

# Hell's Hinges

By David Menefee

In 1916, by the time former Broadway star William S. Hart appeared in "Hell's Hinges," he had achieved the status of a movie veteran with more than two dozen films of varying lengths to his credit.

"Hell's Hinges" was filmed in September and October 1915. Hart insisted on staging the five-reel romantic Western in picturesque atmospheres in the vicinity of California's Lake Arrowhead in the San Bernardino National Forest, appropriate for the atmosphere described by scenarist C. Gardner Sullivan.

Gardner, initially a newspaper reporter, segued into a prolific movie scenarios writer for Edison, and for Thomas Ince, his scripts that were carefully crafted for Hart included "The Scourge of the Desert," "The Aryan," "The Return of Draw Egan," "Branding Broadway," and "Wagon Tracks." Gardner's tailor-made tales were largely responsible for Hart becoming one of the biggest stars of the 1910s.

The "Hell's Hinges" cast included veteran Clara Williams and relative newcomer, John Gilbert, (who would later rise to one of MGM's top male stars throughout the 1920s). Gilbert attracts many fans today, as verified by the tens of thousands of viewers of YouTube clips from his long film career. He can be seen in "Hell's Hinges" as one of the roughnecks in a mob that taunts and tempts the minister to drink and torch the church.

Publicity began even while the film was still in production. In "William S. Hart in the Wilds" in "Moving Picture World" 1916, a reporter wrote, "Each succeeding story filmed by Hart for Thomas H. Ince has shown even stronger than its predecessors. It is said that "Hell's Hinges," the coming Triangle release in which Hart is starred as a Western character, will prove a revelation of dramatic strength."

Critical response was euphoric after "Hell's Hinges" official release on March 5, 1916. In "Variety," February 11, 1916, a reviewer wrote, "... the story is crammed full of action, and the scenario ... is re-



Pictorial featured in March 1916 issue of Motion Picture News.  
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plete with interest, the real interest of the West, slightly exaggerated, but not to a point of ridiculous proportions. The panoramic scenes are well-taken, particularly the scene shown at the minister's arrival at Hell's Hinges. Hart in the stellar role is himself at all times, blending action with genuine character work and excelling in the close-ups, where his facial expressions carry the story unaided. The religious reference is nicely guarded, and the supporting cast acquit themselves admirably. It's a corking feature. . . ."

A reviewer for "Moving Picture World," January 8, 1916, wrote about the climax, "... A striking scene in the play is the destruction by fire of the entire village of Hell's Hinges, an episode for the taking of which no less than thirty-eight buildings in the vicinity of Inceville went up in smoke."

"Hell's Hinges" features suspenseful rising action that builds to the previously mentioned sizzling climax. The story opens with the newly ordained Reverend Robert Henley (Jack Standing) preaching to the adoring attention of the young ladies of his church, which does not go unnoticed by the church elders. They decide that the presence of temptation will be too much for him and send him West with his godly sister, Faith. Of course, they arrive at a town called Hell's hinges, where a few decent citizens greet them warmly, but the town's bad men see him as a threat to their existence and brew a plot to drive him out.

As a reviewer for "Moving Picture World" wrote in 1916, "Some rough men and women interrupt the service. Blaze Tracy, a notorious gunman, drives the bunch out of the church when one of the men insults Faith. Silk decoys Henley to his saloon, where Dolly, one of the dance hall girls, induces him to drink till he is intoxicated. Blaze goes away to a nearby town to fetch an organ for the church. On his return, he finds the church burned down, Henley killed, and Faith brokenhearted over the disaster that has come to the good element. In fury, Blaze shoots the treacherous Silk, sets the saloon on fire, and sees the flames wipe out the town, as the result of a high wind. He takes Faith away with him.

Hart specialized in portraying what some critics called a "good bad man." As in "Hell's Hinges," his love of Faith spurs him to read a Bible, albeit with a cigarette in one hand and a bottle of whiskey in the other. His sincerity rings true a century after "Hell's Hinges" was staged. His love of the West trails back to his youth, when he rode with his family in a covered wagon throughout the Wild West and even lived at times among Indians.

Because of Hart's personal familiarity with the real West, the town of Hell's Hinges looks remarkably like paintings by renowned Western artists, such as Charles Marion Russell, Thomas Moran, and Frederick Remington. Extras and small part were portrayed by men and women that look like they lived in the West. Real buildings were torched when the church and the town burn to cinders. Heavy-handed religious symbolism reflects the florid style of preachers from that era. Best of all, every detail merges together to recreate a thrilling film experience that, especially when viewed on a big screen in front of

an audience and accompanied by appropriate orchestra music, creates a powerful, memorable, and intensely personal journey that is not easily forgotten.

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*The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.*

*Film historian David Menefee's book Wally: The True Wallace Reid Story was nominated for a 2011 Pulitzer Prize and was named one of the Best Silent Film Books of the Year by the San Francisco Examiner along with his The Rise and Fall of Lou-Tellegen. He has published works on Richard Barthelmess, George O'Brien, Billy "Buckwheat" Thomas, Sarah Bernhardt, and the love story of Mary Pickford and Owen Moore. In 2012, David collaborated with Carol Dunitz on two romance novels, Can't Help Falling in Love and Come Away to Paradise. David lives in Dallas, Texas.*