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# HELL HARBOR'S 55TH ANNIVERSARY

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March 28, 1984 was a very special evening for over 300 persons who visited the Tampa Theatre in honor of the 55th anniversary of the making of "Hell Harbor". Several hours before the presentation, guests crowded the theatre lobby to view a display of photographs, documents and other film memorabilia which was loaned by Tampa collector, Mr. Bob Kaiser. The guests included a number of persons who were extras in the film or who had gone to the film location at Tampa's Rocky Point in 1929. Other guests were simply curious to see the film and catch glimpses of what Tampa looked like over a half a century ago.

The movie was based on Rida Johnson Yong's novel, *Out of the Night* and was adapted for film by producer Henry King. It was filmed entirely on location in fall, 1929, during the time when the stock market crash initiated changes in American lifestyle which lasted for nearly a decade. The new picture was made by Inspiration Films, a branch of United Artists, and was promoted as the first all talking film made in Florida.

Producer King had already achieved a renowned reputation prior to filming *Hell Harbor*. He was considered "one of the most original of motion picture directors."<sup>1</sup> He decided to make the film in Tampa after being told of Tampa's ideal setting by New York actor, Tom Migham. The convincing conversation between the two men took place at the New York Lambs Club. Mr. Migham, so kindled the producers interest in Tampa that King wrote a letter to the Tampa Chamber of Commerce. He inquired



**Producer Henry King was a noted film producer for low budget, high sales pitch films. He decided to make Tampa the location of *Hell Harbor* after the Tampa Chamber of Commerce enthusiastically supported his request for their support.**

-photo from Bob Kaiser Collection

whether or not the town would welcome him and his Hollywood crew, and was astounded by the warm reception offered him. Mr. King later stated while Mussolini had given him overwhelming support in making a film in Italy entitled "*White Sister*," the dictators' response was nothing in comparison to the enthusiastic response by the Tampa Chamber of Commerce.<sup>2</sup>

Once the site of the film was decided, King made elaborate plans to move the set and actors across the continent from California. Inspiration Films was willing to make such a long and arduous move because it "wished to give its motion picture audience a sense of reality, rather than a 'paper mache illusion' of a site."<sup>3</sup> Over 100 stage workers and designers were sent from the security of



**A commemorative post card was made by Inspiration Pictures to promote the film. This photograph was taken on the west side of Rocky Point.**

-photo from Bob Kaiser Collection



**This cantina scene gave local Tampan Rondo Hatton (center of photograph with a cigarette) national attention and he later starred in numerous films made in Hollywood.**

-photo from Bob Kaiser Collection

a Hollywood studio to Tampa where they began construction at a furious pace. Soon Rocky Point was transformed from a Florida palm covered peninsula to a Caribbean pirate community, complete with lookout tower, houses, stores and cantinas. Interior and exterior settings were built on location. Cigar chairs were purchased from local factories and were placed inside the cantina where the first part of the film was made. Building supplies not brought from

Hollywood were purchased from local lumberyards and hardware stores.

The task of preparing the film was monumental; seven freight cars of sound and technical equipment were sent from Hollywood by train. Expenditures ran into the "many thousands."<sup>4</sup>

While construction was underway, local Tampans' favorite weekend activity was to visit the movie setting where they often had their photographs taken in front of the hastily constructed Caribbean stores and

houses. Once filming began, Tampans were often hired as extras for the film. They not only had an opportunity to see the famous Hollywood actors but were able to be in the movies, a thrill to the numerous young Tampans who were photographed as Caribbean island children.

Former Hillsborough High School football star Rono Hatton was discovered in Tampa as an extra and later acted in numerous Hollywood films. Imported from England for the film, Gibson Gowland married local Tampan Rachelle Dervaes. They both gave up their native homes for the glitter of fame and fortune in Hollywood.<sup>5</sup>

After the set was completed and the extras hired, it took three months to film Hell Harbor. Fortunately, Mother Nature cooperated with warm and sunny weather, and the lack of rain allowed producers to follow a routine schedule. The most serious threat to production came from a rooster, whose continuing crowing interrupted a -scene supposedly shot far out in the ocean. The film crew had to reshoot this scene



**Rachelle Dervaes, a local Tampan, met Gibson Gowland, part of the array of stars to come to Tampa. The couple moved to Hollywood where this picture was taken of the couple in the 1940s in Hollywood.**

-photo from Pattie Dervaes Collection

several times before the rooster was finally quieted. Other than this amusing incident, the production went extremely well.

In an age in which stars were treated like Gods and Goddesses, Tampans were awed with the presence of Hollywood notables in their own back yard. This adulation was clearly evident when the female star of the film, the Latin bombshell Lupe Velez arrived to Tampa by train. When she stepped off the traincar, Florida Governor Carlton greeted her. According to Lupe, this was the first time a Governor had honored her. Speaking with a distinctive Spanish dialect, she said, "I am ver' please to meet you, senior Governor. But why dees beeg crowd?"<sup>6</sup>



**Lupe was a favorite of Tampa's Latin Community, and when she arrived for the filming of Hell Harbor, thousands of Latin well wishers greeted her. Her image as a "hot blooded Latin" made Lupe a box office favorite across the continent. This scene from the movie shows her in her defiant but beautiful mood which she portrayed throughout the film.**

-photo from Bob Kaiser Collection

After her victorious arrival, Lupe was rushed off to the Floridan Hotel for a gala reception, but the welcome was not yet over. The next stop was Plant Park, where a crowd of 5000 well wishers and dignitaries gave Hell Harbor, according to the star, "the most cordial greeting of her life."<sup>7</sup> Overwhelmed by the attention given to her, Lupe said of the warm attention given her, "It makes ze flesh goose pop out on my skin!"<sup>8</sup>

Producer Henry King received an equally warm reception in Tampa, but he always "stepped back at all the parties to let the light fall fully upon the jet black hair of his Mexican star."<sup>9</sup> As the weeks of filming passed, almost all Tampans were on the lookout for stars in their local stores and streets.

After eight weeks of filming, Lupe's role was complete, but the film crew remained an additional two weeks. Lupe boarded a train

for Hollywood November 10, 1929. She took with her two over-sized trunks of clothing, a bull dog, and an oversized memory book as her mementos from Tampa. Prior to her departure, she gladly gave an interview. When asked what she liked most about Tampa, the Mexican star responded; "I cannot understand why they (the Tampa women) go to New York to shop. Such bargains I have found in Tampa and such marvelous styles!"<sup>10</sup>

Lupe left behind the memories of a beautiful star in the minds of Tampans, and her memory was rekindled when the premiere of the film was made in Tampa January 24, 1930. Tampa's Victory Theatre was the site of the gala event and reservations for the first showing were made weeks in advance. Although Lupe did not grace the town with her presence at the premiere, her memory was still in the minds and hearts of the city. "If Lupe were here," the Tampa Morning Tribune said, "there would be no rest for the traffic squad, but even without Lupe in the flesh, her figure flashing across the screen will help make it a worth-while film event."<sup>11</sup>

Fifty-five years later Tampa Historical Society was honored to sponsor the film's anniversary. The widow of Mr. King, Mrs. Ida King planned to attend the anniversary but was unavoidably delayed by a court hearing on her recently deceased husband's estate. She wrote to T.H.S. President Richard Clarke:

Dear Mr. Clarke,  
 Thank you for thinking of me at this time, when Tampa Historical Society is presenting the fifty-fifth anniversary showing of my husbands picture Hell Harbor. I would like so very much to be there as its been years since I've seen it. It was a good picture but



**The issue of the Tampa Tribune advertised the gala world premiere of Hell Harbor at the Victory Theater. Although Lupe did not attend the gala, the theater had a capacity crowd for the event.**

-photo from Bob Kaiser Collection

do wish you had known Henry and some of his fine pictures he made after Hell Harbor.

There will always be a soft spot in my heart for Hell Harbor as it was made in my beloved home - Tampa, Florida.

Thank you again for your lovely invitation will be thinking of you on the evening of the 28th. That happens to be our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary too.

Very Sincerely,  
 Ida King<sup>12</sup>

Tampa Historical Society hopes to be able to contact persons who still remember the

filming of Hell Harbor. If you or a friend have any memories, photographs or other items of interest related to the film. Please call us at 259-1111, leave your name and address, and we will be in touch with you shortly.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Hell Harbor Promotional Book, The Longacre Press, Inc., New York 1930, p. 3

<sup>2</sup> Tampa Morning Tribune, September 16, 1929.

<sup>3</sup> Hell Harbor Promotional Book, p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Oral Interview, Pattie Dervaes, Tampa, Florida, March 29, 1984.

<sup>6</sup> Tampa Morning Tribune, September 16, 1929.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Tampa Morning Tribune, November 10, 1984.

<sup>11</sup> Tampa Sunday Tribune, January 19, 1930.

<sup>12</sup> "Hell Harbor Memorabilia Files", Tampa Historical Society Headquarters, Tampa, Florida.