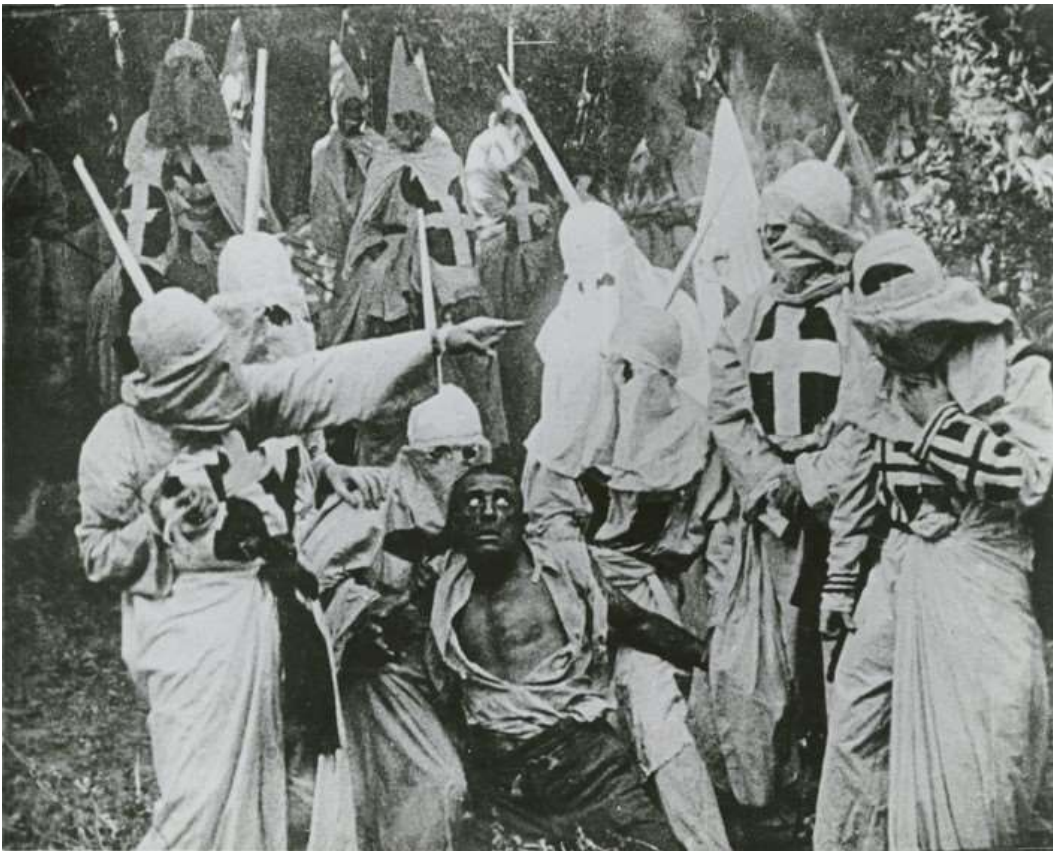


Movie “The Birth of a Nation” Plays in Owensboro

By Jerry Long
c.2025

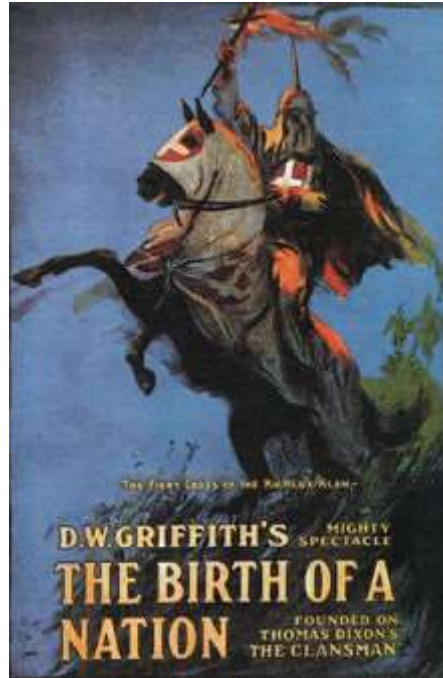


Klansmen surround freedman Gus (played by white actor Walter Long in blackface) in a scene from "The Birth of a Nation." The movie offended many with its negative stereotypes of Blacks and its heroic portrayal of the Ku Klux Klan. The movie helped to rekindle the KKK. The racist narrative presented was an affirmation of the prejudices of many.



From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia:

The Birth of a Nation



The Birth of a Nation is a landmark of film history, lauded for its technical virtuosity. It was the first non-serial American 12-reel film ever made. Its plot, part fiction and part history, chronicles the assassination of Abraham Lincoln by John Wilkes Booth and the relationship of two families in the Civil War and Reconstruction eras over the course of several years—the pro-Union (Northern) Stonemans and the pro-Confederacy (Southern) Camerons. It was originally shown in two parts separated by an intermission, and it was the first American-made film to have a musical score for an orchestra. It helped to pioneer closeups and fadeouts, and it includes a carefully staged battle sequence with hundreds of extras made to look like thousands. It came with a 13-page Souvenir Program. It was the first motion picture to be screened inside the White House, viewed there by President Woodrow Wilson, his family, and members of his cabinet.

The film was controversial even before its release and it has remained so ever since; it has been called "the most controversial film ever made in the United States", as well as "the most reprehensibly racist film in Hollywood history". The film has been denounced for its racist depiction of African Americans. The film portrays its black characters (many of whom are played by white actors in blackface) as unintelligent and sexually aggressive toward white women. The Ku Klux Klan (KKK), a white supremacist far-right hate group, is portrayed as a heroic force that protects white women and maintains white supremacy.

Popular among white audiences nationwide upon its release, the film's success was both a consequence of and a contributor to racial segregation throughout the U.S.. In response to the film's depictions of black people and Civil War history, African Americans across the U.S. organized and protested. In Boston and other localities, black leaders and the NAACP spearheaded an unsuccessful campaign to have it banned on the basis that it inflamed racial tensions and could

incite violence. It was also denied release in the state of Ohio and the cities of Chicago, Denver, Pittsburgh, St. Louis, and Minneapolis. Griffith's indignation at efforts to censor or ban the film motivated him to produce *Intolerance* the following year. A 2023 study found that screenings of the film during its original release were linked to a spike in racist violence.

In spite of its divisiveness, *The Birth of a Nation* was a massive commercial success across the nation—grossing far more than any previous motion picture—and it profoundly influenced both the film industry and American culture. Adjusted for inflation, the film remains one of the highest-grossing films ever made. It has been acknowledged as an inspiration for the rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan, which took place only a few months after its release. In 1992, the Library of Congress deemed the film "culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant" and selected it for preservation in the National Film Registry.



“The Birth of a Nation” played in Owensboro on the following engagements:

- **Grand Theatre (southeast corner of First & St. Ann) on 9, 10 & 11 December 1915;**
- **Grand Theatre on 11 & 12 September 1916;**
- **Empress Theatre (418 Frederica) 4 February 1918, one day only;**
- **Grand Theatre on 3 & 4 February 1919;**
- **Seville Theatre (118 West Third) on 20, 21 & 22 September 1931; and the**
- **Plaza Theatre (2700 Frederica) on 20, 21, 22 & 23 May 1970.**



Owensboro Messenger, Owensboro, KY, Sunday, 7 November 1915, p.7B:

BIRTH OF A NATION

The Birth of a Nation the show Owensboro has been waiting for, with an orchestra of 21 pieces, with a cast of 1,800 people and 3,000 horses used during the action of the play, comes to the Grand on December 9, 10 and 11, with matinee each afternoon. D W. Griffith's great masterpiece, and the nation's mightiest spectacle founded upon *The Clansman* by Thomas Dixon, dealing with the reconstruction and Civil War period in the nation's history will be distinctively the most important booking of the season, for Owensboro will be one of the smallest cities in the United States to see this big feature this season. The attraction is still in the first flush of its success, with companies appearing before tremendous audience in New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, Pittsburg and St. Louis. While *The Birth of a Nation* is an outgrowth of motion photography, it is far more than a moving picture show. The company with the picture will consist of 35 people, with two carloads of electrical and other special stage equipment. The company brings a twenty-one piece orchestra, two moving picture machines, two operators, men for effects, scenery and stage seats, screen, musical director, and stage carpenter. The play contains 5,000 scenes presents 18,000 actors and 3,000 horses, cost \$500,000 for actual production expense and took eight months to produce. The story is divided in two acts, total time of performance two hours and for 40 minutes. Some of the greatest battles of the Civil War are re-enacted. A reproduction of Atlanta as it was in 1864 is given and Sherman's march to the sea. Lee and Grant are shown at Appomatox, Ford's

theatre, Washington, reproduction to the smallest detail, the Lincoln tragedy. Reconstruction pictorialized in the actual South Carolina scenes show a series of wild Ku Klux Klan rides that commandeered a county for a day and cost \$10,000. The night scenes of the battles invented and perfected cost \$5,000. The women's dresses used 12,000 yards and Ku Klux Klan costumes, 25,000 yards of cloth.



Owensboro Messenger, Owensboro, KY, Tuesday, 7 December 1915, p.5:

*Negroes Enter Protest Against
"The Birth of a Nation"*

Before adjourning last night the council was waited on by a delegation of negroes, headed by Dr. R. P. Bell, city physician for the colored people, who requested to be heard on behalf of a mass meeting of their race. Dr. Bell stated to the council that there was then in progress at the Fourth-street Colored Baptist church a revival, He said that in connection with this revival there had been held a mass meeting of negroes for the purposes of protesting against the showing of "The Birth of a Nation" at the Grand theatre the latter end of this week. He stated that two scenes in particular were calculated to stir up strife, between the white people and the negroes, and cause animosities to exist. He said that there had always existed the best of good feeling between the two races, and it was hoped by the colored people that this would always continue. Dr. Bell praised highly the magnificent show but said it was marred by two objectionable scenes.

Mr. Stimson moved that the matter be referred to the mayor for action. Mayor Hickman advised the council that he was not empowered to censor productions of such a character, and that he knew from newspapers and other criticisms that the play was the greatest screen play ever produced, nothing similar ever having been attempted. He quoted from Dr. Chas. H. Parkhurst, the noted Eastern divine, who had pronounced "The Birth or a Nation" the most magnificent picture he had ever seen. The motion of Mr. Stimson was changed to empower the mayor to name a committee to wait upon the management of the Grand and learn if the two objectionable scenes could be eliminated without affecting the value of the whole. The mayor named Dr. Calhoun, Mr. Stimson and Mr. Hart as the committee. They will report at the next meeting of the council.

Similar efforts were made by the negroes at Henderson, but Mayor Johnson declined to censor the great film in any manner. Injunctions have been secured by negroes in Northern cities against "The Birth of a Nation," but every one has been won by the company producing the film. A great part of the picture deals with conditions in the South following the Civil War during the "reconstruction" period.



Owensboro Messenger, Owensboro, KY, Wednesday, 8 December 1915, p.3:

*There Will be no Censoring of
"The Birth of a Nation"*

That the film drama "The Birth of a Nation" will be shown in Owensboro uncensored was the opinion of Manager Pedley of the Grand, and of Mayor Hickman. When the delegation of negroes made its plea to the city council to eliminate two scenes from the great show the mayor, not being empowered to act as censor, referred the matter to a committee to be reported upon at the next council meeting which will not be until after the show film shall have been exhibited.

In an interview Tuesday afternoon Mayor Hickman said:

"I have seen statements in several different papers about the film, "The Birth of a Nation." They are all unanimous in stating that it is the most interesting and most instructive photoplay ever presented. I have also read in many of the papers of protesting delegations from the colored race, similar to the one that appeared before the Owensboro city council. In very few instances, so far as I can learn, has any serious action been taken towards censoring the production.

"From what I have heard and read it is my opinion that there is nothing in the film that could possibly tend to arouse any race antagonism. There is nothing shown that reflects any discredit upon the negro. I deem the picture as being rather of advantage to them as they can the more readily judge the great advancements the race has made as a race since the scenes depicted.

"Manager Pedley told me that, if the play was censored as requested, the entire motive would be ruined. I am inclined to believe the colored citizens who see the film will appreciate it as much as will the white people.

Manager Pedley states that the picture will be shown exactly as advertised and that none of it will be censored. Councilman Stimson, a member of the committee named by Mayor Hickman called on Manager Pedley and requested that the scenes in the film objectionable to Owensboro negroes, be cut out. Mr. Pedley said: "I can not cut anything out of the films of 'The Birth of a Nation,' and would not do it if I could."



Owensboro Messenger, Owensboro, KY, Wednesday, 8 December 1915, p.2:

The Birth of a Nation.

The Birth of a Nation, at the Grand December 9, 10 and 11, is a telling illustration of the possibilities of motion pictures as an instrument of instruction in history.

The criticism that it exhibits the negro in an unfortunate light and that it is calculated to engender racial animosity, is fully met by the consideration that it represents the negro, not as he is now at all, but; as he was in the days when he had just had the chains broken from him, and when he was rioting; in the; deliciousness of a liberty, so new and untried that he had not yet learned to understand it, and was as ignorant as a baby of the way to use it. It is in this respect exactly true to history, and if it reflects upon the negro as he was then it is a compliment to the black man of today. An exhibition of lawlessness might not have been proper thirty or forty years ago. Such proprieties change with the passing of time. Seats now on sale at Mills' drug store.



Owensboro Messenger, Owensboro, KY, Friday, 10 December 1915, p.4:

When negroes ask for the censorship of "The Birth of a Nation" there's a reason. Owensboro is fortunate in having a Democratic mayor who believes in a display of the truth.



Owensboro Messenger, Owensboro, KY, Saturday, 11 December 1915, p.2:

*"The Birth of a Nation"
Continues to Draw Large Crowds*

Friday afternoon's matinee of "The Birth of a Nation," was witnessed by almost a packed house at the Grand. Two school classes attended in a body. The historical value of the pictures was grasped by the teachers, who assembled their classes and accompanied them to the show. There were nearly 100 pupils in the two classes. The stupendous proportions of the wonderful picture being shown at the theatre can scarcely be appreciated at the time of viewing it.

It should be remembered that "The Birth of a Nation" is the first show at the prices that has ever been given in Owensboro more than one performance. The matinee this afternoon and the closing show tonight will be five performances of the biggest moving picture show in the country. From Owensboro the picture goes to Huntington, West Virginia, Louisville has not yet had "The Birth of a Nation." Owensboro's business, so far, has about equaled Paducah, and doubled that of Henderson. The enthusiasm at the Grand on Friday afternoon and night surpassed that of Thursday night.



Owensboro Messenger, Owensboro, KY, Sunday, 12 December 1915, p.6:

Showing to 1,000 people Saturday, "The Birth of a Nation." at the close of the fifth performance of this wonderful masterpiece of motion photography last night, closed a successful three days' engagement at the Grand.

Manager Taylor was well pleased with the patronage accorded the film in Owensboro. Notwithstanding the fact that the filmpay was produced on the eve of the Christmas holidays the great picture was shown to good houses at each of the five performances. It is stated that not less than thirty-five hundred people witnessed the production and that \$3,000 was paid for admission tickets.



Owensboro Messenger, Owensboro, KY, Sunday, 12 December 1915, p.6:

The "Birth of A Nation," moving picture show by D. W. Griffith, has been in Owensboro for five performances and large crowds have attended and deep impressions have been left behind. Most of them are true as the great picture was true to history. Some erroneous impressions may have been imbibed. It was so with any who thought the play wholly partisan or pitched entirely on

racial hatred. Not so. There was heroic showing of virtuous and loyal negroes. The racial fairness of the author was further shown in the depravity and unwisdom of those white carpetbag leaders who inspired and lead the docile negroes into most of the evil that they did. It requires an impartial mind to get the proper bearing and teaching of this great production.



Owensboro Messenger, Owensboro, KY, Wednesday, 15 December 1915, p.4:

The "Birth of A Nation," moving picture show by D. W. Griffith, has been in Owensboro for five performances and large crowds have attended and deep impressions have been left behind. Most of them are true as the great picture was true to history. Some erroneous impressions may have been imbibed, It was so with any who thought the play wholly partisan or pitched entirely on racial hatred. Not so. There was heroic showing of virtuous and loyal negroes. The racial fairness of the author was further shown in the depravity and unwisdom or those white carpetbag leaders who inspired and lead the docile negroes into most of the evil that they did. It requires an impartial mind to get the proper bearing and teaching of this great production.



Owensboro Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Thursday, 7 September 1916, p.2:

“BIRTH A NATION”

"The Birth of a Nation" is coming back. This announcement from the Grand theatre will be received with delight by the great multitude of local playgoers who were moved to cheers and tears by the \$500,000 film-and-music spectacle last season and it is a safe prediction that another series of capacity audience will greet its return. D. W. Griffith is sending the same symphony orchestra of 25 and the same elaborate production seen last season but there will \$2 seats for this engagement. The engagement is for two days, beginning Monday matinee.



Owensboro Messenger, Owensboro, KY, Tuesday, 12 September 1916, p.2:

*“The Birth of a Nation” Makes
Another Big Hit At Grand*

The great film, "The Birth of a Nation," is more wonderful than ever. It is more wonderful because nearly a year has elapsed since its first showing in Owensboro, and during that time there has been nothing produced that in any way compares with D. W. Griffith's wonderful story of the Civil war and the reconstruction days that followed.

More than 2,000 people witnessed the showing of "The Birth of a Nation" at the Grand last December. There was a fair crowd at the matinee at the Grand on Monday afternoon, and last

night there was a great throng of people. The balcony and gallery were packed, and there was a large number on the first floor. There were nearly 200 out-of-town visitors at the night performance. Many automobile parties were here from Hawesville, Calhoun, Livermore, Hartford and other nearby towns. A large number came down from Rockport, returning at midnight on a special boat.

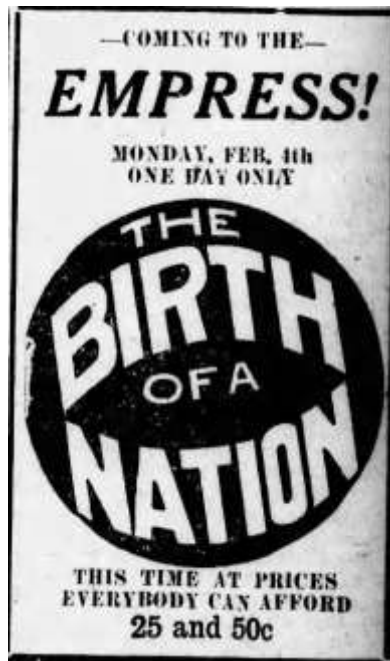
The same superb orchestra is carried this time, and the same wonderful mechanical effects are given. The showing of "The Birth of a Nation" last night caused demonstration after demonstration, and the entire audience was delighted with the picture. Another matinee will be given this afternoon and the final performance will be tonight.



Owensboro Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Sunday, 27 January 1918, p.2B:

“THE BIRTH OF A NATION”

“The Birth of a Nation” which is coming to the Empress at popular 1 prices Feb 4 has proved the sensation of the century. In New York City it has the astounding record of 1200 performances. In Chicago it ran for 500 performances and in Boston for 450. In Philadelphia it played to enormous business for twenty weeks. There were similar records in Pittsburgh and St Louis for fourteen weeks each. In every part of the country “The Birth of a Nation” has played the largest business ever known These records are now being duplicated abroad. It is now being successfully shown on five continents, America, South America, Europe, Australia and Asia.

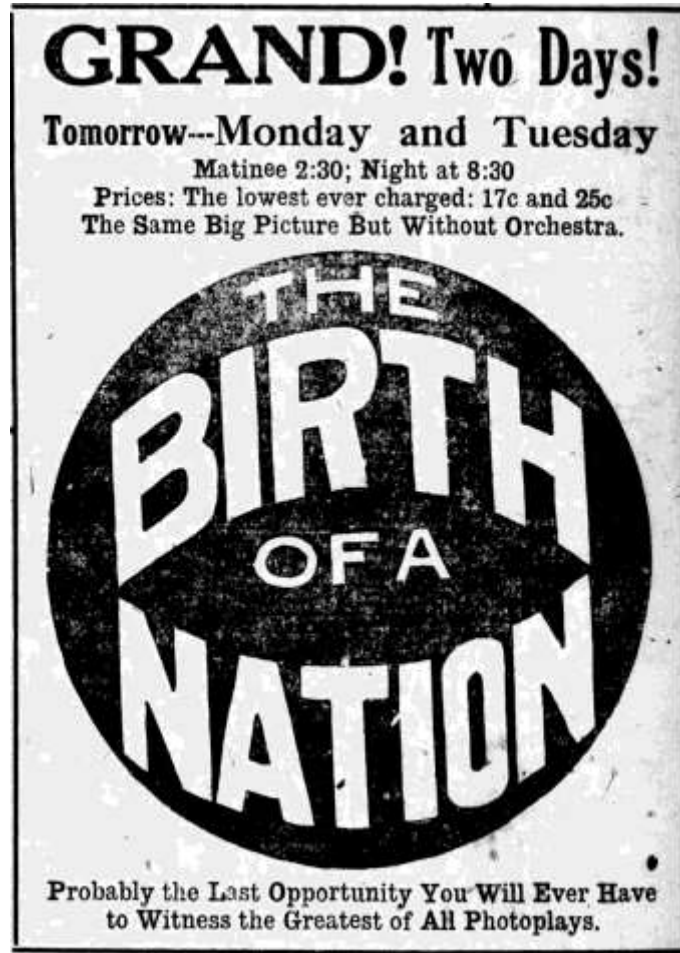


Owensboro Messenger, Owensboro, KY, Tuesday, 5 February 1918, p.5:

The popularity of the filmplay, "Birth of a Nation," was evidenced yesterday in the three "standing room only" audiences at the Empress theatre. The spirit of patriotism, the appealing story, and the historical value of the film continue to make it one of the greatest photo dramas on record.



Owensboro Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Sunday, 2 February 1919, p.2B:



Birth of a Nation

"The Birth of a Nation," that well known Griffith masterpiece plays the Grand Monday and Tuesday at popular prices. The story covers the essential details of American history ranging through three centuries. Actual battles of the Civil War are shown with tens of thousands of soldiers in the conflict. Lillian Gish, Mae Marsh, Miriam Cooper, Henry Walthall, Robert Harron and other favorites appear in the cast. And besides the big war scenes, the assassination of Lincoln is given with Wilkes Booth firing the shot, the play being "Our American Cousin," with Laura Keene the star. The coming home of the little colonel after the war will never be forgotten by those who have seen the picture.



Owensboro Messenger, Owensboro, KY, Tuesday, 4 February 1919, p.4:

The largest crowd which has yet witnessed the . "Birth of a Nation" turned out on its fourth visit to the city last evening at the Grand. Many were in the audience who have seen it several times during its different visits to the city and still enjoy the wonder and the great beauty of the picture.



Owensboro Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Friday, 18 September 1931, p.14:

SEVILLE THEATRE

COMING SUNDAY AND MONDAY
D. W. Griffith's

BIRTH OF A NATION

The Most Famous Picture of ALL TIME
Brought to Life Through the Miracle of Sound Effect.
DON'T MISS THIS
Eighth Wonder of the World
18,000 People—3,000 Horses—The Supreme Picture of All Time.
ADDED ATTRACTION
"THE LAST YARD"—Directed by KNUTE ROCKNE, of Notre Dame. See Rockne in action as he coaches the boys.
Also PATHE NEWS

Owensboro Messenger, Owensboro, KY, Tuesday, 22 September 1931, p.7:

"BIRTH OF A NATION"

"Birth of a Nation," a picture produced by D. W. Griffith in 1914, has played to capacity business at the Seville theatre for two days. Many people unable to attain seats have requested the management to hold this picture, so that everyone will have an opportunity to see it. The management has been successful in getting the distributor to let the Seville use this picture this afternoon. The picture will begin at 1 o'clock and close at 6 o'clock.



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Sunday, 17 May 1970, p.7C:



MOTHER LOVE is dramatically demonstrated in this famous scene from D. W. Griffith's "The Birth of A Nation," opening Wednesday at the Plaza Theatre. Left to right are Josephine Crowel, the late Henry B. Walthall and Lillian Gish.

Classic 'Birth Of A Nation' Returns With Sound Effects

"The Birth of A Nation" was the first feature-length production in the United States and premiered at the Liberty Theatre in New York in the days when movies were a nickelodeon novelty, March 3, 1915. The original silent classic, now complete with sound effects and the authentic musical score, will open Wednesday at the Plaza Theatre.

"The Birth of A Nation" costs as much to make as was ordinarily spent on half a dozen films of that day. It opens to the tune of Stephen Foster's "Swanee River" and such familiar favorites as "My Old Kentucky Home" and "Dixie" are heard throughout the film.

Now in its first major release since the 1930s, "The Birth of A Nation" has indeed a broad appeal to this modern generation. Today's young audience will find its mood varying from high camp to silent tension as the plot unfolds.

Based on Thomas Dixon's novel, "The Clansman," "The Birth of A Nation" tells the story of two friendly families, the Stonemans of Pennsylvania and the Camerons of South Carolina, who fight on opposite sides during the War Between The States. In the aftermath of reconstruction they unite to eject the carpetbaggers from the South. The scope of its drama covers such historical events as Lee's surrender, Lincoln's assassination, the siege of Atlanta, the dreaded Ku Klux Klan, and Sherman's march to the sea. The battle scenes, with literally a "cast of thousands," are staged on such a scale as to rival even some of today's colossal epics.

The cast includes Lillian Gish, Henry B. Walthall, Mae Marsh, Miriam Cooper, Donald Crisp, Wallace Reid, and Raoul Walsh.

The Ruthless Panoramic Drama Of
LEE'S SURRENDER
LINCOLN'S ASSASSINATION
THE SIEGE OF ATLANTA - THE KU KLUX KLAN
SHERMAN'S MARCH TO THE SEA - AND MORE.

The Original Silent Classic

D.W. GRIFFITH'S

THE BIRTH OF A NATION

NOW COMPLETE WITH SOUND EFFECTS
AND THE AUTHENTIC MUSICAL SCORE



A JOSEPH BRENNER
ASSOCIATES PRESENTATION

LILLIAN GISH · HENRY B. WALTHALL · MAE MARSH · MIRIAM COOPER
DONALD CRISP · WALLACE REID · RAUL WALSH

Based on the Novel: THE CLANSMAN · By THOMAS DIXON · Directed by D. W. GRIFFITH

**STARTS
WEDNESDAY!**

PLAZA

THE
LUXURY
THEATRE

WESLEYAN PARK PLAZA SHOPPING CENTER



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, 25 October 1995, p.6A:

TCM's cancellation of 'Birth of a Nation' disappointing

.... The importance of "The Birth of a Nation" in cinema history cannot be underestimated. Directed by D.W. Griffith, three-hour epic premiered in Los Angeles in February 1915 to both cheers and jeers.

Practically every movie technique – the sweeping long shot, running inserts, cross-cutting between parallel actions, dramatic lighting – all were introduced by Griffith with this production. "The Birth of A Nation" became a guide for all future filmmakers.

Despite all of its dazzle, "The Birth of A Nation" carried a lot of negative baggage: its racist story. Based on the novel "The Clansman," the film glorified the formation of the Ku Klux Klan as a means ridding the post-Civil War South of "Yankee carpetbaggers." That element of the script might not have caused a big stir, but Griffith's film is filled with racist sequences.

Griffith's drew on his own childhood memories while making the film. He was born in Kentucky, the son of a Confederate Army veteran father's bitterness.

TCM had planned to air a restored version of the film accompanied by discussions about its content and long-range impact on the cinema. Joining film critic Robert Osborne was to be Dr. Thomas Cripps, professor of history at Morgan State and author of two books about African Americans in the movies, and Charles Burnett, one of the most successful independent African-American film directors.

In view of the current racial climate, however, TCM decided to cancel the showing and discussion of the film.

Thirty years ago, many of us had high hopes for the future of race relations. On the surface, barriers were lifted and doors were opened. But what about our hearts?

During all these efforts to make life better, we forgot to do one of the most important things: to sit down and talk – really talk – with each other and confront our own thoughts and fears.

