

THE GENERAL (1927)

Buster Keaton always credited scenarist Clyde Bruckman with the idea for *The General*—and Bruckman wasn't even working for him at the time. After writer Jean Havez's death, "Bruck" had gone freelance, working at intervals with Monte Banks, Eddie Cline, and Harold Lloyd. A prodigious reader, he had come across *The Great Locomotive Chase*, a history of a daring Union raid into Georgia during the Civil War. The book by William Pittenger, one of the participants in the expedition, had been around for decades in various forms, and it's likely that Bruckman would never have seen the comic potential in the story had he encountered it under its original title, *Daring and Suffering* or the later *Capturing a Locomotive*. But the apt combination of the words "Locomotive" and "Chase" in the title of the book's third edition, published in 1891, must surely have brought Keaton to mind.

"Clyde Bruckman run into this book... and it was a pip," Buster reminisced.

"[Bruckman] says, 'Well, it's awful heavy for us to attempt, because when we got that much plot and story to tell, it means we're goin' to have a lot of film with no laughs in it. But we won't worry too much about it if we can get the plot all [laid out] in that first reel, and our characters—believable characters—all planted, and then go ahead and let it roll.'" Of the book's nearly five-hundred pages, the story to be told on screen consumed just one-hundred and twenty-eight. "Nothing I had ever heard so fired my

imagination,” wrote Pittenger, a first corporal in the Union Army. “The idea of a few disguised men suddenly seizing a train far within the enemy’s lines, cutting the telegraph wires, burning bridges, and leaving the foe in helpless rage behind, was the very sublimity and romance of war.”

Keaton instantly knew his solitary character wouldn’t fit in with the twenty-one volunteers under the leadership of James J. Andrews, a Union spy and contraband merchant. Rather, since this was, as he put it, a page from history, it was important to acknowledge up front that the audience would already know how it all turned out for the South. “They lost the war anyhow, so the audience resents it. We knew better. Don’t tell the story from the Northerners’ side—tell it from the Southerners’ side.” The character he envisioned for himself would be a Confederate engineer whose beloved locomotive, the General, is the one the spies seize in the raid and pilot northward toward Tennessee.

With such a complex series of events, Bruckman was tasked with the job of getting it all on paper, paring away the hundreds of pages of extraneous detail and boiling the book down to its essence. The result was a preliminary 116-page script, by far the most complete scenario with which Keaton had ever started a film. With the document at hand and the book cast aside, he began focusing his mind on the emerging continuity, which would see many changes. “The moment you give me a locomotive and things like that to play with, as a rule I find some way of getting laughs with it. But

the original locomotive chase ended when I found myself in Northern territory and had to desert. From then on it was my invention in order to get a complete plot. It had nothing to do with the Civil War.”

In April 1926, with the story for *The General* far from settled, Keaton, Fred Gabourie, and staff writer Paul Gerard Smith traveled to New Orleans and Atlanta to scout locations. “I went to the original location from Atlanta, Georgia, up to Chattanooga,” Keaton remembered, “and the scenery didn’t look very good. It looked terrible. The railroad tracks I couldn’t use at all because the Civil War trains were narrow gauge, and those railroad beds of the time were pretty crude. They didn’t have so much gravel rock to put between the ties, and then you saw grass growing between the ties every place you saw the railroad, darn near.” With the authentic locales ruled out as viable locations, Bert Jackson, Keaton’s location manager and chief property man, was dispatched to the verdant lumbering regions of the Pacific Northwest, where rivers and logging trains were plentiful, and where the terrains looked more authentically southern than the South itself. It was Jackson who identified Oregon’s Cottage Grove as the best filming site and, after seeing to preliminaries, such as cooperation from the Oregon, Pacific & Eastern, a local short line railroad, wired the studio to say he had found exactly what they were after.

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