

STEAMBOAT BILL, JR. (1928)

The impetus for the film that became *Steamboat Bill, Jr.* came from director Charles F. “Chuck” Reisner, a monologist and song-and-dance man in vaudeville who made the leap to pictures by way of the scenario department at Keystone. “Chuck’s story,” as Keaton remembered it, “opened with a rugged old Mississippi steamboat captain reading a letter from his wife. They had a quarrel twenty years before, just after their only child was born. She returned with the baby to her hometown in New England. The letter explains that their baby, now a fully-grown man, is on his way to see his father for the first time. He will arrive by train on Sunday and will wear a white carnation so his father will recognize him. But the Sunday I arrive is Mothers Day, and every man on the train is wearing a white carnation in his buttonhole. Hopefully, my father, Steamboat Bill, approaches one muscular youth after another. But he doesn’t find me until the train pulls out because I got off the train on the wrong side. He takes one look at me and groans. I have on a beret and plus fours. I have a ukulele under my arm and a ‘baseball moustache,’ so called because it has nine hairs on each side... With this for a start, all we needed to get the story rolling and churning was a wealthy menace with a pretty daughter.”

For the role of the father, William Canfield, a.k.a. Steamboat Bill, Keaton recruited Ernest Torrence, six-foot-four, a star heavy in pictures with the face of a battered prizefighter. The wealthy menace, in the person of actor Tom McGuire, became a rival

steamboat owner, J.J. King, president of the River Junction Bank and proprietor of the local hotel. ("This floating palace should put an end to that 'thing' Steamboat Bill is running," he boasts.) And Keaton discovered actress Marion Byron, all of seventeen, in the *Hollywood Music Box Revue*, where she played a memorable bit as a child in a sketch with Fannie Brice. "Miss Byron has never worked before a camera," he said, "but she is a human dynamo and just the right height. In fact, she comes about even with my ears—when she has on high-heeled shoes."

Keaton collaborated on the story with Reisner, who was engaged to direct the picture. By July 1927, Keaton and Reisner were far enough along to make a scouting trip to Sacramento, the California state capital, where the winding Sacramento River had previously served as the Yangtze for a Richard Dix epic titled *Shanghai Bound* and the Volga for Cecil B. DeMille's *The Volga Boatman*. They cruised the river, confirming it would stand in nicely for the Mississippi, with room to construct the entire town of River Junction on the west bank near its confluence with the American River.

Within days, a huge exterior set was under construction, the King Hotel and thirty-three other buildings lining two fully macadamized boulevards complete with concrete sidewalks, outdoor lighting, and a pair of wharves jutting out into the water. At a cost of around \$50,000, River Junction would serve as the backdrop for most of the action in *Steamboat Bill*, and then, in a spectacular climax, it would be destroyed by torrential rains and a devastating flood. With typical efficiency, scenic designer Fred "Gabe"

Gabourie and his on-site foreman, Lloyd Brierley, along with 150 local workers and craftsmen, were aiming to have it all fabricated within a couple of weeks so that filming could begin there on July 20. Then portions of the town would be reconstructed a few miles away for the flood scenes in the Sacramento's slow-moving waters. In all, Brierley estimated, two-hundred thousand board feet of lumber would go into the job.

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