

Review: Shawn C. Bean (2008) *The First Hollywood: Florida and the Golden Age of Silent Filmmaking*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida.

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The real first Hollywood, Shawn C. Bean argues, was not in California, but in Jacksonville, Florida. Published one hundred years after Jacksonville's first film studios opened, Bean's book depicts how the motion picture industry became an important part of Jacksonville's identity during the early years of filmmaking in the United States. The author chronicles the rivalry between Jacksonville and Hollywood and how it came to an end. Furthermore, Bean also delves deeper into the city's history of filmmaking in order to discover what was to follow for Jacksonville after its cinematic heyday.

While most readers will be aware that the silent era of cinema began around the turn of the last century, few will know that roughly 330 films were produced in Jacksonville during a period known as the golden age of silent cinema – between 1909 and 1917 (72). Bean explains that motion picture studios and film production companies were attracted to the city thanks to its versatile locations and consistently sunny weather. Indeed, the bright sunlight and scenic locales already made of Jacksonville a competitor to California for domestic American tourism. However, unlike its rival, Jacksonville also had proximity to the northeast and was easily reachable from New York by boat or by rail. How the city's geographical location might have appealed to artists and would-be filmmakers is made clear by the boast that Jacksonville was 'only 27 hours from Broadway' (78). Beginning with the first day of January 1900, therefore, Bean unfolds the story of how this 'first Hollywood' for a brief period became a special enclave of filmmaking.

Bean recounts historical events in precise detail, including descriptions of the Jacksonville Fire of 1901, and the post-fire reconstruction of the city, which is when the first studio back lots were built. The rebuilding of Jacksonville gave the city a new lease of life, its studios thriving during the 1910s, when American film production skyrocketed. As per the Broadway connection outlined above, film companies from the northeast ventured south to Jacksonville and for the very same reasons that they would eventually go to California: Jacksonville had ample space, an abundance of natural light, and a wide variety of locations and architectural styles. Essanay, Vitagraph and Edison began using Jacksonville exteriors after 1912. Fox and Metro Pictures soon

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followed. By 1914, over a dozen major film companies had ensconced themselves in Jacksonville, and many luminaries of silent cinema, including Lionel Barrymore, Mary Pickford, D.W. Griffith and animator Max Fleischer, would work there. The so-called first Hollywood was, however, not without its problems.

Besides a susceptibility to fire, due to the heat and easily ignited wooden buildings, Jacksonville suffered from a lack of infrastructure. Without film processing facilities, film was sent to New York by train and then brought back to Florida for editing. This system fell apart during World War I when the railroads were needed to transport supplies instead. When the film studios lost access to the railroads, they lost the vital service that supplied film processing. Although Jacksonville's first film studios predated California's, then, Hollywood would take over film production during the war, and Jacksonville would embrace the shipbuilding industry.

After filmmaking in Jacksonville was greatly reduced in the aftermath of World War One, Florida filmmaker Richard E. Norman bought the Eagle Film City studios in the city's suburbs. *The First Hollywood's* strongest asset is the chapter that Bean devotes to Norman, a pivotal filmmaker in the development of silent black cinema, and who 'had in part put the black film industry on his shoulders, and his films became emblematic of that industry's progress' (118). During that period, most films typically cast African-American actors only in stereotypical and derogatory roles. However, Norman, like his contemporary Oscar Micheaux, cast African-American actors in positive roles, often as the protagonists in his films. Norman's films starred African-American actors in the roles of hero, businessman, pilot and cowboy. Identifying a gap in the field's knowledge regarding Norman's work, then, Bean pinpoints a lesser known area of silent black cinema – and this research could spur future volumes on Norman and his contribution to silent black cinema in a similar vein to the few existing books on Micheaux.

*The First Hollywood* is singular in that it covers not only Jacksonville's little-known contribution to American film history, but it also makes a significant contribution to the existing literature on Florida history. Bean takes us back to the nickel theatres and movie studios of Jacksonville by way of newspaper clippings, library archives, first-person interviews and second-hand accounts. It offers film students a rare source of inspiration about the dawn of filmmaking in the United States that they will not find in most cinema studies textbooks. This unique book is intended for film scholars and Hollywood enthusiasts alike and would suit anyone interested in twentieth century United States history.