

# MOVIE COMPANY COMES TO TIBURON TO FILM FERRIES

By Susan Cluff

In 1933, a movie company arrived from Universal Studios to shoot ferry scenes in Tiburon for a feature comedy called "Her First Mate" starring ZaSu Pitts and Slim Somerville. Some 60 men and women from Tiburon and Belvedere found jobs as extras and people came from all around to watch the filming and get the stars' autographs.

Comic actress ZaSu Pitts was already immensely popular with cinema-goers, her large blue eyes, fluttering hands and zany antics later caricatured as Olive Oyl in the Popeye cartoons. Paired here with tall, gangly Slim Somerville, who'd begun his acting career as a Keystone Kop, the film also featured Una Merkel, Berton Churchill and George Marion. The movie plot focuses on an old sea dog, Slim, reduced to selling candy on a night ferry. Complications ensue when his wife ZaSu, believing he's the ship's first mate, uses their family nest egg to buy him a ferry of his own.

The scenes filmed in Tiburon -- the christening of a new ferryboat with the ferry and pier dressed up in flags and bunting for the celebration, passengers loading and unloading -- took several days. Director William Wyler, who later won three Academy Awards for directing, was a perfectionist known for multiple takes. Extras like Charles Chapman Jr., whose family owned the town grocery store, com-

plained of sore feet and limbs caused from continuously standing in one place and repeatedly walking and climbing the ferry stairs.

Since Tiburon was a railroad freight and repair depot then, with only a small shuttle ferry to Sausalito, the film studio had made arrangements with Southern Pacific to rent the Tiburon pier and bring the ferry steamer "Shasta" over from Sausalito to play the part of the fictitious "John Horner." Built in the 1920s, she could carry up to 600 passengers and 60 cars and worked the popular ferry run between Sausalito and the San Francisco's Hyde Street pier.

The irony of the situation was not lost on local residents who'd recently been thwarted in their dreams of restoring direct passenger and auto ferry service to the City. Despite getting approvals, filling in the Tiburon lagoon to extend the State highway into town, and constructing a new pier, it never happened. Right as the film was shooting, construction had already begun on the new Golden Gate Bridge piers and trestle. After the span opened in 1937, Bay Area ferry use waned. The last Hyde Street ferry run was in 1938, the last from Sausalito in 1941.

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**1-2.** Images of scenes from "Her First Mate" taken from an amateur home movie on 16mm film donated by Sam Chapman and shown at the "Tiburon Centennial Historic Film Festival" in 1984.

**3.** The Tiburon dock used for filming movie ferry scenes shown here in 1927 with the small shuttle ferry "Marin" in the foreground. After 1909, the main ferry service was from Sausalito and larger passenger and auto ferries only docked at Tiburon for special excursions and repairs.



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