

# Dickson Experimental Sound Film

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The **Dickson Experimental Sound Film** is a film made by William Dickson in late 1894 or early 1895. It is the first known film with live-recorded sound and appears to be the first example of a motion picture made for the Kinetophone, the proto-sound-film system developed by Dickson and Thomas Edison. (The Kinetophone—consisting of a Kinetoscope accompanied by a cylinder-playing phonograph—was not a true sound-film system as no attempt was made to synchronize image and audio throughout playback.) The film was produced at the "Black Maria", Edison's New Jersey film studio. There is no evidence that it was ever exhibited in its original format. Newly digitized and restored, it is the only surviving Kinetophone film with live-recorded sound.

The movie features Dickson playing a violin into a recording cone for an off-camera wax cylinder.<sup>[1]</sup> The melody is from a barcarolle, "Song of the Cabin Boy", from *Les Cloches de Corneville* (literally *The Bells of Corneville*; presented in English-speaking countries as *The Chimes of Normandy*), a light opera composed by Robert Planquette in 1877.<sup>[2]</sup> In front of Dickson, two men dance to the music. In the final seconds, a fourth man briefly crosses from left to right behind the cone. The running time of the restored film is seventeen seconds; the accompanying cylinder contains approximately two minutes of sound, including twenty-three seconds of violin music, encompassing the film's soundtrack. After its restoration in 2000, the Dickson Experimental Sound Film was selected for inclusion in the United States National Film Registry.

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### *Dickson Experimental Sound Film*



Frame from restored version of the Dickson Experimental Sound Film (1894/95)

<b>Directed by</b>	William Dickson
<b>Starring</b>	William Dickson
<b>Music by</b>	Robert Planquette
<b>Cinematography</b>	William Heise
<b>Running time</b>	≈17 secs
<b>Country</b>	USA

#### IMDb profile

(<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0177707/>)

## Restoration

A soundless 35mm nitrate print of the movie, described as precisely forty feet long, was acquired by the Museum of Modern Art from the Edison National Historic Site (Edison NHS) and transferred to safety film in 1942. The soundtrack was not inventoried by the U.S. National Park Service, custodians of the Edison NHS, until the early 1960s, when a wax cylinder in a metal canister labeled “Dickson—Violin by W.K.L. Dixon with Kinetograph” was found in the music room of the Edison laboratory. In 1964, researchers opened the canister only to find that the cylinder was broken in two; that year, as well, all nitrate film materials remaining at the facility were removed to the Library of Congress for conservation. Among the filmstrips was a print that the Library of Congress catalogued as "Dickson Violin." According to Patrick Loughney, the library's film and TV curator, this print is "thirty-nine feet and fourteen frames [two frames short of 40 feet]."<sup>[3]</sup>

The connection between film and cylinder was not made until 1998, when Loughney and Edison NHS sound recordings curator Jerry Fabris arranged for the cylinder to be repaired and its contents recovered at the Rodgers and Hammerstein Archive of Recorded Sound in New York. A new reel-to-reel master was created, allowing for fidelity reproduction onto digital audio tape. As the library was not equipped to synchronize the recovered soundtrack with the film element, producer and restoration specialist Rick Schmidlin suggested that award-winning film editor Walter Murch be enlisted on the project (the two had worked together on the 1998 restoration of Orson Welles's *Touch of Evil*). Murch was given the short piece of film and the two minutes of sound recovered from the cylinder to work with.<sup>[4]</sup> By digitally converting the film and editing the media together on an Avid system, Murch was able to synchronize the visual and audio elements 105 years after the motion picture was made.

On the cylinder, before the camera starts rolling, a man's voice can be heard to say, "Are the rest of you ready? Go ahead!" This extra sound is included on the version of the film that was distributed in the early 2000s.<sup>[5]</sup> However, since filming had not yet begun when the words were uttered, this cannot be claimed as the first incidence of the spoken word on film.

One question that remains unresolved is how the eventual running time of just over 17 seconds was arrived at. Per the curatorial reports, the 35mm prints have a standard 16 frames per foot of film—39 feet plus 14 frames thus equals a total of 638 frames. Murch describes the film as having been shot at 40 frames per second (fps); Loughney describes it as 46 fps. At 40 fps, 638 frames would run 15.95 seconds, which should be the maximum length of the restored film if all other reports are correct; as Loughney notes, at 46 fps, the film would last only 13.86 seconds. If the latter figure is correct, as many as 9 seconds of film are missing from both extant prints if the entire violin performance was filmed. Based on his own tests of eighteen Kinetoscope films, scholar Gordon Hendricks has argued that no Kinetoscope films were actually shot at 46 fps, making the speed of 40 fps reported by Murch more likely correct.<sup>[6]</sup> Yet there is still a difference of more than a second between the maximum potential running time at that speed and the actual duration of the film as digitized by Murch. That 17-second running time works out to an average camera speed of approximately 37.5 fps, a significant difference from Murch's report.

## Interpretation

In his book *The Celluloid Closet* (1981), film historian Vito Russo discusses the film, claiming, without attribution, that it was titled *The Gay Brothers*.<sup>[7]</sup> Russo's unsupported naming of the film has been adopted widely online and in at least three books, and his assertions that the film's content is homosexual are frequently echoed.<sup>[8]</sup> In addition to there being no evidence for the title Russo gives the film, in fact the word "gay" was not generally used as a synonym for "homosexual" at the time the film was made.<sup>[9]</sup> There is also no evidence that Dickson intended to present the men—presumably employees of the Edison studio—as a romantic couple. Given the lyrics of the song Dickson plays, which describes life at sea without women, it is most plausible that he intended a joke about the virtually all-male environment of the Black Maria. Still, this may be seen as one of the earliest examples of same-sex imagery in the cinema. An excerpt of the film is included in the documentary based on Russo's book, also titled *The Celluloid Closet* (1995).

## Notes

- <sup>^</sup> A few sources, including Dixon (2003, p. 53) and FilmSound.org (<http://www.filmsound.org/murch/dickson.htm>), suggest that the violinist is or might be Charles D'Almaine, who recorded a number of cylinders for Edison. For a detailed rebuttal of this claim, see Loughney (2001), p. 216. A photograph positively identified as of D'Almaine, available online (<http://www.tinfoil.com/cm-9702.htm>), also belies the notion that he is the violinist seen in the film. See also Hendricks (1966), p. 122.
- <sup>^</sup> See, e.g., UNLV Short Film Archive ([http://www.unlv.edu/programs/filmarchive/catalog\\_archive100/1894\\_dickson.html](http://www.unlv.edu/programs/filmarchive/catalog_archive100/1894_dickson.html)). Courtesy of Wikipedia editor Franz Jacobs, the following material can be accessed to compare Dickson's performance with a selection from "Song of the Cabin Boy", demonstrating that Dickson plays the vocal part on the violin:
  - MP3 of Dickson's performance (<http://queersilents.com/dickson/DicksonMp3.mp3>)
  - Section of sheet music from *Les Cloches de Corneville* (<http://queersilents.com/dickson/NormandyMusic.gif>)
  - MIDI of sheet music section (<http://queersilents.com/dickson/NormandyMidi.mid>)
  - MIDI of just the vocal part played on a violin (<http://queersilents.com/dickson/ViolinMidi.mid>)

See Two Hundred Opera Plots (<http://www.mrichter.com/opera/files/plots.htm#124>), by Gladys Davidson, for a description of the opera. Ion Martea, in his May 19, 2006, essay on the film (<http://www.culturewars.org.uk/EF/ef3.htm>) for the *Culture Wars* website, claims erroneously that the music Dickson plays is "an excerpt from Pietro Mascagni's *Cavalleria rusticana*."

- <sup>^</sup> Loughney (2001), p. 217.
- <sup>^</sup> Loughney (2001) describes the sound as "nearly two minutes long" (p. 217). Murch, in his brief 2000 note, calls it "a couple of minutes long"; in his 2004 interview he says "two and a half minutes long."
- <sup>^</sup> UNLV Short Film Archive ([http://www.unlv.edu/programs/filmarchive/catalog\\_archive100/1894\\_dickson.html](http://www.unlv.edu/programs/filmarchive/catalog_archive100/1894_dickson.html))
- <sup>^</sup> Hendricks (1966), pp. 6–8.
- <sup>^</sup> Russo (1987), pp. 6–7. For rebuttal of Russo's claim, see, e.g., Dixon (2003), p. 53; Justin DeFreitas, "Moving Pictures: Documentary Puts Modern Gay Cinema in Context", *Berkeley Daily Planet*, July 7, 2006 (available online (<http://www.berkeleydailyplanet.com/article.cfm?archiveDate=07-07-06&storyID=24579>)).
- <sup>^</sup> See *Movies of the 90s*, ed. Juergen Mueller (Bonn: Taschen, 2001), p. 147. See also Larry P. Gross,

*Up from Invisibility: Lesbians, Gay Men, and the Media in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), p. 57. Gross also erroneously calls it a "five-minute experimental film" and describes the men as dancing to music "played on an Edison gramophone", though he does properly state that "we don't know what Dickson intended this light-hearted scene to suggest" (ibid.). The passage is adapted from a section introduction written by Gross for *The Columbia Reader on Lesbians & Gay Men in Media, Society, and Politics*, ed. Larry P. Gross and James D. Woods (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 291.

9. ^ A particularly relevant example of the way the word "gay" was actually used is provided by a later Edison Manufacturing Company film, directed by Edwin S. Porter. As described by scholar Linda Williams, *The Gay Shoe Clerk* (1903)

is composed of a static long shot.... A clerk is tidying up, when two women enter. The younger woman seats herself before the clerk as the older woman's attention wanders. When the clerk begins to try a shoe on the young woman, the master long shot is replaced by an "insert" close-up of her foot and ankle showing the clerk's hands fondling the foot. As the shot continues the woman's full-length skirt rises, and the audience gets a good view of her stockinged calf. Returning to the original long shot, we see the rest of the action: the clerk, apparently aroused by the sight and touch of her calf, kisses the young woman; the older woman finally notices and begins beating him on the head with her umbrella.

Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible"*, exp. ed. (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1999), pp. 65–66.

## Sources

### Published

- Dixon, Wheeler Winston (2003). *Straight: Constructions of Heterosexuality in the Cinema* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003). ISBN 0-7914-5623-4
- Hendricks, Gordon (1966). *The Kinetoscope: America's First Commercially Successful Motion Picture Exhibitor*. New York: Theodore Gaus' Sons. Reprinted in Hendricks, Gordon (1972). *Origins of the American Film*. New York: Arno Press/New York Times. ISBN 0-405-03919-0
- Loughney, Patrick (2001). "Domitor Witnesses the First Complete Public Presentation of the [*Dickson Experimental Sound Film*] in the Twentieth Century," in *The Sounds of Early Cinema*, ed. Richard Abel and Rick Altman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 215–219. ISBN 0-253-33988-X
- Russo, Vito (1987). *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper & Row). ISBN 0-06-096132-5

### Online

- Dickson Sound Film ([http://www.unlv.edu/programs/filmarchive/catalog\\_archive100/1894\\_dickson.html](http://www.unlv.edu/programs/filmarchive/catalog_archive100/1894_dickson.html)) short, scholarly discussion; part of the UNLV Short Film Archive
- "The Three Fathers of Cinema & The Edison/Dickson Experiment" ([http://www.fromscripttodvd.com/three\\_fathers.htm](http://www.fromscripttodvd.com/three_fathers.htm)) interview with restoration editor Walter Murch by William Kallay, September 27, 2004; part of the *from Script to DVD* website

## External links

- Dickson Experimental Sound Film (<http://www.filmsound.org/murch/dickson.htm>) brief discussion by Walter Murch, with variously formatted clips of the film (note the credits table gives the title of Planquette's opera incorrectly as *Les Cloches de Normandie* and misdates it 1878); part of the *FilmSound.org* website
- Dickson Experimental Sound Film (<http://www.archive.org/details/dicksonfilmtwo>) anonymously written and error-riddled discussion of film's recovery, with downloadable version of the film; part of the Internet Archive
- Dickson Experimental Sound Film ([http://ia310131.us.archive.org/3/items/dicksonfilmtwo/DicksonFilm\\_High.mov](http://ia310131.us.archive.org/3/items/dicksonfilmtwo/DicksonFilm_High.mov)) video clip formatted in Apple QuickTime
- Dickson Experimental Sound Film (1894) (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0177707/>) movie credits and additional details; part of the Internet Movie Database
- "The Pre-History of Sound Cinema, Part 1: Thomas Edison and W.K.L. Dickson" ([http://www.spencersundell.com/blog/2006/04/10/the\\_pre-history\\_of\\_sound\\_cinema\\_part\\_1/](http://www.spencersundell.com/blog/2006/04/10/the_pre-history_of_sound_cinema_part_1/)) extensive discussion by Spencer Sundell, April 10, 2006; part of the *Mugu Brainpan* weblog

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