

1965 MGM Fire: The Day Hollywood Burned, Explained

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Who knew stockpiling reels of old movies is substantially more dangerous than warehousing tons of firewood?



MGM

It seems hard to fathom that, in one afternoon, decades of movies could cease to exist, but that's exactly what happened one day in Culver,

California. The **1965 MGM Fire** — erroneously misidentified as 1967 by the BBC because of another fire at Universal, and not to be confused with the MGM Grand Fire of 1980, which also is conflated in searches — eradicated countless movies from the early pioneering days of [the silent era](#) and the 30s.

Arguably the most catastrophic day in film history, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer's collection was one of the most complete, respected film libraries that ever existed. The vault that burned that day took with it a studio's pride and joy, irreplaceable films that defined the time, now never to be watched again. Certain lost films from the MGM inferno like Lon Chaney's *London after Midnight* — dubbed the "holy grail" of lost film canon (per [Slash Film](#)) — can and have been reconstructed from existing scripts, scraps, production stills, and notes. But it isn't quite the same thing as the moving image.

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The disaster was as ferocious as it was predictable. Cellulose nitrate stock film bearing a very dangerous side effect that would turn all movies into a ticking bomb if not stored to precise specifications. However, seeing how storing old, unprofitable films was already a burden on studios, maintaining the facilities was the last of the big Hollywood studios' concerns. Not that they didn't have plenty of warning that Lot 1 was primed for just such an explosive fate. Drunken screenwriters aren't the only self-destructive ones in LA.

Things aren't as bleak as they might seem, though. Thousands of the greatest pieces of art of the twentieth century are still potentially alive outside the studio vaults, in the least likely places.

Dynamite Storage



The Weinstein Company

Through a quirk of chemistry not lost on filmmakers (Quentin Tarantino using it as the [plot of *Inglorious Basterds*](#)), celluloid, especially the kind that was used in early silent pictures, was about as flammable as a pile of gasoline-drenched rags. Those working with reels of old 35 mm movies have been aware for some time that the film not only deteriorates, but can, under the right circumstances, spontaneously combust. All you needed was a spark.

Who knew stockpiling reels of old movies is substantially more dangerous than warehousing tons of firewood? Well, as it turns out, anyone with a college degree in chemistry or a basic knowledge of movie-preservation history. As [Smithsonian Magazine](#) noted on the 1978 blaze that annihilated the National Archives and Records Service, cellulose nitrate is especially dangerous because "once it ignites, it produces its own oxygen," burning hotter and longer than a normal residential fire. This was not an anomaly, rather a known risk of the business of keeping old movies.

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Made from pulverized bones, the gunk is smeared onto a film. Ironically, the first film censorship laws were passed not on grounds on protecting viewers from profane images but from saving them from dying in a nitrate fire. One such nitrate-related incident killed 200 people in a 1897 Paris beauty show. From the dawn of the movie industry, film studios have been balancing the need to preserve their cinematic legacy with basic safety. Safety usually won out, not because anyone cared about safety, but because it was a lot cheaper for insurance reasons and storage fees.

Calamity in Culver



MGM

Nestled in the LA suburb of Culver, not far from Hollywood, MGM's Lot 1 became home to thousands of reels from the studio's illustrious past, housing one-of-a-kind copies of movies by Greta Garbo and director George Eastman. Or did. A lot of [classics were lost](#) in what has been blamed on

faulty wiring igniting the volatile nitrate. Sometimes art is lost to vandalism or totalitarian regimes, and other times pure negligence.

The blaze was so intense, the six-inch concrete building partially collapsed under the heat. We'd rattle off the titles, but it wouldn't mean much, seeing that the last person who can vouch for the quality of a lost silent most likely died decades ago. Films are often rediscovered, reappraised, and revalued in years after their debut. For these films, that would never happen, the vast majority only being viewed a few months or years then sentenced to a term in a vault, meaning a large chunk of the films probably hadn't been viewed in decades, forgotten to everyone, even the stars who made them.

All things considered, it could have been far worse. No one was injured, and no outside communities were effected unlike the 1937 Fox vault fire in Little Ferry, New Jersey, which sent whole neighborhoods running for their lives as the nitrate fire produced choking toxic fumes, fueling itself on the oxygen it released inside the enclosed space, turning the building into an impromptu incinerator.

Related: [MGM Replaces Iconic Leo the Lion with New CG-Animated Mascot](#)

It wasn't a big deal to the execs, who saw little value in the old films. There was no secondary market, home entertainment systems, nor Blu-Ray collector's editions to break out every ten years. Years earlier, MGM head Samuel Goldwyn had [dismissed film preservation efforts](#) by the Museum of Modern Art, telling representatives, "[You] must realize that I cannot rest on the laurels of the past and cannot release traditions instead of current pictures."

The fact that so many MGM films survived to 1965 was a miracle in itself, as MGM's cash-strapped rivals proved all too well. For a company whose mantra is inscribed in Latin on the corporate logo ("art for art's sake"), you'd

think they would have a little more pride in keeping around a reminder of what made them great. Not so much. Why bother with Lon Chaeny Sr., when you got his son, right?

Tip of the Iceberg



Société Générale des Films

Though MGM suffered a painful loss, they can at least boast a 68% survival rate for their total catalog. Based on the best estimates of film historians and preservationists, a [measly 30% of all silent films](#) is all that can be accounted for from the first three decades of movie history.

And if that 30% should seem awful, certain film studios like Universal-International voluntarily destroyed their entire back catalog of silent movies in 1948, with only 17 saved because they had "remake value." The very first Oscar-winning performance, given by German actor Emil Jannings in Paramount's *The Way of All Flesh*, is lost to time to boot. Likewise, more sensationalist films like *Convention City*, outlawed for sexual content, is also

wiped out of existence. Universal had a good reason. Photos of the 1917 Lubin Vault Fire in Philadelphia looks like it was flattened by an A-bomb when its stash of documentary clips and newsreels went up in smoke.

The last hope for many lost films is private collectors, hoarders, and, yes, even movie thieves, who inadvertently keep alive a small piece of movie history [hidden in their suburban basements](#). In 2012, another collector stumbled upon an obscure horror slasher starring Mickey Rooney so rare, nobody, not even film geeks, knew it existed. Until its rediscovery, *The Intruder* had never been officially shown in theaters due to a legal dispute. The best Joan of Arc biopic, the silent version by Danish master Carl Theodor Dreyer called *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, was deemed lost for years, surviving only in mismatched fragments ... until it showed up completely intact in a Norwegian mental asylum with new camera angles and scenes never seen publicly. Better late than never.

About The Author

Nathan Williams is a freelance writer who has written hundreds of articles over the last decade, covering every conceivable subject from the socio-political impact of memes in the Ukraine Conflict, politics in the early Christian church, psychology, to the history of cat wranglers in film.

He formerly wrote at *Cracked.com* and *Dead Talk News*, covering pop culture and breaking news before joining *MovieWeb*.