

PRODUCTION

CHAPTER 4

PUBLICITY DEPARTMENT

The Publicity Department was, among other things, responsible for generating early publicity about a film, including providing information to magazines and publications. This is also the point where production code numbers were assigned.

The publicity department would review the contact sheets and create a “key set.” From this “key set,” images were selected for specific purposes, and provided to magazines and publications. **THESE** are some of the main stills that are targeted in this book for identification.

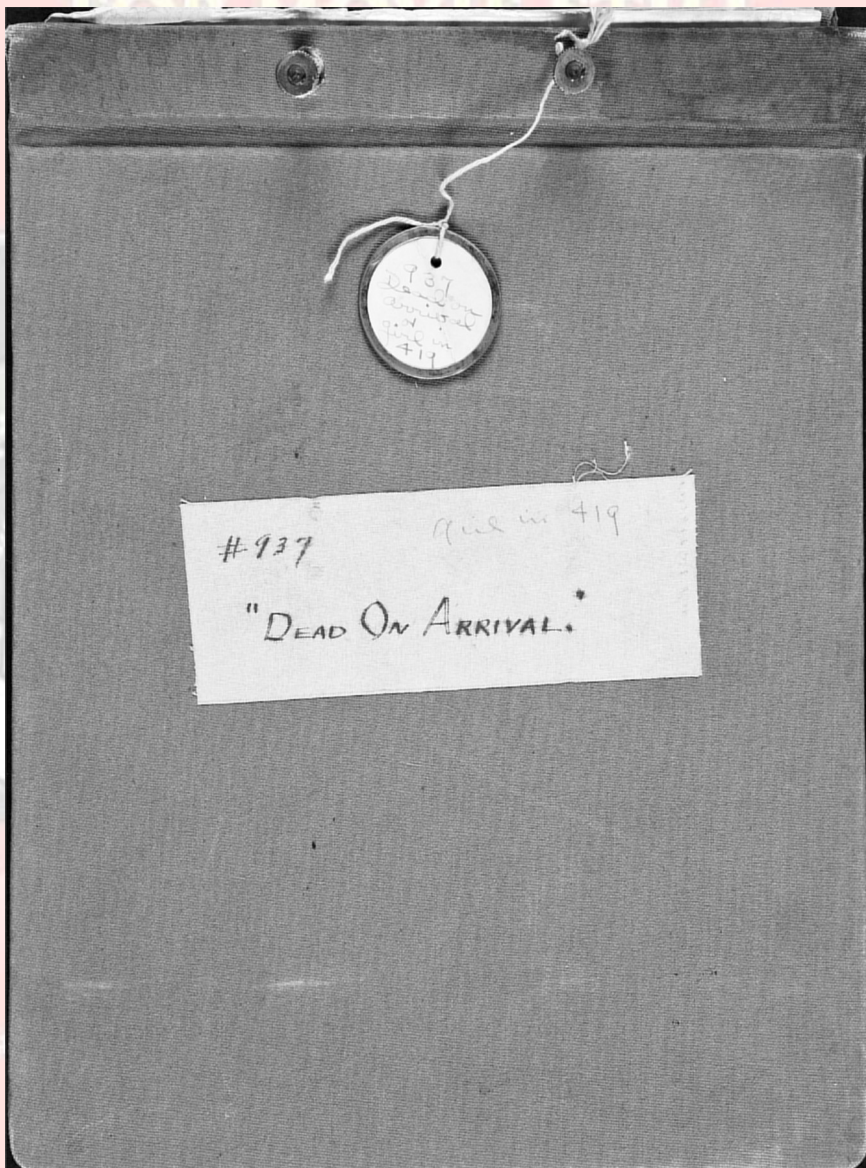
Key Set Creation

After a review by the publicity department, the better images were chosen to become part of a key set. The selected images were marked with the **assigned production number** and the individual still number. The stills were then printed and placed into the key set binder.

The rejected images were skipped over and **left unnumbered**. The negatives and contact sheets were then filed. These could be pulled and numbered at a later date if someone wanted something different.

By the end of the shooting, this key set would normally consist of hundreds of the better still shots

to be used in a variety of ways by the publicity department. They were kept in large bound books that could be used at any time for reference. Here is a sample:



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The key book on the preceding page was for the Paramount film *Dead On Arrival*, which was the working title. It was renamed *Girl in 419* as you can see written on the label and tag. It also shows the production code (937).

Shown below is a great shot of Wild Bill Elliott with Little Beaver (young Bobby Blake).

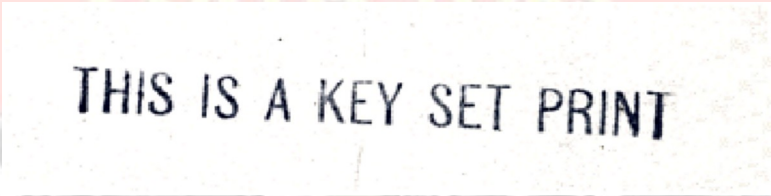


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Notice that this still has two punch holes at the top. Sometimes stills would be placed on extended photo paper or a backing like this one, and sometimes the holes were punched directly into the still.

FOR MOVIE STILL COLLECTORS

A lot of studios would then mark them on the back like this:



THIS IS A KEY SET PRINT

All the negatives were filed by the assigned production code number. Then all of the stills that were used for promotions in various ways were issued and controlled by the “key set.”

When someone wanted a particular still, or it was going to be used for a particular purpose, they pulled the negative to print. Each studio had their own unique marking system, which was primarily based on the intended purpose of the still.

An assignment log was kept to show all the numbers issued in the “Key Set” and how the still was used.

Production Codes Issued

Before we continue, let's take a look at a production code on a still. Some stills would have the studio name and title on the still. That makes it REAL easy. BUT, many of the stills used would not have any identifying information.

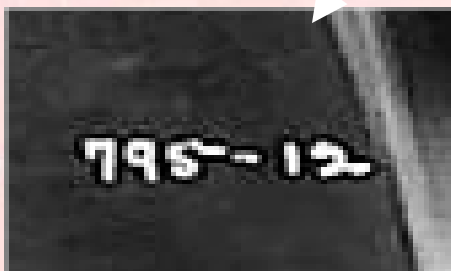
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Below is an example of a standard still without the studio and title on it and how it was marked. It's from the 1934 MGM film, *Forsaking All Others* starring Clark Gable and Joan Crawford. This was a GREAT still that could be used to create a LOT of buzz.



Now, notice the bottom right corner which is enlarged in the image to the right. You will see a 795-12.



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THIS is the production code. The number 795 identifies the MGM production *Forsaking All Others* and the (dash) 12 is the individual still number.

Production codes were not always NUMBERS as shown above. Some studios preferred letters or a letter and number combination. Different studios used slightly different systems.

Some codes are extremely simple to figure out.

For example, most of the Fox Film codes that we have on file from 1917 to 1932 were letter codes. The majority of them were by director.

For example, Frank Borzage directed over 100 films starting back in 1913. In 1925, he went to work for Fox Film and coded all of his films using “BOR” (dash) and a number of that film with Fox. “BOR” was apparently represented the first three letters of his last name.

The image on the following page is a still of Charles Farrell in one of Borzage’s most famous films, the 1927 film *7th Heaven*. The marking on the still indicates a production code: BOR-7-38. This code would indicate that this was Borzage’s seventh film. The number 38 represents that this was the 38th still processed.

Continuing the pattern, Borzage’s sixth film with Fox was the 1926 film *Marriage License* and carried the code Bor-6. His eighth film was *Street Angel* and carried the code Bor-8.

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Cor-7-38

Stilla

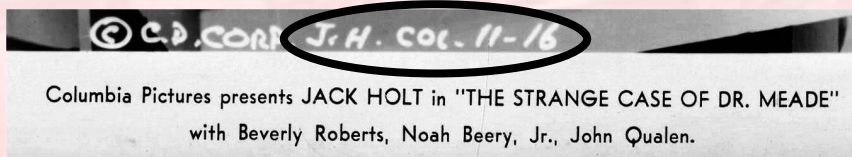
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Some codes make perfect sense and some don't. WHY? Because so many changes can happen during filming, editing, post production and final release. Many times in the planning stage, a title would be set based on an important phrase or a book name. In this case, the production code was set with the title codes from the beginning.

But, sometimes the studio was not sure what the final title was going to be. In this case, they would assign a working title and a temporary production code.

On occasion, the production code would be based on a particular star's project, such the "Jack Holt project." For example, the production code number "JH-11" would represent Jack Holt's project #11. Code "JH-11" happens to be the code for the Jack Holt film *Strange Case of Dr. Meade*.

The Publicity Department would then determine if a code conflicted with other projects and how it would be changed. In the case of the above, after editing, a simple addition of the Columbia code was added to become "JH COL-11." The image below shows how the code was changed in this clip of the still for *The Strange Case of Dr. Meade*.



We call these markings **pre-distribution codes** because they were usually re-numbered in the publicity department once a release title was assigned.

Different Ways the Production Code Was Used

Now let's look at some of the different ways codes were used by the various departments.

Exclusives

Major magazines and publications would quite often want exclusive photos in order to write articles about an upcoming film. This was a tremendous way for the film to get FREE publicity AND give the paper or magazine something exclusive to report on.

To accommodate them, the publicity department would put a hold tag on numerous stills and send over a group for the magazine or newspaper editor to choose from. Once the exclusives were picked, the tags would be removed from those images not selected so they could be used for other purposes.

When researching stills used as “exclusives,” we must vary from our “only looking at the front” discussion. For larger and favored publications, the publicity department would choose certain images and enlarge them to 10x13” or 11x14”. These larger shots gave the image a more portrait appearance and would quite often win more publicity space.

Here's the good part about “exclusives.” They are usually the best of the publicity stills and are normally GREAT shots of the stars.

As for identification, since these are the best shots from the film, it is normally not that difficult to

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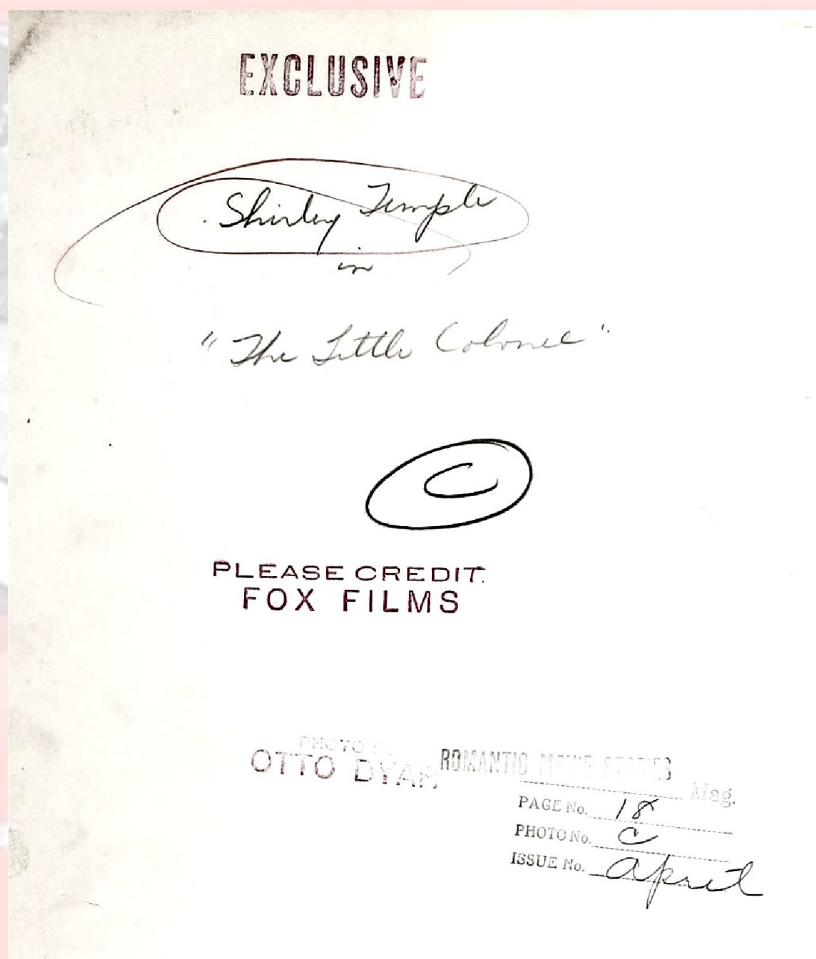
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Notice the sample still below. This “exclusive” still features the adorable Shirley Temple from the 1935 Fox release of *The Little Colonel*. **What a GREAT SHOT!!**



Most of the time, the publicity department did not want the production codes "marring" the photo that was being used in a newspaper or magazine. They would instead write the production code on the BACK of the still, along with any additional information for the paper or magazine. Without the information on the back, if the star happened to be in a couple of "similar" films, it would become difficult to identify.

Here is the back of the Shirley Temple still:



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Most studios would stamp “EXCLUSIVE” on the back of the still if it was for a major paper or magazine. That is not the case for smaller publications and it would be used again.

Notice on the back side of the Shirley Temple *The Little Colonel* still seen on the previous page. There is an EXCLUSIVE stamp on the top, This is followed by the name of the star (Shirley Temple) and the film’s title (The Little Colonel) in handwriting. There is also a notation to credit Fox Films any time the still is used in a publication. Below this information is the photographer’s name (Otto Dyar), On the bottom right side is a stamp with the name of the magazine getting the exclusive rights to use the image (*Romantic Movie Stories*). There is also an indication that the photo will be placed on page 18, photo C in the April issue.

Also notice that in the top left corner is a small number (192-46, which you can’t read from the photo). This is the production code with 192 being the number code for *The Little Colonel* and 46 the number for this particular still.

No matter what studio was producing a film, **sometimes** they were in a rush and would forget to mark the stills.

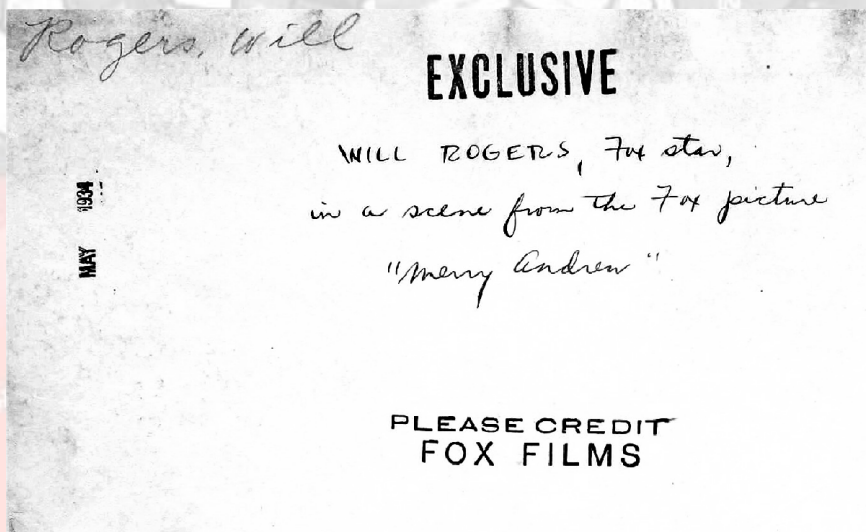
Here is another example from the SAME studio that presents a slightly different problem with exclusives.

The still on the next page features a GREAT shot of Will Rogers playing golf. There are no production codes or markings on the front of the still as was fairly common with most exclusives.

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As seen below, the production code was not placed on the back of the still either.



Now let's look at the backside of the Will Rogers' still on the preceding page.

You will see at the top of the backside of the still is the standard "EXCLUSIVE" stamp. This stamp establishes that this photograph was taken and allocated for exclusive use.

Also notice that there is a handwritten note just below the stamp that says: "Will Rogers, Fox star, in a scene from the Fox picture '*Merry Andrew*'". And then there is a date stamp on the left that says "May 1934."

This brings up another common problem with still identification.

These particular stills were taken and sent to the publicity department **during the shooting of the film**. These were used for advance publicity **before the film was released**.

The publicity department tried to create some excitement about the coming release. But it was quite common for a film to have a title change once the film was finished and edited.

In this particular case, the publicity department sent this still out **BEFORE the film was finished** and the final title assigned. *Merry Andrew* was actually one of several working titles. The film was actually released as ***Handy Andy***.

The bottom line is that even though a still may have identifying information on the back, there is no guarantee that it is 100% accurate.

Now let's look at a completely DIFFERENT way stills were used to garner publicity.

Portrait Codes

As noted in the discussion of all the jobs of the Unit Photographer (or Special Photographer), some photographs were taken behind the scenes with actors and directors or special set ups for publicity shots. Let's take a closer look at those.

In Chapter 2, we established that executives of the major studios established complete control over all the various steps of the filming process. One of the processes put into place was assigning a CODE for EACH performer.

This number or letter (or combination) was basically an accounting code that would follow an individual through the various stages of employment with the studio. It was used to track what the individual performer did (similar to an employee number and a time clock).

The publicity department also used the same number for several other areas. When they would go through looking for images for the Key Book, they also looked for images that could be used for special promotions. These special promotion shots could also be used BEYOND this particular film's promotions.

The following examples show how stills taken on a specific film with a particular actor or actress were coded and used differently. On the next pages are two stills featuring Merle Oberon from the 1946 film *Temptation*.

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"Property of National Screen Service Corp.
Licensed for display only in connection with
the exhibition of this picture at your theatre.
Must be returned immediately thereafter."

Merle Oberon in
"TEMPTATION"
Universal-International Release.

"Copyright 1946, Universal Pictures, Inc." 46/1035
Permission is hereby granted to newspapers,
magazines and other periodicals to reproduce
this photograph. (Country of origin U.S.A.)



Notice the "BD-110" scratched into the bottom left.
"BD" is the production code for *Temptation* and 110 is
the still number. The film was based on the 1909 novel
by Robert Smythe Hichens called *Bella Donna* (BD).

Now, here's another still of Merle Oberon FROM THE SAME FILM.



"Property of National Screen Service Corp.
Licensed for display only in connection with
the exhibition of this picture at your theatre.
Must be returned immediately thereafter."

Merle Oberon in
"TEMPTATION",
a Universal-International Release.

"Copyright 1946, Universal Pictures, Inc." 46 1035
Permission is hereby granted to newspapers,
magazines and other periodicals to reproduce
this photograph. [Country of origin U.S.A.]



Notice that on THIS still, the
code is "MO-16". "MO" was the
portrait code for Merle Oberon.

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While production codes were used for scenes in the film, portrait codes were used for accounting purposes AND for photos that could be used for other publicity besides just that particular film.

Most still collectors believe that portrait codes were only for the actors and actresses. That is because the actors and actresses were the main ones seen in the photos. Very few times do you ever see photos of – the cameraman – for example.

Numerous studios used the portrait code for more than just the celebrities. Some also included directors, producers, writers, cameramen and, beyond that (especially at Paramount), **anyone employed by the studio** (craft workers, drama coaches, secretaries, etc.) and anyone connected to a film (the real life subject of a biography, the author of a source novel, etc.).

This ACCOUNTING CODE was used in a WIDE variety of ways. Some codes were even assigned for specific GROUPS of individuals and screen couples that were in the public eye a lot.

Here is a good example of a popular couple where the studio used a separate portrait code.

You should be able to recognize the popular screen couple featured in the still on the next page. Notice that the bottom right corner of this still has the portrait code of T-H-4, which represents, of course, Spencer Tracy and Katharine Hepburn. Unfortunately, there's no indication of what movie this is from.

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Learn How



See Still

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PRODUCTION CODE BASICS

It can be difficult to figure out all of the different uses for portrait codes. Here are some general facts to help.

- A. Portrait codes were primarily used between the 1920s and the 1960s.
- B. When someone left the studio and came back later, a NEW code for that person was usually issued.
- C. Some studios used initials, some used names, some used numbers
- D. Some studios would combine the portrait code with another code such as F or P for fashion or publicity.
- E. Sometimes the code was assigned to a group of stars
- F. Sometimes the studio used initials for their REAL name instead of the stage name.

Since there are so many variables in this area, we will try to address more specific uses later in the book under specific studios.

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## Learn How To Identify Unknown Movie Stills

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