

THE MINE WITH THE IRON DOOR

JENNIFER L. JENKINS, 2010

The Mine With the Iron Door caused quite a stir when it went into production outside Tucson in mid-1924. Based on a novel by Harold Bell Wright, then America's best-selling novelist, the film promised to bring fame to both its author and his adopted hometown. Advance local publicity noted the use of Tucson's beautiful desert setting and the small cityscape as backdrops to the story, and invited Tucsonans to view the film with an eye to familiar locations. Indeed, the reviewer for *Variety* noted that "The location picker deserves a [credit] line all by himself. They are truly works of art and a delight to the eye." Local audiences of 1924 found much to recognize in the film's scenery, from the establishing shot of Tucson framed by saguaros to images of Cañada del Oro and Mount Lemmon vistas—locations still recognizable to viewers in 2010.

The film was celebrated in the local and industry press for its fidelity to the source novel, and for being filmed—remarkably—in the exact, real locations where the events of the fictional story took place. The story of an orphaned girl, stolen as a baby by Natives and taken back by two prospectors to raise as their own, relies upon pathos, cultural difference, and Western stereotypes to bring to the screen the plot of *Innocence Imperiled* by the evil Lizard (Raymond Hatton) and finally redeemed by an Eastern tenderfoot (Pat O'Malley). *Variety* pronounced the film (even) better than a Western: "True, its story is of the west and told by western characters, but the plot has dignity, drama, romantic interest and a definite appeal."

Silent movie actors were made of stern stuff. Not only did the cast of *Mine* brave the heat and monsoons of location shooting in June and July, but several had extremely long careers. Dorothy MacKail, the ingénue in *Mine*, had 60-year career that began in silents in 1920 and ended with an appearance on *Hawaii Five-O* in 1980. Raymond Hatton, the aptly-named villain Lizard in *Mine*, totaled 420 film and television credits between 1909 and 1967. Director Sam Wood worked consistently from the '20s until his death in 1950, filming several Harold Bell Wright scripts, two Marx Brothers films, and such Hollywood classics as *Goodbye, Mr. Chips*, *Kitty Foyle*, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, *The Pride of the Yankees*, and *Saratoga Trunk*.

Testament to the appeal of *The Mine With the Iron Door* is an article in the October 20, 1924 *Citizen* noting that the film has been held over for additional showings: "Each night has seen the street in front of the Rialto Theater filled with people forming a line a block long. . . . In truth, the fact that 'The Mine with the Iron Door' has been taken near Tucson and is replete with the atmosphere of the southwest must in the mind of a Tucsonan take precedence over the interest and significance of the film as a purely cinematic production. It is, however, a picture which by right of its merit, will interest a gigantic circle of movie fans." Welcome to that circle, and enjoy the show!