

## OUR HOSPITALITY (1923)

Costume dramas were all the rage when Joseph M. Schenck, producer of the Buster Keaton features, encouraged his star comedian to make something along the same lines, convinced that interest in period subjects had reached “fever heat.” Keaton seemed to acknowledge as much when asked what kind of comedy people wanted. “Refined brutality,” he said. “Put lace on the slapstick. Gild the club. Don’t kill; merely mutilate. That enables the cast to appear in other comedies.”

In their search for a historic germ of an idea, something that would fit on the back of a postcard, someone hit on the notion of dropping Buster into the middle of a feud on the order of the Hatfields and the McCoys. Tentatively titled *Headin’ South*, the resulting story would first go before the public as *Hospitality*, then, ultimately, as *Our Hospitality*. Said Keaton, “On *Our Hospitality* we had this one idea of an old-fashioned Southern feud. But it looks as though this must have died down in the years it took me to grow up from being a baby, so our best period for that was to go back something like eighty years. ‘All right,’ we say. ‘We go back that far. And now when I go South, am I traveling in a covered wagon, or what? Let’s look up the records and see when the first railroad train was invented.’ Well, we find out: We’ve got the Stephenson Rocket for England and the De Witt Clinton for the United States. And we chose the Rocket engine because it’s funnier looking. The passenger coaches were stagecoaches with

flanged wheels put on them. So we built the entire train and that set our period for us: 1825 was the actual year of the invention of the railroad.”

Casting the new movie became a family affair. A year after separating from his wife Myra over his drinking, Buster’s father, Joe Keaton, had taken the pledge, and with Buster’s wife, Natalie Talmadge, and Little Buster already on board, it was a natural fit to give him the role of the Rocket’s high-kicking engineer. Perennial heavy Joe Roberts was the obvious choice for the paternal head of the Canfield clan, with New York stage personality Craig Ward and Ralph Bushman (son of matinee idol Francis X.) as his two trigger-happy sons. Filling out the principal cast were character actress Kitty Bradbury, known for her work with Griffith and Chaplin, and stage veteran Monte Collins, both of whom had appeared with Keaton in the past.

If *Three Ages* represented a transitional and somewhat uncertain bridge between shorts and features, *Our Hospitality* was a mature work of visual storytelling, richly textured and combining the comic and the tragic so deftly it marked an astonishing advancement for a man who had been directing his own films for just three years. “Once we started into features,” said Keaton, differentiating between shorts and what he termed “legitimate” stories, “we had to stop doing impossible gags and ridiculous situations. We had to make an audience believe our story.” Gone were the anachronistic absurdities of *Three Ages*, replaced by the quaint and charming authenticities of the early Nineteenth Century. “I don’t know why it is, but I know it’s a

fact, that every gag used in a straight comedy has to be *logical* at bottom. There must be an element of possibility in everything that happens to me or the audience is immediately resentful.”

— James Curtis, *Buster Keaton: [A Filmmaker's Life](#)* (Knopf)