

CHAPTER 4

Dixie on Film

“As all cinema observers knew, it was time for a cycle to come along. Another is here—the Deep South cycle, you might call it. Producers and writers alike have turned their attention to the aspects of Dixie, and there’s scarcely a studio in Hollywood that hasn’t a story of the South in production.” Thus began a 1936 editorial in the *New York Times* entitled “Sowing the South Forty.” Of course, *Gone with the Wind*, Margaret Mitchell’s best-selling novel about the Civil War, was credited with starting the cycle. By the time of this December editorial the book had sold more than 1 million copies—less than seven months after its publication. To capitalize on the book’s success, there were several films about the Old South in production. Mitchell’s story, and especially its protagonist, so resonated with the American public that *New York Times* film critic Frank Nugent observed that “casting Scarlett became a game the entire nation played.” German-born director Kurt Neumann, who later made *The Fly* (1958), was interviewed for the *New York Times*’ piece. “Call it a cycle,” Neumann said, but “the fact is the South is one of the best subjects Hollywood has ever had for sustained interest.” Neumann, director of *Rainbow on the River* (1936), a film set in New Orleans, predicted that “some of the greatest pictures of the future will be placed in a Southern setting,” adding that “we are just beginning to understand the South.”¹

Although the *New York Times* may have regarded the emphasis on southern films coming out of Hollywood as a cycle, the fact was there had been numerous films set in the South prior to the publication of Mitchell’s novel. It is true that *Gone with the Wind* set off this frenzy, but the region’s antebellum past had long been a fascinating topic for both the reading public and moviegoers. Yet there can be no doubt that the film version of Mitchell’s Civil War epic cemented a nostalgic image of the South in American popular culture that still resonates with the American public. In the book and most certainly in the film, the cultural mythology of the Old South was in full flower. As early as World War I, there was already a consensus of opinion that favored the dominant southern narrative of the Civil War, and that opinion was further influenced by the story that emerged from Mitchell’s pen and from David O. Selznick’s vision as a film-

maker. It was an image that remained stable well into the 1950s, when the southern civil rights movement, and its coverage by the more popular medium of television, pulled back the curtain to reveal an image of the South that was far more complicated.²

Before television, motion pictures were arguably the most popular and influential medium of culture in the United States. From the time Thomas Edison introduced "moving pictures" on his kinetoscope at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893, movies swiftly became America's first mass amusement. This new technology to entertain the masses helped signal that the United States had entered the modern era, and motion pictures very rapidly became part of the urban-industrial landscape. In their infancy, motion pictures were a cheap form of entertainment with a working-class consumer base, especially in the large urban centers of the North and on the West Coast. Entrepreneurs were quick to capitalize on society's fascination with film by building literally thousands of nickelodeons in urban working-class neighborhoods where Americans could, for the cost of a nickel, watch a film lasting ten to fifteen minutes.³

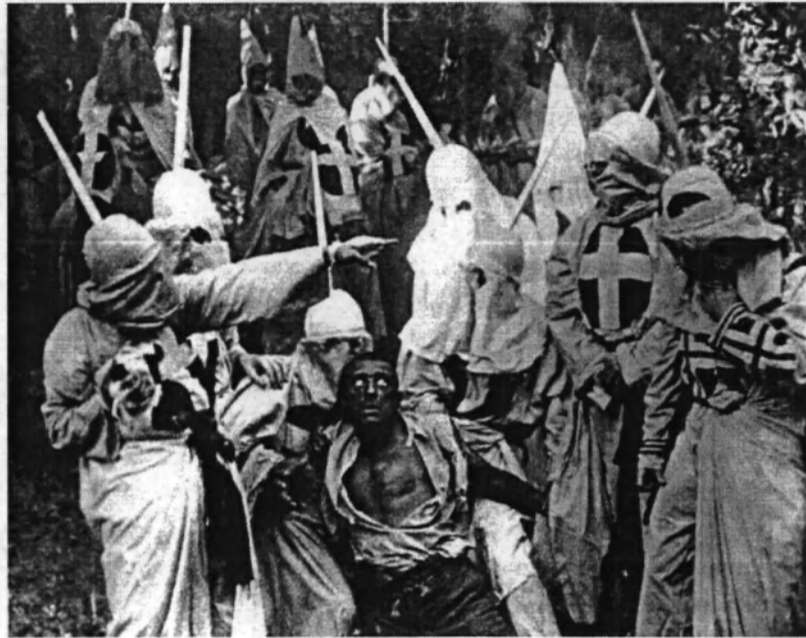
Middle- and upper-class audiences initially saw films as depraved and nickelodeons as corrupt and immoral venues, but the movie industry sought to turn a large profit by creating motion pictures with mass appeal, regardless of class. By World War I, American filmmakers—influenced by their European counterparts—began making feature films that were longer and thus more costly to make (and to see), in an effort to appeal to middle- and upper-class audiences. This formula worked, and it also did not deter the working classes from spending an additional five to ten cents to see a longer and better-produced film. In a very short span of time, motion pictures developed a mass audience that traversed class lines. As a result, movies not only became America's most influential mass medium but also its most profitable.⁴

Most scholars of film agree that motion pictures, from their inception, have had a critical impact on American society. Movies revolutionized how different communities of Americans perceived one another and influenced their opinions on race, class, ethnicity, and even different regions of the country. Early on, movies became an influential form of cultural expression that helped to reinforce as well as reflect the deep-rooted values and attitudes held by larger society. Films set in the South or ones that featured southern characters were most certainly expressions of the nation's perception of the region and were in line with other forms of popular culture in their construction of various images of the South.⁵

Ironically, although movies were made possible by modern technology and were symbolic of modern life, the actual motion pictures made between 1915 and 1945 often consciously reflected America's nostalgia for its preindustrial past, including the American frontier. This longing for America's utopian ideals became more pronounced in the 1930s during the Great Depression but was evident in the feature films produced since the beginning of World War I. The American frontier, without a doubt, was most often represented in Westerns, which were the most popular films of the 1920s and 1930s. Yet, in these decades, the South also served as an exotic and preindustrial location in the American imagination, as evidenced by the stereotypes of hillbillies, belles, and African Americans, who were used to define the South in radio, literature, advertising, cartoons, and even music. Motion pictures magnified these southern stereotypes and brought them to life on the big screen.⁶

The American South was certainly not the most popular setting for motion pictures. Movies set in New York City and the American West were far more common. The number of films set in the American South, however, increased over time, and Hollywood's interpretation of the South and southerners consistently relied on stock images of the region and its people. A survey of motion pictures made between 1915 and 1945 shows that the Old South served as the primary setting for the majority of films set in the region during those years. As a rule, the films set in the South were engaged in some form of cultural or historical mythmaking, from D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) to Walt Disney's *Song of the South* (1946). When the South was represented on film, it was usually based around plantations, southern belles, and loyal slaves. Then, in the late 1930s and early 1940s, when several hillbilly films were made, Hollywood added yet another regional stereotype to its catalog of films set in the region.⁷

D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) was the most profitable and most watched silent movie ever produced, and there is no shortage of analysis on Griffith as an innovative filmmaker or on the film's influence in helping to revise America's memory of the Civil War and Reconstruction. Historians have also rightly noted the influence of Thomas Dixon Jr. on the production and distribution of the film, as the visual expression of his Reconstruction novel *The Clansman* (1905). As historian John Hope Franklin has argued, *The Birth of a Nation* was "Dixon, all Dixon," in its promotion of racist propaganda as historical truth. Perhaps most important, because it was the most successful film of its kind, it helped perpetuate racial



The Birth of a Nation, 1915. (Courtesy Photofest)

stereotypes that, while southern in origin, found a receptive national audience and signaled the direction Hollywood would take for the next three decades in its films about the South.⁸

W. E. B. Du Bois called the film "Tom Dixon's latest attack on colored people" and, along with other black intellectuals, wrote to Dixon condemning his novels, but the uproar against the film was much more significant than the criticism leveled at the book, largely because of the impact of seeing racism dramatized on screen. Although there was considerable criticism from both black and white Americans that *Birth of a Nation* was "a travesty against truth as well as an insult to an entire race of people," Thomas Dixon Jr. weathered the storm and in the end proved to be a formidable adversary when it came to promoting and defending the film.⁹

Dixon went to his old friend Woodrow Wilson, whom he had met while attending Johns Hopkins University some years earlier, in an effort to quash the criticism of the film. If Wilson, now president of the United States, supported the film, Dixon believed, the criticism would subside. It has been well documented that Wilson did lend the prestige of his office and showed the film at the White House. Less known, and even more impressive, was that Dixon influenced members of Congress, as well as sit-

ting judges of the U.S. Supreme Court, to attend a viewing of the film at the Raleigh Hotel in Washington, D.C. Once this became common knowledge, censors in New York City, who had previously objected to showing the film, allowed it to open in the city's Liberty Theatre in March 1915, where it ran for forty-seven weeks.¹⁰

The social and political milieu into which the film was "born" is important to understanding its reception, both positive and negative. The South was expanding its system of Jim Crow, several race riots had taken place in both the North and the South, and African Americans saw Woodrow Wilson's presidency as yet another instrument to defend the "southern way of life." Moreover, the success of Dixon's novels, as well as that of D. W. Griffith's film, helped to fuel racial prejudice and incite fear among northern whites, who were concerned about the migration of southern blacks into northern cities, as well as the influx of eastern European immigrants.¹¹

Despite the NAACP's lobbying efforts to sink the film due to its racist portrayals of African Americans and negative impact on racial progress, and despite heated protests of the film in cities like Boston, *The Birth of a Nation* succeeded in spreading Dixon's racist message. As the most financially successful and widely acclaimed film of the silent era, it had grossed \$18 million by 1931, and by 1946 it was estimated that more than 200 million people had seen the film. It was also the film that African American leaders often pointed to as being one of the most damaging to race relations and to their morale as a people.¹²

The social impact of the film and its negative impact on race relations were made possible because of how well it was received far beyond the boundaries of Dixie. Moreover, although the novel was authored by a white southerner and made into a film by another white southerner, the publisher was northern and a Hollywood studio distributed it and profited handsomely. The fact was that nonsoutherners had a far greater interest in the film's financial success and nonsoutherners made up the film's primary audience. Thus, for all the vitriol spewed by Dixon through his novels and Griffith's achievement in dramatizing it on film, they were undoubtedly assisted in their efforts by the marketing and consumption of their ideas nationally.

Motion pictures that dramatized the Old South began in earnest during the 1920s and were common fare by the end of the decade. In 1929 alone, Hollywood made half a dozen such films, ranging from an adaptation of the Broadway play *Show Boat* to the film *Coquette*, in which Mary Pickford played the "heartless belle of a southern town." Even when a

film was set in the contemporary South, the region was still portrayed as being ensconced in the past. One such film, entitled *Crinoline and Romance* (1923), was set in North Carolina. Its protagonist, Emmy Lou, lives on a secluded plantation and still wears crinolines with her dress in the style of the Old South. When she visits the home of a family friend, she “quickly takes to the jazz ways of the young people” living there. The film implies that southerners were still wedded to their antebellum past and lived in isolation from the changes that were taking place outside of the region. In other words, the region remained provincial, even in the Jazz Age.¹³

The Deep South and southern plantations provided the most common film settings for motion pictures about the region in the two decades prior to 1945. One estimate suggests that there were nearly seventy-five films set in the pre-Civil War South in the decade leading up to World War II, with Louisiana and Mississippi Hollywood’s favorite locales. In the 1920s, thirty-four films were set in those two states, and during the 1930s, twenty films were set in Mississippi alone. New Orleans, antebellum plantations, and the Mississippi River offered romantic backdrops for films about the Old South, the planter elite, riverboat gamblers, and showboats.¹⁴

River of Romance (1929) was typical of the southern fare offered to American film audiences. The film, set in the river port town of Natchez, Mississippi, during the 1840s, is a story about Tom Rumford, the son of a plantation owner and “southern general,” who returns to his father’s home in Natchez from Philadelphia, where he had been raised by Quaker relatives. When Tom gets challenged to a duel, he scoffs at the idea of this southern ritual and is subsequently banished from his father’s home for this breach of honor. The Mississippi River, the old southern town of Natchez, a plantation, a duel, and southern honor were all used to create a specific image of the region.¹⁵

One of the most successful films of the 1920s was *Show Boat* (1929). Like many of the early films produced by Hollywood, the film was based on a successful Broadway play. Florenz Ziegfeld, who produced *Show Boat*, the play, brought to life the Edna Ferber novel of the same name and worked with Hollywood on the film’s production. The movie was directed by Carl Laemmle, who incorporated a prologue that showcased some of the featured players from the original play, including the plantation singers and Queenie, the mammy character played on stage in blackface by white actress Tess Gardella. The story was already familiar to American audiences who had read the novel and to many more who had enjoyed the play. The title character, Magnolia Hawkes, the star of her family’s riverboat revue,



River of Romance, 1929. (Courtesy Photofest)

marries a “charming, river gambler” named Gaylord Ravenal, who squanders the family’s money and is asked to leave by Magnolia’s mother. This forces Magnolia to support herself and her child by going back on stage, where, in blackface, she sings Negro spirituals. *Show Boat* proved to be such a successful southern formula that Hollywood decided to remake the film in 1936 and again in 1951. For the 1936 remake, the roles of the black characters were played by two leading African American actors of the time—Hattie McDaniel as Queenie and Paul Robeson as Joe. Both roles were southern stereotypes—the black mammy and the lazy darky. In fact, in one scene, Queenie tells Joe, “I believe you’re the laziest man that ever lived on this [Mississippi] river.” Irene Dunne played the lead female role of Magnolia, performing Negro spirituals in blackface, accompanied by a banjo, in what is clearly a minstrel sequence.¹⁶

Films about the South in the 1930s may have increased in number, but the story of the region remained the same. The musical costume drama *Dixiana* (1930) began the decade with a story set in New Orleans and also featured a plantation, members of the southern aristocracy, a “powerful riverboat gambler,” and a duel. The year 1935 was an especially productive year for Hollywood films about the South, which became some of the



Hattie McDaniel and Paul Robeson in *Show Boat*, 1936. (Courtesy Photofest)

most successful the industry produced that year. In addition to the remake of *Show Boat*, Paramount Pictures produced *Mississippi*, based on the Booth Tarkington play *Magnolia*, and *So Red the Rose*, drawn from the best-selling Civil War novel by Stark Young, whose setting was the Portobello plantation in Natchez, Mississippi. That same year, Twentieth-Century Fox produced *The Little Colonel* and *The Littlest Rebel*, both of which were vehicles for America's favorite child star, Shirley Temple.¹⁷

The Little Colonel was based on the children's novel of the same name written by Annie Fellows Johnston. Johnston's story, originally published in 1895, tells the story of a young and feisty girl from Kentucky, Lloyd Sherman, whose name was a combination of her southern mother's maiden name and her Yankee father's last name—a name both familiar to, and despised by, white southerners. The little girl's mother, Elizabeth, had married a "New York man" and for doing so was disowned by her father, the colonel, who "hate[d] Yankees like poison." Elizabeth and her husband move back to Kentucky, and the old colonel unwittingly meets his granddaughter (now his neighbor), who, in temperament, turns out to be much like her grandfather, thus earning the nickname, Little Colonel.¹⁸

In both the novel and the film, the Little Colonel is surrounded by



The Littlest Rebel, 1935, starring Shirley Temple and Bill Robinson.
(Courtesy Photofest)

the stock characters one would find in a southern plantation setting. The old Confederate colonel and his daughter Elizabeth, a southern belle, are present. There is also the mammy figure, in this case the family cook, Mom Beck, played by Hattie McDaniel, whose career was filled with such roles. Lloyd Sherman's playmates are Mom Beck's children, who are referred to as "little darkies" and "picknannies" in Johnston's book. In the film, the black actor Bill "Bojangles" Robinson plays the uncle figure, Walker, another household servant, with whom Shirley Temple sings and dances. Finally, the music for the film includes minstrel songs by Stephen Foster and Daniel Decatur Emmett's "Dixie."¹⁹

The Littlest Rebel likewise cast Temple with Robinson in a story set in the Civil War South. The film begins with a scene of a slave cabin sitting in the middle of a cotton field in full bloom and quickly moves to a white-columned antebellum mansion where Virginia Cary (Shirley Temple) is having a children's party, at which Uncle Billy (Bill Robinson) and a fellow male house servant, James Henry, attend to the children. Temple asks Uncle Billy to dance for the children, and with a smile he loyally complies. The film is replete with southern racial stereotypes—from Uncle Billy, the

dancing, happy slave, to James Henry, the slow-shuffling oaf who provides comic relief, to the mammy and the pickaninnies. Temple's character also gets in the act when she hides from the Yankees and is discovered in black-face dressed like a miniature mammy, including kerchief. The combination of America's little sweetheart playing the part of a precocious "little rebel" and a plantation setting with happy and loyal slaves sold well with American audiences nationwide, who made *The Little Colonel* and *The Littlest Rebel* two of the highest-grossing films of the year.²⁰

The terrific success of *Gone with the Wind* only increased Hollywood's desire to produce films set in the Old South, and publishers were definitely in on the act. Several Hollywood studios maintained offices in New York, where they kept close tabs on successful novels as well as Broadway plays. Novels and plays about the Civil War and the Old South were popular in the 1930s, but no book at the time grabbed the attention of Hollywood as much as did *Gone with the Wind*. The book's tremendous sales meant a readymade audience for its film treatment. The American Institute of Public Opinion, founded by George Gallup, known today as the Gallup Poll, estimated that 14 million people had read the novel in whole or in part by 1938. Based on that evidence, the institute estimated that there was a "better-than-even chance" that almost two-thirds of the moviegoing public planned to see the film. As *New York Times* movie critic Bosley Crowther wrote, "Perhaps no cinematic consummation has been so devoutly wished by the American movie-going public" as *Gone with the Wind*.²¹

Before the book was even published, nearly every studio in Hollywood was in contact with Macmillan for an advance copy of the novel. Paramount, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, Twentieth-Century Fox, Columbia, Universal, and Selznick, International—all were interested in making a bid on the movie rights. Warner Brothers initially wanted the film for its star, Bette Davis. Likewise, RKO Radio Pictures expressed an interest in the story for Katharine Hepburn. Margaret Mitchell eventually signed a contract giving Macmillan the right to sell her book to a movie studio, and one month after its publication it was announced that David O. Selznick had bought the film rights to the novel for \$50,000.²²

Mitchell was relieved to hand over the task of selling the film rights to Macmillan and wanted no part in the production. She knew that an adaptation of her 1,037-page novel would be difficult, at best, although she expressed to her editor, Harold Latham, that she "wouldn't put it beyond Hollywood to have General Hood win the Battle of Jonesboro, Scarlett seduce General Sherman and a set of negroes with Harlem accents play the



Clark Gable and Vivien Leigh on the set of *Gone with the Wind*, 1939.
(Courtesy Photofest)

back woods darkies." Mitchell's concern for historical accuracies and for scenes that would set most white southerners' teeth on edge were genuine, as motion pictures had taken liberties with both.²³

Before the ink was dry on the contract, Hollywood was abuzz with excitement about the picture, and actors and actresses were angling to be selected to play the film's principals. Kirtley Baskette, a columnist for *Photoplay* magazine, described the phenomenon as a "grade-A tornado" sweeping the country and Tinseltown. "Actors and actresses who have never been South of the Slot in San Francisco or below Twenty-third Street in Manhattan, whose closest tie to Dixie in fact, is a faint resemblance to a Virginia ham, wander around calling people 'Honey' in a languid, molasses manner," adding that "even the high yellows down on Central Avenue are brushing up on their southern accents." *Gone with the Wind* was being touted as the "greatest film" to ever be made.²⁴

Even before David Selznick began production on his magnum opus, Hollywood rushed to cash in on the novel's mass appeal. The most successful effort was Warner Brothers *Jezebel* (1938), based on the 1933 play by Owen Davis. Margaret Mitchell, who saw the film, discerned no similarities between it and her book, and she told a friend that she did not "have a copyright on hoop skirts or hot-blooded Southerners."²⁵ Selznick, however, did notice the similarities and sent a letter to studio head Jack Warner letting him know as much. "The picture throughout is permeated with characterizations, attitudes and scenes which unfortunately resemble 'Gone With the Wind,'" he wrote, and cautioned that "it would be a pity . . . if so distinguished a picture as 'Jezebel' should be damned by the millions of readers and lovers" of Mitchell's book.²⁶

The similarities between *Jezebel* and Selznick's as-yet-uncompleted film were not lost on critics. Nor was Hollywood's attempt to cash in on the success of *Gone with the Wind*. Frank Nugent, writing for the *New York Times*, remarked that "since a Southern cycle is in the offing, where it has been since Mr. Selznick started looking for Scarlett, it is probably for the best that Owen Davis's 'Jezebel' should have got in the first licks. Being heavy in melodrama with the intense Miss Bette Davis as its heroine, the [film] should clear the air, prepare us for the gentler things to come." Even the trailer for the film did not attempt to hide a connection with *Gone with the Wind*, proclaiming that the story was "a scarlet portrait of a gorgeous spit-fire." Despite Selznick's fear that *Jezebel* would be "damned" by fans of Mitchell's work, the reverse was true, and Davis won the Oscar for Best Actress. If anything, the film whetted the appetite of American audiences,

which were eager to see the most celebrated romantic epic of the Old South ever made for the large screen.²⁷

The cinematic expression of Margaret Mitchell's novel undoubtedly did more to promote a nostalgic image of the Old South than the novel itself. A few years after the film premiered, Mitchell wrote to her friend Virginius Dabney, editor of the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, and expressed her embarrassment that she was "included among writers who pictured the South as a land of white-columned mansions whose wealthy owners had thousands of slaves and drank thousands of juleps." The reality was that the film had done more to influence that perception of the book; even Mitchell recognized the impact of the film on people's understanding of southern history. "Southerners could write the truth about the ante-bellum South," she wrote, but "everyone would go on believing in the Hollywood version." She had resigned herself to the fact that "people believe what they like to believe and the mythical Old South has too strong a hold on their imaginations to be altered by the mere reading of [my] book."²⁸

Mitchell clearly did not place her own work in the context of Lost Cause literature, and yet all the elements of the Lost Cause were there—belles and loyal slaves, plantations and Confederate heroes, and a vindication of the Ku Klux Klan. The Hollywood version, to be sure, embellished the myth. After learning from fellow Georgians Susan Myrick and Wilbur Kurtz, technical advisers Selznick hired to ensure regional and historical authenticity, that Tara was going to have columns and Twelve Oaks would have two staircases, Mitchell admitted she "did not know whether to laugh or to throw up." She confessed she was "mortally afraid" that Tara would resemble the Natchez homes that were seen in the film *So Red the Rose* (1935), adding that she feared that Hollywood might add columns "on the smokehouse, too," rather than portraying the more modest Georgia plantation she described in her book.²⁹

Mitchell's concerns about how the South might appear in film were not unfounded. Motion pictures about the region often represented its antebellum history by showcasing a southern plantation with a white-columned mansion. George Cukor, the original director for *Gone with the Wind*, spent several scouting trips—none of which were in middle Georgia where the novel was set—in search of the perfect antebellum mansion. He visited the James River plantations in Virginia, as well as plantations around Charleston and Savannah. Northern film critics revealed their preconceived, and yet commonly held, notions about the South when they reported on the film's progress. They used Cukor's trips to the region, for

example, to describe the South as a place where the director had enjoyed "the lazy life." Even those who worked on the film were accused of being swept away by the "Southern *dolce far niente*," which translates as "pleasant idleness." Thus, although *Gone with the Wind* was a nostalgic take on the antebellum past, the South's national reputation in the late 1930s remained one of a region where people went about their lives at a slow pace and with a carefree attitude.³⁰

For white southerners, the most important element in the film, aside from adhering to Margaret Mitchell's narrative, was that the actors and actresses not sully the southern accent. Southerners everywhere expressed their concerns to Mitchell personally on this point, and thousands of others wrote to David Selznick himself. As Lucille Pratt, a woman from Shreveport, Louisiana, explained to the producer, "Having had our nerves frayed every time we hear the 'Southern drawl' in a motion picture, we are not hankering at this time for an overdose of it in 'Gone With the Wind.'" Selznick apparently got the message. "We got thousands of signatures on petitions from the South, urging us not to put the northern version of the southern accent in the picture," he explained, and he hired Atlantan Susan Myrick to advise the actors in the film to avoid that pitfall.³¹

The selection of the actress to play Scarlett O'Hara was a national obsession, but in the South it played out in the cultural politics of the Lost Cause. A United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) chapter in Ocala, Florida, passed a resolution to "secede" from Selznick International in protest for choosing anyone other than a native-born, southern woman to play the role. Once Vivien Leigh was chosen, however, the president-general of the entire organization praised her selection, preventing any further uproar by the membership. Getting approval from the UDC was important, given that the organization still wielded influence in the region. After the film's premier in Atlanta, the predecessor of the UDC, the Ladies' Memorial Association, made Vivien Leigh an honorary member of its organization and passed a resolution commending David Selznick "for making the picture conform to the facts of history." This stamp of approval was noteworthy, because it validated the film as staying in step with the *southern* version of history, which was steeped in the mythology of the Lost Cause.³²

Gone with the Wind's achievement in reinforcing the Lost Cause myth in American culture was matched only by its financial success. On the one hand, American audiences readily consumed the film's ideas about the southern past, the idealized race relations presented on the screen, and the

image of the South as a place locked in time. Yet Americans also literally consumed the myth, through the film's commercial tie-ins and by spending their tourist dollars to see the Dixie they witnessed on film, in the hope of seeing blacks working in the cotton fields next to grand, white-columned mansions.

If Hollywood was anything, it was a business, and merchants considered movies to be their greatest salesmen. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and David Selznick, in fact, were singled out for "taking advantage of this newly developed form of exploitation." The studio and the film's producer signed agreements with nearly seventy-five manufacturers to create and market items associated with *Gone with the Wind*, including "jewelry, slippers, house coats, pajamas, hats, snoods, ladies' suits and fur jacket ensembles." Entrepreneurs around the country were quick to capitalize on clothing and jewelry linked to the film or its primary characters—extending the mythology of the South into the marketplace. Atlanta's business community was no exception. F. J. Coolidge & Sons advertised wallpapers that were "expressive of the influence we have come to know and cherish in the Deep South." Interior designers Lang and Fritz, Inc., had a window display in their store "emphasizing the Southern Aristocratic Charm of the 'Gone With the Wind' days."³³

Writing about the film a few years after it debuted, Mitchell's friend Virginius Dabney offered his own assessment of how the film version of *Gone with the Wind* helped to create a false impression of the South. He decried the prologue of the film, which described the South as a "land of Cavaliers and cotton," as "grotesque" and argued that "many of the misconceptions concerning the New South [stemmed] from earlier misconceptions of the Old South." Dabney may have been concerned with historical inaccuracies presented in the film, but the essence of his statement was true. That is to say, most Americans in the 1930s did not have an image of a "New South." Rather, they were content with their image of the region as a place still immersed in the culture of the Old South.³⁴

Dabney may have been offended by misconceptions concerning southern whites, but stereotypes of southern blacks were far more offensive in the eyes of contemporary black leaders. One writer contended that *Gone with the Wind* was a "worthy successor to the other rotten output, *The Birth of a Nation*" in its portrayal of blacks.³⁵ Religious and labor leaders in Chicago protested the film as "anti-Negro" and one that incited hate and lynching. Their appeal to the Chicago Board of Censors to ban the showing of *Gone with the Wind*, although it failed, highlighted their con-

cern about the film's potential to provoke racial violence.³⁶ Andy Razaf, a writer for the Associated Negro Press, offered a creative and pointed criticism of the film with his poem entitled "Gone with the Wind." Razaf's lament is a larger critique of the nation's racial prejudice as revealed in the poem's final stanza:

What of the black man's liberty?
Today, he's half slave, half free,
Denied his rights on every side,
Jim crowed, lynched and crucified
He's even barred in Washington—
Gone with the wind? You're wrong, my son.³⁷

Hollywood's romantic vision of the South and of southerners, black and white, illustrated what was inherently insidious about films set in the region in the early decades of filmmaking, especially for African Americans. Before hillbillies emerged as a regional type, Hollywood offered American consumers a South in which whites were portrayed as elites and African Americans were there to serve or entertain them. For moviegoing audiences in the urban North, in cities to which southern blacks had migrated, motion pictures provided an ideal of race relations that was modeled on the Old South. These films also perpetuated a romantic version of the region that northern consumers of the genre assumed they might still find in the modern South, and they toured the region expecting to see plantations and blacks working in cotton fields. Such films perpetuated an image of the region—an image that in many ways kept it locked in the antebellum past, hindering racial progress not only in the South but in the nation as a whole.

Indeed, African Americans across the nation who longed for racial progress were thwarted in their efforts at reform by the perpetuation of stereotypes that were wedded to the mythology of the Old South. Hollywood helped maintain this state of affairs through numerous motion pictures set in the region, the majority of which were based on stories set in the pre-Civil War South. In a speech before the Hollywood Writers' Congress in 1943, American screenwriter Dalton Trumbo commented that "the most gigantic milestones of [Hollywood's] appeal to public patronage have been the anti-Negro pictures *The Birth of a Nation* and *Gone with the Wind*." Trumbo's larger argument was that Hollywood had done very little to help end racial prejudice and, to some degree, had helped perpetuate

it through motion pictures. Significantly, he pointed to the two most successful films set in the American South to make his point.³⁸

In 1946, film critic John McManus and theater critic Louis Kronenberger reflected on the role motion pictures had played in race relations in the period between *The Birth of a Nation* and *Gone with the Wind* and, like Dalton Trumbo, criticized Hollywood for “never [accepting] as its responsibility the function of helping to destroy race and group prejudice.” McManus and Kronenberger argued that, because Americans were three times as likely to see a film as to read a newspaper or magazine, the motion picture industry had a responsibility to produce films that might help improve race relations. They acknowledged that racial prejudice was “virtually national in extent” and was “built into American custom,” but they encouraged Hollywood to make films that exposed racial prejudice, even though such films would be “in advance of national policy.” To be sure, film audiences were familiar with several talented black entertainers on film, including Lena Horne, Duke Ellington, Paul Robeson, Katherine Dunham, and Fats Waller. Yet most African American artists were in what were known as “all-Negro” films, or performed in a segregated scene, or continued to play stereotypical roles—many of which were based on southern stereotypes.³⁹

In 1942, Wendell Willkie, chairman of the board of Twentieth-Century Fox and former Republican candidate for president, gave the keynote address at the annual meeting of the NAACP in which he spoke of providing a “new deal” for African Americans in films and implored Hollywood to offer films that did not limit black actors to playing menial or comic roles. He reiterated this message later that year at a meeting with motion picture industry executives and producers, who promised to offer films with more realistic portrayals of African American life. Still, Hollywood was a business, and in that regard the industry was careful not to take this experiment too quickly and too far, lest it offend southern theater owners, who were essential to the financial success of a film.⁴⁰

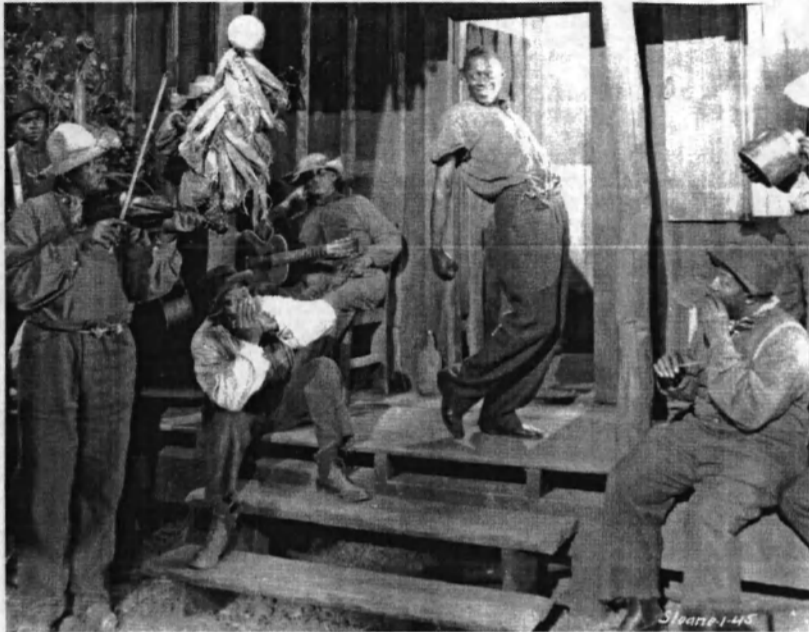
Willkie’s comments about the types of roles offered to black actors—either menial or comic—reflected the long history of Hollywood films set in the South and the portrayal of African Americans in roles that were clearly southern in origin. Most black actors only appeared in films as extras or to provide a racial “atmosphere.” However, when African Americans appeared on film, they generally appeared in what were known as “bit parts” and they nearly always portrayed domestic servants. Even when they were offered actual film roles, they were usually defined as “mammy

roles," like those played by Hattie McDaniel in several films, including *Show Boat*, *The Little Colonel*, *Gone with the Wind*, and *Song of the South*. With few exceptions, Hollywood offered black actors few alternatives to these servant roles until the late 1940s.⁴¹

What did this emphasis on southern racial stereotypes in films mean for African Americans nationally? Claude Barnett, founder of the Associated Negro Press, argued that the popular press and media, including radio and films, influenced national morale and that when popular mediums dealt with issues of race they played an important role in shaping the morale of African Americans. He observed that, although there was "plenty of work" for black actors and actresses in Hollywood, the roles offered to them had not changed substantially in two decades. It is telling that when Margaret Mitchell received the cast list for *Gone with the Wind*, she admitted that she had "never seen . . . any of the Negro characters except Hattie McDaniel." Barnett lamented that black actors and actresses were still being offered parts as "servants, comedians, chicken thieves, razor wielders, believers in ghosts and the supernatural, and [characters that possess] a simple, child-like religion." And, he argued, such stereotypes in film, the nation's most influential form of popular culture, were particularly damaging to black morale because they sustained an image of African Americans as inferior.⁴²

Not surprisingly, Barnett also criticized *The Birth of a Nation*—as a film that not only incited racism but pitted "race against race." Even when Hollywood produced feature films with a black cast, such as *Hearts in Dixie* (1929) and *Hallelujah* (1929), the real interest was to showcase slave spirituals and to depict African Americans in nostalgic settings generally linked to the Old South. *Hearts in Dixie*, for example, was initially applauded for offering black performers an opportunity to work in motion pictures. The characters, however, included stereotypical roles with character names like Nappus and Gummy, the latter described as "lazy and shiftless." The only benefit Barnett saw in having increasing numbers of African Americans in motion pictures was that even though these films invoked such southern mythology, at least the black roles were less likely to be played by whites in blackface.⁴³

Hollywood persisted in producing films that typecast the region and its people throughout the period of World War II. Hillbilly pictures became the favorite of smaller movie studios, especially Republic Pictures, which saw an opportunity to capitalize on the cornpone humor that was increasingly popular on radio. But many of the actors chosen to play the roles were from places far removed from the Ozarks or Appalachia. A *New York*



Hearts in Dixie, 1929, the first film to have an all-black cast. (Courtesy Photofest)

Times movie critic noted that, since “the people of the Southern mountains resolutely refuse to leave their homeplaces for Hollywood,” the industry resorted to hiring actors from places like New York, Maine, and Indiana. The fact was that hillbilly films, too, were profitable. “There continues to be gold in them thar hillbillies,” he wrote, “and so long as that happy state of affairs exists, what difference does it make who does the mining?”⁴⁴

There were native southerners whose radio popularity playing hillbilly characters translated into film careers. Radio personalities Chester Lauck and Norris Goff, who played the roles of Lum and Abner from the fictitious town of Pine Ridge, Arkansas, were featured in no less than six movies. Another Arkansas native, Bob Burns, known on radio as the Arkansas Traveler, also turned his radio fame into a Hollywood career.⁴⁵

Perhaps no other radio star had as successful a run in hillbilly movies as did Judy Canova. Born in Stark, Florida, into a relatively affluent family, Judy and her siblings, Anne and Zeke, began their careers as a hillbilly trio called Three Georgia Crackers. They sang and acted, as well as performed comedy. Judy eventually became a solo performer, playing hillbilly roles on Broadway and on the radio, where she further developed her role as a hillbilly comic. Eventually, she signed with Republic Pictures to star in

films in which she played a simpleminded country girl often caught up in situations that pitted her against scheming city folk who tried to take advantage of her naïveté. In 1941, she starred in the films *Puddin' Head*, as Judy Goober, and *Sis Hopkins*, in which she played the "naïve but good-hearted hillbilly." Canova's wardrobe for these films included calico or gingham dresses, and her hair was styled in her trademark braided pig-tails. One of Canova's films, like other movies of the genre, also integrated contemporary themes of war. In *Joan of Ozark* (1942), Canova played Judy Hull, an Arkansas native who, while hunting quail, accidentally shoots a carrier pigeon being used by Axis spies, which earned her the nickname Hillbilly Mata Hari.⁴⁶

Prior to World War II, hillbilly films were mildly successful with American audiences, but they also influenced the nation's image of the mountain South as a place where there lived an unsophisticated and fecund population, which carried shotguns, feuded, and went shoeless and whose rural isolation kept them ignorant. During the war, stereotypes remained, but a new type of southern hillbilly emerged. As Anthony Harkins has noted in his cultural history of the hillbilly image, this genre of films in the 1940s was more likely to celebrate the "goodness of the 'plain folk'" as a means to critique "the evils of modern urban America," often represented in these films as corrupt businessmen or aristocratic snobs.⁴⁷

Southern stereotypes like the hillbilly and the "old-time Negro" finally came under fire in the years following the conclusion of World War II. Thousands of men and women from Appalachia and the Ozarks who took war-production jobs in largely northern cities like Detroit, Chicago, and Baltimore, along with the thousands of others who enlisted in the armed forces, influenced a change in attitude—at least among movie critics, who ramped up their attacks on Hollywood for promoting ethnic and racial stereotypes in the movies. Nonetheless, movie studios continued to produce films that perpetuated images of the South as a region still wedded to its agrarian roots. Was Hollywood hard of hearing or was it keenly aware that many Americans were still enamored with the Old South? In the case of *Song of the South* (1946), the answer was a little of both.

Walt Disney made plans to produce an animated version of Joel Chandler Harris's Uncle Remus tales before the end of the war, and in 1944 the studio sent its consultants to Georgia to gather background for the movie. They visited Turnwold, the Eatonton plantation of Joseph Addison Turner, where Harris honed his writing skills, and Disney hired Wilbur Kurtz—the historian and technical adviser for *Gone with the Wind*—and



Judy Canova in *Scatterbrain*, 1940. Canova made several hillbilly films during World War II. (Courtesy Photofest)



James Baskett as Uncle Remus in *Song of the South*, 1946. (Courtesy Photofest)

his wife, Annie, to serve as consultants for *Song of the South*. The couple was hired to advise on costumes, architecture, and dialect. According to the *Atlanta Constitution*, Annie Kurtz, who "reared her own five children on Uncle Remus stories and poems . . . [was] an authority on southern dialects." One of the Disney artists who traveled to Georgia told the paper that she, too, had been "brought up on Uncle Remus stories" and was eager to see a Georgia cotton field firsthand and to learn "all about the briar patch."⁴⁸

Song of the South, like *Gone with the Wind* before it, had an Atlanta premier. The film debuted in the city's Fox Theater on November 13, 1946, and, not surprisingly, was well received. The only criticism that Wright Bryan could summon in his editorial in the *Atlanta Journal* was that the film's title should have included the name of Uncle Remus. "To those of us who were brought up on bedtime readings of Uncle Remus stories, the change in the name seems to border on sacrilege," Bryan complained, adding that "[the title] *Song of the South* could do for any picture with a scene below the Mason Dixon Line," an observation that speaks volumes about how Hollywood portrayed the region. Critics writing for newspapers above that line, however, had far more to say about Disney's film.⁴⁹

Bosley Crowther of the *New York Times* lambasted the film in his review, which was appropriately titled "Spanking Disney." Prior to World War II, characters like Uncle Remus were common in motion pictures set in the South and managed to slip through unnoticed by white critics. But, in the postwar era, Crowther's review signaled a change. He began with an assault on the character of Uncle Remus, played by James Baskett, who appeared as the "sweetest and most wistful darky slave that ever stepped out of a sublimely unreconstructed fancy of the Old South." Crowther's description of Disney's vision as "unreconstructed" was significant, even though several critics did not agree, because it was an "unreconstructed" vision shared by a broad cross section of the American public, who turned out to see the film in droves.⁵⁰

Crowther was troubled by what he saw in *Song of the South* and its meaning for race relations, and he chastised Walt Disney directly. "The master-and-slave relationship is so lovingly regarded in your yarn, with the Negroes bowing and scraping and singing spirituals in the night," he wrote, "[that one] might almost imagine that you figure that Abe Lincoln made a mistake." He added, "Put down that mint julep, Mr. Disney!" Not surprisingly, the NAACP joined Crowther in his disdain for the film. The organization had consistently protested negative portrayals of African Americans

in the movies since *The Birth of a Nation* had premiered more than two decades earlier. Walter White, executive secretary of the organization, issued a statement saying that, although the group recognized the "artistic merit" of the film, specifically its music, it was disappointed that "in an effort not to offend the South, the production [helped] to perpetuate a dangerously glorified picture of slavery."⁵¹

The National Negro Congress protested by picketing the Palace Theatre in New York when the film opened in December. In a show of interracial cooperation, several whites joined with African Americans to picket the theater, with placards reading, "We fought for Uncle Sam, not Uncle Tom"—a clear reference to the recent war, in which thousands of African Americans had served. The group brought an effigy of "Jim Crow" in a wooden coffin, which it placed in front of the theater, and, to the tune of "Jingle Bells," the protestors marched with their placards, singing, "Disney tells, Disney tells, lies about the South. We've heard those lies before, right out of Bilbo's mouth"—alluding to the race-baiting senator, Theodore Bilbo, of Mississippi. They also gave handouts to the theatergoers, on which they criticized the film as "an insult to the Negro people because it uses offensive dialect; it portrays the Negro as a low inferior servant; it glorifies slavery"; and, not insignificant, "it damages the fight for equal representation."⁵²

Two weeks after the protest, a subcommittee of the National Board of Review—the organization that monitored the motion picture industry—recommended *Song of the South* as a suitable film for children. Known as the Schools Motion Picture Committee, the group, made up of teachers and parents in the New York area, with its stamp of approval essentially promoted the film and its message to another generation of Americans. Therein lay the problem being protested by the National Negro Congress, which saw a correlation between the continued presence and support for such images on the big screen and their negative impact on African Americans' struggle for equal representation under the law.⁵³

It took both social and political change, as well as a new mass medium, to shake up Hollywood's stale approach to its stories about the South. African American veterans came home from World War II and assumed leadership roles in the southern civil rights movement, and President Harry Truman's executive order ending segregation in the armed forces signaled an important change in national policy. Such changes meant that Hollywood's image of African Americans, an image that was modeled on a southern narrative of blacks as loyal servants, would soon no longer be

tenable. Moreover, the new medium of television increasingly replaced motion pictures as the form of entertainment sought out by most Americans. Ten years after *Song of the South* was made, television had replaced motion pictures as the most influential form of mass media. During those years, Hollywood turned its attention toward making films that might draw Americans away from their television sets, and, as a rule, movies set on a southern plantation with happy-go-lucky slaves were no longer desirable nor profitable. Despite all these changes, Hollywood's representation of the South in motion pictures, both grand and ordinary, continued to influence how the South was perceived in the American imagination—and this reality had consequences for the region and the nation.