

## *Danger Lights:* The Hollywood Make-Over of Montana

In the spring of 1930, RKO and Director George Seitz came to Montana to create a film with the working title of "The Railroad Man." Filming took place along the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul and Pacific Railroad from Lombard to Chicago. The May 8, 1930 Three Forks Herald reported that the movie troop stopped in Three Forks for a photo op. A later edition reports that the "Purposeful wrecking of a freight train in a landslide in Sixteen Mile is the task of (local railroaders) Engineer Shaw, fireman Gosnell, conductor Coffin, and brakemen Dixon and Davis. The 85 members of crew and cast spent eight days in the Lombard area.

During the filming, many Three Forks residents traveled to Lombard to view the movie troop. One such group stayed with Mrs. Leib and included Mr. & Mrs. Avery, Mr. & Mrs. Ted Lane, and Mrs. Vanmeter, whose brother was a unit director on the film.

The Ruby Theatre, under the management of Homer Thompson, was renovated to handle "talkies" in early 1930, making it the most "ultra-modern" theatre between Bozeman and Butte. The RKO film, now titled "Danger Lights," was shown at the Ruby in late October.

The film opens with a train in the Sixteen Mile Creek canyon. A landslide blocks the tracks and sends Miles City Division master Dan Thorne (played by Louis Wolheim) into action to keep the coast-to-coast Olympian Limited on schedule.

While desperately trying to clear the track, Thorne recruits the hobos hitching a ride on the now stuck train. Among them is Larry Doyle (played by Robert Armstrong), a down-on-his-luck ex-railroad man. Thorne takes Doyle under his wing and when they return to Miles City, Doyle and Thorne are caught in a love triangle with Mary Ryan (played by Jean Arthur). A spectacular six minute sequence toward the end of the film is a life-or-death race to Chicago.

"Danger Lights" is in the public domain and can actually be downloaded from [www.archive.org](http://www.archive.org). It's an interesting film. There are several good shots of steam locomotives in full speed action, especially an excellent shot of the train speeding through Lombard and across the Missouri. Only locals would know that the train, which is supposed to be headed to Chicago, is going the wrong way! What is really off, is that the train supposedly started out at the Miles City division yard.

There's also a great line delivered by one of the hobo's before they get recruited, "Boy, it's looking at labor like that, that's made a hobo out of me."

The film was shot in both regular and wide screen format. According to the Three Forks Herald, "Projection of the wide film gives the illusion of depth to the characters on the screen,

something entirely new in motion picture entertainment."

Unfortunately, all the wide screen formats of the film were lost, a tragedy for us spoiled wide-screen film buffs.

For train buffs, there are some great shots of the Miles City train yard and a plethora of steam locomotives. If you look closely, you can see that many shots of the trains in the the Montana Division have the overhead electrification lines that were touted by the Milwaukee, but the train is being pulled by a steam locomotive. Another case of a Hollywood make-over.



HOMER THOMPSON, Manager



Above: Homer Thompson, Ruby Theatre manager.

Left: Jean Arthur

Below: Scene from *Danger Lights* where the train headed to Chicago crosses the Missouri River (going the wrong way).

