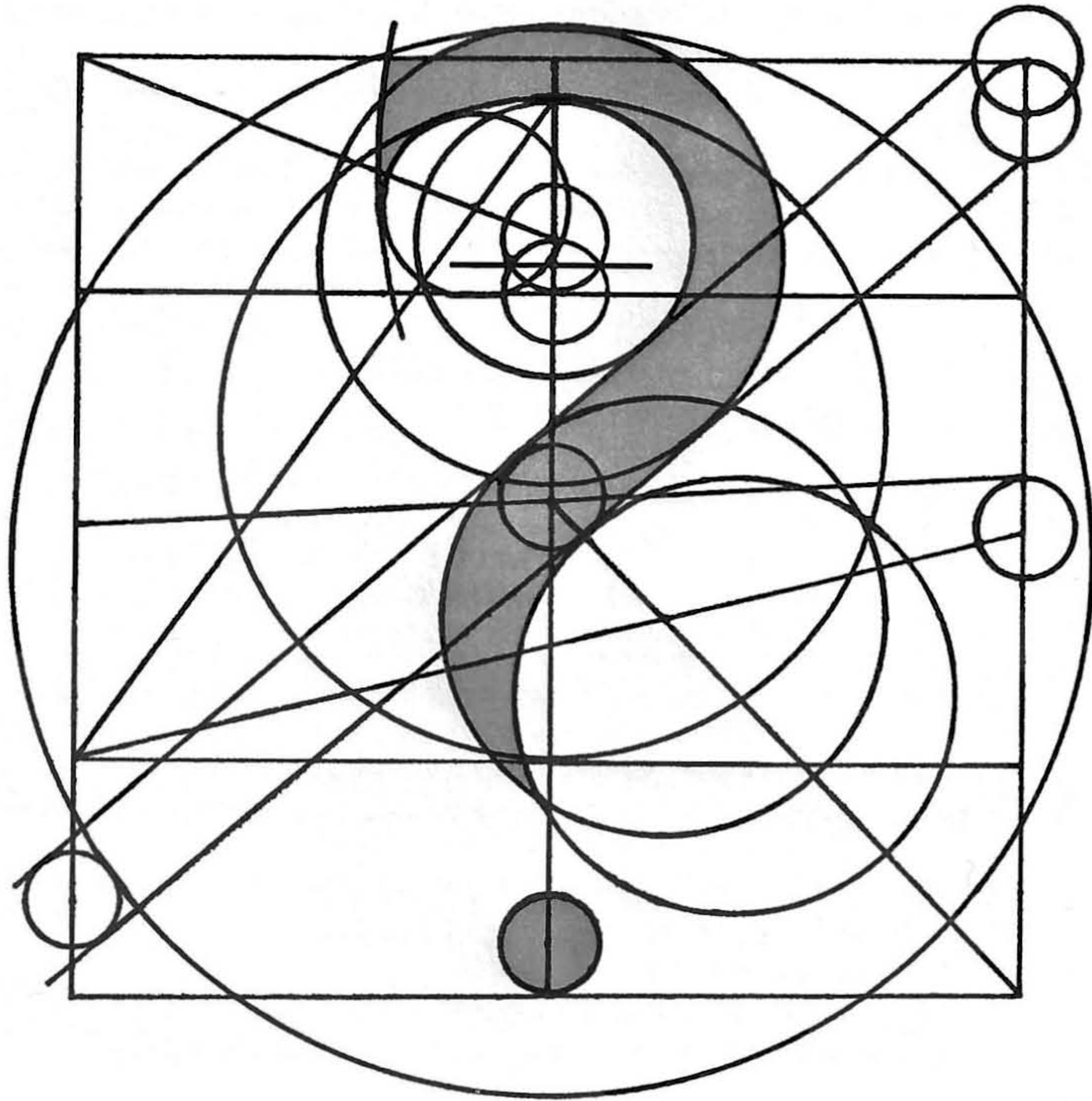


THE BOOK CLUB OF CALIFORNIA  
QUARTERLY  
VOLUME LXXXV · NUMBER 2 · SPRING 2020



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- ❖ COMBING THE SCENE FOR CLUES: *Researching Historical Places with the Great Detective of Silent Film Locations* Rebecca Fenning Marschall
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## Introduction

*Nina M. Schneider*

WHEN I WAS INVITED TO EDIT the spring 2020 issue of the *Quarterly*, I had the opportunity to concentrate on a topic that celebrated a new decade while simultaneously honoring the century-long traditions of the Book Club of California. I wanted the issue to be inclusive, showcasing writers investigating a compelling theme that would prove true up and down the Golden State.

Since the year lends itself so readily to clear vision and new perspective, I suspected that careful observation and concentrated focus were important attributes, and there should be some evidence that these clues would point toward books. Now that the motive was revealed, the means fell into place: an issue dedicated to detection, sleuthing, forensics, mysteries, crime, punishment, truth, and consequences.

You'll see I've gathered together five contributors whose interests and expertise invite us to examine the evidence, investigate clues, solve puzzles, and seek redemption. Modern detective fiction was born and raised in the Bay Area. "Jail Books" made by incarcerated writers and artists can be traced to Northern California. Movie making has fingerprints all over Southern California, while burglary has no boundaries.

The facts are simple. Randal S. Brandt takes us on tour of the California Detective Fiction Collection housed at the Bancroft Library. In her interview with John Bengtson, Rebecca Fenning Marschall reveals forensic investigations are not limited to criminals, dodgy characters, or jilted lovers. Travis McDade's presentation of the facts lays out a strong case for all book collectors to start taking precautions against thieves and scoundrels. Jamie Mahoney and Liz Canfield prove punishment and incarceration aren't the final answer for crime prevention.

In the words of Agatha Christie, "An appreciative listener is always stimulating." I hope you enjoy this issue.



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~~cisco featuring newspaper reporter/detective Samuel Hamilton. He cemented his legacy at UC Berkeley with his gift to The Bancroft Library earmarked to support the California Detective Fiction Collection. The gift provides funds not only for new acquisitions, but also for cataloging and processing, enabling the library to provide access to materials in the collection much sooner than would otherwise be possible. Unfortunately, Willie did not live to see his gift being put into action. He passed away in March 2019, but his generosity will live on.~~

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~~RANDAL S. BRANDT is a librarian at The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, where he serves as Head of Cataloging and as Curator of the California Detective Fiction Collection. He is a member of the American Library Association's Rare Books and Manuscripts Section, previously serving as chair of the Bibliographic Standards Committee, a member of Mystery Writers of America, currently serving on the board of the Northern California chapter, and on the faculty of California Rare Book School, where he teaches rare book cataloging.~~

## COMBING THE SCENE FOR CLUES: Researching Historical Places with the Great Detective of Silent Film Locations

*Rebecca Fenning Marschall*

JOHN BENGTON'S CAREER AS A DETECTIVE of silent film had a modest and unassuming beginning. As a teenager interested in film history, he attended a Buster Keaton film festival that he enjoyed immensely, and though he didn't see Keaton's films again for another twenty years, they made quite an impression on him. Indeed, he remembered them so fondly that when Keaton's work became available on laserdisc in 1995, he bought the set. As he watched the 1922 film *Day*

*Dreams* on the small screen at home, he was surprised to see that the background of a chase scene in the film was actually quite familiar — it was clearly shot in San Francisco's North Beach, a neighborhood he knew well. Curious about whether he could figure out a few of the exact locations in which Keaton and his crew had shot the film, in that pre-digital era, he set up a tripod and camera in his living room and photographed a few scenes from his television where he noticed architectural details in the background. Since this was 1995, he took his film to the drug store, and once he was "armed with [his] snapshots," set off around North Beach on foot, quickly finding all five of the spots he'd photographed off the TV. Walking in Keaton's footsteps, Bengtson discovered that one scene had even been shot on Lombard Street, "the crookedest street in the world," a few months before those famous turns were actually constructed. At the time, Bengtson had no way of knowing that this fun exercise in detection and virtual time travel would become a consuming passion and that one day the *New York Times* would refer to him as "the great detective of silent film locations."

Thinking it would be fun to try to piece together a few more filming locations, Bengtson paid a visit to the Central Library in downtown Los Angeles six months later while on other business. Recognizing that most films had been shot in LA, he thought he'd do a bit more research on a handful of other background clues. Having noted the names on business signs that appeared in some shots, he looked those businesses up on microfilmed historic city directories, found their 1920s addresses, and was able to drive around the city and positively identify a few more locations.

Though in retrospect it is clear he had already been bitten by the historical detecting bug at this point, Bengtson didn't truly realize it for some time — he just thought it was a fun challenge that would find its own end. And so he incrementally became more and more entrenched in his new avocation as he entertained his brain by searching out more and more locations in the backgrounds of his Keaton films: "I figured I might identify 20 spots or so, and that would be it," he says. "But what started as a simple curiosity kept expanding" as he started connecting the dots (or the streets), "triggering amazing coincidences, insights and lucky breaks, until it reached the point where I just gave in to the process to see where it would lead." Where it led was to a series of books highlighting the filming locations of three of the great silent comedians (Buster Keaton, Charlie Chaplin, and Harold Lloyd), an active blog documenting his findings for an engaged readership, and leadership roles in film history organizations — not to mention a likely unparalleled understanding of Los Angeles as it was during the silent film era.

Indeed, Bengtson's knowledge of the geography of downtown Los Angeles (and other popular filming areas across the city) has gone beyond a simple mental map, and is now a sprawling memory palace — or perhaps memory city is more

apt. Bengtson readily admits that he thinks of it sometimes as his own personal virtual reality, but one that doesn't require a special headset: "I am so familiar with these LA neighborhoods and how they looked and how they appeared in these films" that he can walk through 1922 Los Angeles as if he were really there. Places like Keaton's original studio are so vivid to him that he knows what it would have looked like as a three-dimensional space and can imagine walking around it. Bengtson admits he has a particularly strong ability when it comes to remembering architectural details and patterns: "I am not good at remembering names," for example, just good (or really, more than good) "at spatial relationships and spaces." "If you focus on something," he adds, "you can develop and improve it." Though he is modest, his abilities — while they have no doubt been sharpened through experience — are so prodigious that he clearly has an amazing natural aptitude for thinking about spaces and places and perspective. It isn't a coincidence that he has become the Sherlock Holmes of silent filming locations.

Now that Bengtson has been working on the location-based puzzles of silent films for so many years, his methodology has become more finely tuned, though serendipity and coincidence always play a role in his work. For example:

When I visited the LA library that first time, I inquired about a baseball field appearing in Keaton's film *Neighbors* (1920). The librarian said 'Oh, baseball historian Larry Zuckerman is here today, go ask him.' [Zuckerman] immediately identified it as the former Washington Park.

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Similarly, when Bengtson learned through his day job as a lawyer that he had a connection to Jim Henson Studios, which is housed in the historic film studio Charlie Chaplin built,<sup>1</sup> he was able to get a tour of the facility and learn even more about the spaces and buildings within it.

Apart from these coincidences and relying on his (as Hercule Poirot would put it) “leettle gray cells” to recognize a street corner or specific architectural detail, Bengtson uses historical maps and photographs (and sometimes present-day maps and photographs) to help build a coherent picture of the Los Angeles of the past. Though the films themselves give plenty of clues, the view of Los Angeles that they offer is not always truthful: the medium of film is famous for its creative use of geography — edits can make two places seem as though they must be near one another, when in reality they may be tens or hundreds of miles apart. So historic maps, images, and other data about the Los Angeles of the past are required to add the real city’s structure back onto the locations shown in films. Bengtson collects historic postcards and photographs of LA buildings and systematically files them by location to gain more documentation about how these places looked from various angles, whereas historic maps and even current Google Street View images can help to further pinpoint locations and their relations to one another. Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps and Baist’s Real Estate Survey Maps can give a detailed sense of the layout of blocks and entire neighborhoods, as well as how structures and streets changed over time.

Part of Bengtson’s documentation system involves keying locations to a generous handful of central films, and cross-referencing locations from there. For example, many downtown Los Angeles locations he has keyed in his notes to Harold Lloyd films, regardless of whatever other films they may have appeared in. A building is not just at a certain cross-street, but also is “that building from Lloyd’s *Safety Last!* (1923).” Another example of this is an abandoned building from one of Occidental College’s former campuses in central Los Angeles, which Bengtson first saw in Charlie Chaplin’s *The Kid* (1921). Though he has since identified it in several other films, he always cross-references it back to *The Kid* — which is part of how he can build such an interconnected web of locations and their film appearances.

This continued use of the same locations is something with particular resonance for Bengtson, and has become more and more important to his work over time. The former administration building at Occidental College’s original campus is a case in point. Chaplin’s *The Kid* shot at this building when it needed a location to serve as a maternity hospital; Mary Pickford’s *Daddy Long-Legs* (1919), one of the non-comedies that Bengtson has been examining in recent months, had also shot at this same building two years before when it needed an orphanage setting. Earlier in his research, he might have thought this repeat use of the Oxy building

was just a happy coincidence, but as he has become more steeped in the world of silent film locations and the way these productions functioned, he has realized that it was, of course, not coincidence at all. This building would likely have been known among silent filmmakers as a go-to place that could handily stand in for orphanages, hospitals, and other imposing institutions. After all, the silent filmmaking community was a small one and popular filming sites were common knowledge that the community shared. And this sense of being a part of the community of knowledge — even at this chronological remove — is a powerful one for Bengtson:

When I discover a 'new' location, I'm privy to a fact that at one time only the star and the crew members knew. One hundred years later, I invite myself into their select group — I share in their once exclusive community of knowledge. Somehow that new layer of context, that shared experience, greatly enhances my enjoyment of their films.

The fact that locations recur across films is one of the reasons why Bengtson has been able to accumulate such a portfolio of impressive re-found locations. Though he may be able to solve some location mysteries more or less instantaneously (or at least by walking around town, as happened in his first foray around North Beach), much of the time his work is a methodical layering of clues as they unfold across multiple films, a longer-term process of building a case. Sometimes a building will become familiar across a series of films, even though it won't be clearly identifiable from the contextual information given in just one appearance — or even across ten different appearances. By combing the scenes for clues, film by film, Bengtson can sometimes assemble a clear enough picture to place a building in the correct place with its neighbors. But it can take time — and a lot of film-watching.

One good example of this is a particular alley in Hollywood used numerous times by Keaton, Chaplin, Lloyd, and others, which for many years remained a particularly tough nut for Bengtson to crack. He was unable to deduce where this alley was, though he would see it recur over and over again; in all of those reoccurrences, however, the camera was always shooting in the same direction, which did not give enough visual data for him to be able to place it. Several years ago, the San Francisco Silent Film Festival (of which Bengtson is on the board) restored the newspaper drama *The Last Edition* (1925), which, though set at the *San Francisco Chronicle*, was shot in many Los Angeles locations — including in this alley. And, excitingly enough, it shot the alley from multiple angles, finally giving Bengtson the contextual information he needed about the adjacent buildings to finally pinpoint its actual location. He has subsequently made the alley a location on Google Maps, which has in turn made it a point of interest that others have visited and reviewed; he has also been working on getting the alley formally recognized and named by the city.<sup>2</sup>

For those not familiar with the story of urban development in Los Angeles, some of this work may seem somewhat trivial — a great mental exercise, but not much more. That, however, ignores the massive earth-moving and hill-leveling changes that went on in Los Angeles in the 1950s and '60s, which changed the face of downtown Los Angeles, as well as the other similar development projects in other parts of the city. Silent films, as Bengtson has proved, are an invaluable historical source for understanding how the city itself has changed, and they are a relatively untapped resource, apart from the work done by Bengtson and his like-minded fellows. Bengtson admits that “while most of my [blog] posts document some particular building or street corner,” his research does not always touch larger social trends. For that reason, he is particularly proud of two recent articles that highlight silent film’s research potential when it comes to “true early Los Angeles social history” and its historically marginalized communities. The first “documents a heretofore unknown Japanese enclave living in silent-era Hollywood,”<sup>3</sup> while the other identifies a “rancho-era Spanish adobe also filmed by Keaton likely just months before it was demolished.”<sup>4</sup> Bengtson was able to find record of the Japanese community in Hollywood in city directories and in an oral history at Densho: The Japanese American Legacy Project. But he and Jeffrey Castel de Oro, a colleague who wrote the adobe post, were unable to find much documentation about that building, apart from one image in a Huntington Library digital collection. In both cases, it seems that the only detailed visual “record of this community and the adobe lie within the movies themselves,” and it seems more than likely that further study of more silent films will uncover additional nuggets of social history along the same lines.

Though the overall popular narrative about silent film is largely one about loss and destruction, there are still many “new” silent films being restored and re-released every year. This is another appealing and exciting aspect of Bengtson’s work; availability of silent films just keeps expanding. New discoveries are not just limited to new releases: Bengtson notes that “with the visual clarity of the new Blu-ray releases, even well-studied films reveal new clues.” High-resolution versions offer more visible signs and architectural details, allowing him to match up more of his puzzle pieces and to connect more films to one another. Home video and the ability to pause a disc or otherwise slow it down is what has made Bengtson’s project possible, as details are not as easily seen or understood when watching in a theater setting.

Bengtson has recently moved to study more silent dramas and other film genres, which opens even more avenues for detecting. The only genre that he avoids is the historical costume drama — joking that “there won’t be any LA streets for me to look at” — noting that the artistic merits of a film don’t really matter: “a terrible



film that is poorly reviewed might have some scenes filmed at a known location that could give ... a new view point." Quite literally speaking, even a bad film might be valuable for showing a familiar alleyway or building shot from a different vantage point or angle. In some ways, Bengtson's project is still almost in its infancy, as there are so many films he has not yet been able to examine.

It might at first seem strange that a project founded on methodical deductive reasoning and historical research would have started with silent comedies. As Bengtson notes, though, "the silent comedians practiced mostly physical comedy — flirting in the park, people running around corners, speeding car chases," and because of this, "silent comedies tend to have far more exterior scenes shot on location than 'indoor' dramas," which likely would have been shot on sets. Pragmatic silent filmmakers also knew that "it was cheaper to film on location than to build elaborate sets." Beyond this, though, these films were the perfect place to start because Keaton, Chaplin, and Lloyd were just as methodical in their craft as Bengtson or any other detective, fictional or otherwise. These filmmakers were inventive, innovative, and quite serious when it came to their physical use of space and mastery of visual perception. For example, Lloyd built complex sets on top of downtown LA buildings and exploited perspective in order to make it appear as though he were suspended hundreds of feet above ground in films like *Safety Last!* (something that has been meticulously detailed by Bengtson, of course). Keaton himself did almost all of his own stunts, engineering his safety through careful planning. In his *Steamboat Bill, Jr* (1928), an entire house collapses around Keaton and he would have been crushed if not for the open attic window that falls around his body; the mark he needed to stand on to be safe was a nail hammered into the ground, calculated carefully ahead of time. So it is only appropriate that a film detective like Bengtson, with a similar ability to solve and conquer spatial problems, started with these silent masters.

## NOTES

- 1 In case you've ever driven by and wondered about the statue of Kermit the Frog dressed like Chaplin's Little Tramp out in front.
- 2 More information about the Chaplin Keaton-Lloyd Hollywood Alley is on Bengtson's blog: <https://silentlocations.com/chaplin-keaton-lloyd-alley/>
- 3 <https://silentlocations.com/2019/11/20/silent-hollywoods-japanese-enclave>,
- 4 <https://silentlocations.com/2019/12/04/buster-keatons-scarecrow-adobe/>



REBECCA FENNING MARSCHALL has been the Manuscript and Archives Librarian at UCLA's William Andrews Clark Memorial Library since 2008. A Los Angeles native, she dreamed of being a film historian before finding her true calling as an archivist