

PRODUCTION

CHAPTER 7

OUTSIDE THE MAJOR STUDIO FRAMEWORK

The “production code” was originally created to help track production through the filming process. However, as seen in earlier chapters, the major studios expanded it into an accounting code, a publicity code, a distribution code, a portrait code, and even an employee number.

The production code became utilized in a lot of the departments. The major studios had all of the departments to handle every step of the process, so inter-department codes are no problem.

Once you move outside of the major studio system though, things do not work quite the same. So let's take a look at some of them.

The Independents

Independent production companies usually didn't have advertising departments, art departments, publicity departments, etc. They rarely dealt with anything like special photographers and exclusives.

During the planning stage, the production code would be established. It might be the director's initials, the stars' initials, a character series, or whatever code that was decided on for that film. Whatever it was, it was normally put on the stills very similar to the system described earlier except on a smaller basis.

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If the production company already had a distributor, they would send over the stills and the distributor would handle the other areas. If the production company DIDN'T have a distributor, then the best stills were picked out and used to create a package to present a potential distributor.

If no distributor was signed before the end of the production, then material was compiled and decisions made on how to promote the film. In this case, distribution was normally handled through states rights or roadshow. For later releases, distribution would also include film festivals.

The two largest independent production companies were Hal Roach and Mack Sennett, with each producing films for multiple distributors. Both were monsters in the industry and had completely different ways of marking their productions. Here's how they each handled their production codes

Hal Roach

Hal Roach started producing films in 1914. He didn't have a distributor, so he formed his own company called Rolin. In 1915, he did several tests for major distributors such as Pathe and Universal. For these, he marked the stills with a letter and number.

Pathe liked his material, and in 1915 started distributing a new series called Lonesome Luke under the banner of Phun Philms. For this series, Roach started marking them all with a prefix of "P" (P-1, P-2, P-3, etc.). After the first 30, he restarted the numbering with a prefix of "A."

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With every new series that he started, he would begin marking the stills with a different letter and a number. So, ALL Hal Roach stills usually carry a single letter (dash) number and then the still number OR an additional HR and THEN the letter and number.

If you are just picking up Hal Roach stills occasionally, this can be EXTREMELY confusing.
Why, you say? Let me give you an example.

In 1917, Roach started a series for Pathe beginning with A-1. In 1922, he started a new Our Gang series directed by McCowan with A-1. In 1931, he started a new ZaSu Pitts and Thelma Todd series for MGM with A-1. So you have three different series starting with A-1. This pattern continued into the mid A-30s.

This was done with almost **every letter**. When Roach wanted to start a new series, he would pick a letter he hadn't used in a while and use it again.

The only letters that he didn't use were I, N, O, Q, U, V, W, X, Y and Z. All others were on multiple series starting with the number "1," except for the letter "J". In 1923, Roach started a series of Rex the Wonder Horse feature films for Pathe that was directed by Fred Jackman. From 1923 – 1927, five feature films were produced under the "J" series.

In the early 1930's, before dubbing, Roach would put an additional letter behind the production code to show what language, such as: "E-English"; "S-Spanish"; "F-French"; etc.

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We have a comprehensive breakdown of all of the confusing Hal Roach series in our *Movie Still Identification Book* and online in our member section of www.MovieStillID.com.

Mack Sennett

Mack Sennett was financed by New York Motion Picture Co. in 1912 to form Keystone Studios. In 1915, Sennett, D. W. Griffith and Thomas Ince formed Triangle Films.

At the collapse of Triangle in 1917, Sennett formed Mack Sennett Comedies and distributed through Paramount, Pathé, Educational, and several others. During his life, Sennett acted in 360 films, directed over 300 films and produced over 1100 films.

Once Sennett started using production codes, he used all numbers unless it was marked for specific distributors. But with that being said, it can get very confusing because of two major factors:

1. Sennett films came in during the development of production codes so many of his early films did not utilize them.
2. Because Sennett supplied different distributors, most of them added their own codes as well, creating multiple codes on many of the titles.

Mack Sennett produced Keystone productions for Mutual starting in 1915. These films used a code starting with a "K" and then a number. Mack Sennett formed Mack Sennett Comedies in 1917 that used numbers with no letter prefix.

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Triangle started using codes in 1915 with the letter "T" followed by a number. Triangle Komedies were given AN ADDITIONAL code that started with an "X." Sometimes BOTH "T" and "X" were used.

When Keystone started providing films to Triangle, there would be a Keystone code "K," a Triangle code "T" and/or an additional Triangle Komedy code "X."

There is an additional oddity on some Mack Sennett stills. Occasionally, there appears to be an additional set of numbers included in the production code.

In 1932-33, Sennett produced 19 comedy shorts for Paramount Publix. We have located a still for the 1933 film *The Singing Boxer*. The still does NOT have any Paramount Publix or ANY markings on it. But, instead of the standard Mack Sennett production code, it has the code of "MS-18."

Only 3 of the 19 shorts were produced in 1933 and this looks like the 18th of the 19 films (which would make sense). But is this a reissue after Paramount Publix was absorbed that was marked with an "MS?" We have not verified either way yet.

A review of these two major independents shows that they marked their productions differently but used the same basic principles.

Now, let's take a look at distribution companies and how production codes were used.

PRODUCTION CODE BASICS

Distribution Companies

Outside the major studios, the term should actually be changed to production and distribution code, because the DISTRIBUTOR had total control over the code number. It is the distributor's name that the film was listed under and NOT the production company.

It was at the discretion of the distributor to: (1) keep the number assigned by the film's producer; (2) assign another number; or (3) eliminate the number entirely. This situation creates additional complications.

The distributor was normally promoting material from a wide variety of sources. It could be a steady client, a one-time customer, an import film or even rights to distribute a re-release.

Because of this, quite often it appears the distributor would re-number the stills to fit into THEIR accounting system. So it is not unusual to see either two or more sets of codes OR no codes at all.

So let's look at a film released in 1949 by Verity Films, a small U.S. distributor. [NOTE: In our example, we are NOT trying to identify the still but simply showing the process.]

Verity had acquired the rights to rerelease a Paramount film called *Beachcomber* starring Charles Laughton. Paramount had originally released the film in 1938, but had acquired it from Associated British Film Distributors, a British film distributor.

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The film was originally released in the U.K. under the title *Vessel of Wrath*. Paramount got it the same year and changed the title. Ten years later, a small distributor, Verity, wanted to rerelease the film.

Sounds simple enough – right?

The image on the next page features six press stills from the 1949 re-release of the film *The Beachcomber* by Verity Films, Inc. Verity used National Screen Service (“NSS”) for paper and accessory distribution. As such, the still contains the standard NSS studio tag across the bottom of each as well as the title and film information. There is also an NSS number (49/94) in the bottom right of each border tag.

Now ALL of these stills were issued through NSS in 1949, but one of these stills differs from the rest.

All the stills have the production code number 1776 and then the still number. BUT, one still has some additional information. This particular still has two additional code numbers: the 1776 on the right and the VW 131 just above it.

Since the original title was *Vessel of Wrath* (“VW”), this was apparently put on the still by the original DISTRIBUTOR, which was Associated British Film Distributors (ABFD).

Also notice that on the left of the still is the marking “MF.1/540.” The production company was Mayflower Pictures. This happens to be the first film that we have on record for them. The assumption is that the MF-1 would be for MayFlower 1, making this the original production code.

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CHARLES LAUGHTON in "THE BEACHCOMBER" with ELSA LANCHESTER
Based on a Story by W. Somerset Maugham • VERITY FILMS, INC.

49/94

1776-82



CHARLES LAUGHTON in "THE BEACHCOMBER" with ELSA LANCHESTER
Based on a Story by W. Somerset Maugham • VERITY FILMS, INC.

49/94

1776-15*



CHARLES LAUGHTON in "THE BEACHCOMBER" with ELSA LANCHESTER
Based on a Story by W. Somerset Maugham • VERITY FILMS, INC.

49/94

1776-29



CHARLES LAUGHTON in "THE BEACHCOMBER" with ELSA LANCHESTER
Based on a Story by W. Somerset Maugham • VERITY FILMS, INC.

49/94

1776-17



CHARLES LAUGHTON in "THE BEACHCOMBER" with ELSA LANCHESTER
Based on a Story by W. Somerset Maugham • VERITY FILMS, INC.

49/94

1776-96



CHARLES LAUGHTON in "THE BEACHCOMBER" with ELSA LANCHESTER
Based on a Story by W. Somerset Maugham • VERITY FILMS, INC.

49/94

1776-105



CHARLES LAUGHTON in "THE BEACHCOMBER" with ELSA LANCHESTER

Based on a Story by W. Somerset Maugham • VERITY FILMS, INC.

49/94

1776-82

PRODUCTION

The point of this example is to show that every time the stills were handled by a different distributor, the production codes were added and/or taken away at the discretion of that distributor.

Now we can't do a section on film distributors without at least mentioning the largest distributor of film stills and accessories at that time - the National Screen Service.

National Screen Service

And I can already hear the questions – the National Screen Service (“NSS”) identified all of their stills so WHY would we need to look at them? This will be addressed in detail in the next chapter.

The National Screen Service started in 1920. They developed their number system in 1930 for trailers and then modified it to include all other film accessories (posters, stills, pressbooks, etc.) in 1940.

NSS dominated the distribution of stills for all the major studios all the way into the 1980s. Collectors, researchers and archivists owe NSS a HUGE amount of kudos for categorizing, marking and keeping control of such a massive amount of material in a way that could be easily researched with their accounting system.

Their numbering system is on a lot of stills, like the set above, so you need be able to recognize what is and what isn't an NSS number.

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Also, you can't get TOO comfortable with NSS stills. But, instead of addressing it here, in the next chapter, we will be addressing some common problems to all studios, and notice how many of them are on NSS stills.

If you are not familiar with NSS, we have several books available on National Screen Service at www.LearnAboutMoviePosters.com ("LAMP").

There is also a massive amount of NSS information in our members area of LAMP.



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