

What a Week: Silent film festival spotlights Pleasanton's place in early days of cinema

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Lobby card for the 1918 film "Little Orphant Annie". (Image courtesy Jeffrey Codori, from the collection of Judith Hargrave Coleman, stepdaughter of the film's star Colleen Moore).

Silent cinema may seem like a niche genre, often discarded as dull or dated, but the films can be incredibly fascinating to watch. Of course, many need to be consumed with a grain of salt for socially distasteful shortcomings, but even those can help show how the industry and America have evolved -- and have not.

For the film buff, a silent movie screening can be a rare treat these days, especially in a setting like the Edison Theater, where the show is often accompanied by live piano music just like they would have been a century before.

"It gives a window to the past, historically speaking, but I also think they are entertaining," David Kiehn, historian and co-founder of the Niles Essanay Silent Film Museum, told me by email ahead of this weekend's film festival. "It shows how modern films are more connected than one might assume to the early days of the medium in terms of quality and storytelling."

The Bay Area became a coveted filming destination in the early 1900s "because it had a wide variety of scenery and was relatively easy to get to from Los Angeles where many of the studios had set up shop," Kiehn said.

While San Francisco and Niles Canyon were among the more recognizable local settings (Chaplin made five films in the Niles/Fremont area, including his famed "The Tramp" for Essanay Studios), Pleasanton got its share of use too for movies starring the likes of Pickford, Pola Negri ("A Woman of the World") and Rudolph Valentino ("Cobra"), according to the museum.