

Oils Well (1923)

PRODUCTION COMPANY: Ben Wilson Productions. PRODUCER: Ben Wilson. DIRECTOR: Mark Goldaine. CAST: Monty Banks (unnamed lead), Robert Gray (Herbert Hester), Jeffry Osborne (Boss), Ena Gregory (Boss's daughter). RUNNING TIME: 24 minutes.

Oils Well! (1923) is, in many ways, a rather ordinary film. A two-reel comedy with a second-rate star, it played primarily on the bottom half of bills without much fanfare, barely seeming to make a dent in the marketplace. None of the principals involved went on to do particularly noteworthy work, and the film slipped into obscurity, banished to the footnotes of history. Yet it is the very ordinariness of the production that makes it so interesting and gives it historical relevance. While film historians often single out extraordinary films for analysis, *Oils Well!* is representative of Hollywood production and distribution practices in the early 1920s in a way the famous films of that era are not. Thus the film's journey—from the United States to New Zealand and back again, and from orphaned anonymity back to relative prominence—is important for the manner in which it illustrates the ways that Hollywood films of the era were produced and subsequently distributed around the world.

Oils Well! was produced by Ben Wilson, who at the time was successfully transitioning from primarily being a film actor to primarily being a film producer. Wilson acted regularly in Edison Company and Universal Pictures productions during the 1910s and had his greatest success with actress Neva Gerber in the Universal serial *The Voice on the Wire*. This hit allowed Wilson to realize his ambition of becoming a producer, achieving modest success toward the end of the 1910s before buying a studio lot and forming a production company in 1920. Wilson was one of the era's most prolific producer-director-actors, churning out hundreds of cheap serials, melodramas, westerns, and comedies. Wilson made his films quick and cheap, and that meant

hiring talent who were not quite A-list material. Enter Monty Banks, whom Wilson signed in 1922.¹

Banks, whose real name was Mario Bianchi, immigrated to the United States from Italy via Argentina in the mid-1910s. He had little money and knew even less English but had some experience working as a dancer that he parlayed into work at the studio Century Comedies. Toward the end of the 1910s and in the early 1920s, Banks worked at several studios, including Keystone Film Company, Vitagraph Company of America, and Warner Bros. His name was linked to various major figures in Hollywood over these years, including Fatty Arbuckle, with whom he worked at Keystone, and a young Howard Hawks, who directed Banks in a series of one-reelers.² Banks signed with Wilson's studio in 1922, and there Banks churned out dozens of two-reel comedies, including *Oils Well!* Now getting top billing in his two-reel films, the actor eyed a move to more ambitious feature-length films. A Sept. 10, 1922, notice in *The Washington Post* signaled Banks' growing aspirations, stating, "Monty Banks, the comedy star, has just completed a two-year study of drama. Yes, drama—the real heavy kind. And, he had an object in view, to wit: henceforth he will make no more slap-stick comedies and in lieu thereof will offer two-reelers replete with dramatic suspense even while mirth-provoking comedy situations predominate."³ Then, in early 1923, *Film Daily* reported that "Monty Banks' third contract with Federated expires this week, and it is said here that Banks will soon be seen as star and producer

1. Kalton C. Lahue, *Gentlemen to the Rescue; the Heroes of the Silent Screen* (New York: Castle Books, 1972), 240–242; "Serial Orgy in Hollywood," *Los Angeles Times*, August 29, 1920; and "Has an Eye to Business," *Los Angeles Times*, July 15, 1923.

2. Hawks later claimed to have fired Banks, after which the comedian "got down on his knees and begged to be allowed to come back," though Hawks biographer Todd McCarthy notes that the story "smacks of the usual Hawks one-upmanship." "Merit Won His Start in Films," *Los Angeles Times*, September 27, 1925, 31; Whitney Williams, "Comedian Has Long Struggle," *Los Angeles Times*, January 10, 1926, C30; Katherine Lipke, "Mario Bianchi Arrives," *Los Angeles Times*, November 7, 1926, C21; and Todd McCarthy, *Howard Hawks: The Grey Fox of Hollywood* (New York: Grove Press, 1997), 50.

3. "Banks in New Federated Series," *Film Daily*, July 7, 1922; and "Studies the Drama," *Washington Post*, September 10, 1922, 47.

of his own five-reel comedies. He will not make any more short reels.”⁴ Wilson and Banks soon paired with Grand-Asher Distribution Corp., with which Banks made his feature-film debut in *Racing Luck* (1924). Still, Banks’ career didn’t take off the way he had hoped. Though a talented comedian, he was never a match for the greats of the day, such as Charlie Chaplin, with whom Banks was often unfavorably compared. The coming of sound essentially killed off Banks’ acting career in Hollywood, with the actor’s thick accent relegating him to supporting comedic roles. During the 1930s Banks transitioned from acting to directing, his most famous film being the minor Laurel and Hardy comedy *Great Guns* (1941). Though by the time of his death in 1950 Banks was best known as the husband of comedienne-actress Gracie Fields, during the early 1920s there seemed a real possibility that Banks would make the leap to comedy stardom. *Oils Well!* was released during this major crossroads in his career.⁵

The exact date of the film’s release is uncertain; the most authoritative source seems to be a June 1923 listing in *Film Daily* stating that *Oils Well!* was released on Feb. 20, 1923. However, there appears to be no mention of the film before May 29, when it played at the Olympic in Steubenville, Ohio, as part of a bill headlined by *No Trespassing* (1922), with Irene Castle.⁶ Further clouding the picture is a small notice in the May 4 *Los Angeles Times* announcing, “Monte Banks . . . and many other popular film folk, will be at the C.C. Stall Oil Association Lease . . . Next Sunday, at 2:00 P.M., when they will take the first scenes of a drama of oildom. Come out and watch them work.”⁷ Though *Oils Well!* is not mentioned by name in the notice, it stands to reason that it was likely the film set to be shot on Sunday, May 6, with the first and last

4. “Monty Banks Through,” *Film Daily*, March 2, 1923, 2.

5. “Grand Signs Wilson,” *Film Daily*, April 30, 1923, 2; “Banks in Features,” *Film Daily*, Nov. 4, 1923, 11; Grace Kingsley, “Engaged for Racing Luck,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 15, 1923; and “Monty Banks, 52, Screen Director,” *New York Times*, January 9, 1950.

6. “Monty Banks Comedies,” *Film Daily*, June 3, 1923, 40; advertisement for Olympic, *Steubenville Herald Star* (Steubenville, Ohio), May 29, 1923.

7. Banks’ adopted first name was sometimes spelled “Monte” in the press; the spelling “Monty” was more common. “See Movies and Oil Field Sunday,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 4, 1923.

scenes of the film—the only ones actually involving oil—shot on that date in the company’s oil fields. This would have given just over three weeks for the film to be developed, edited, and shipped across the country to Ohio. A difficult task no doubt, but not an impossible one given producer Ben Wilson’s proclivity for making films quickly.

Though Federated Film Exchanges of America was listed as the film’s distributor, the actual distribution of the film domestically is complicated by the organization not having had the infrastructure necessary for a nationwide release. This forced it to partner with states rights’ distributors, which typically distributed films within certain states or regions of the country. Thus, while Federated distributed Banks’ comedies in the Northeast, where its offices were, Greater Features Inc. purchased the rights to these films along with many other Ben Wilson productions for distribution in the Pacific Northwest. Different parts of the country saw Banks’ films distributed by various companies, including, among many others, Specialty Film Corporation in Arkansas and Pearce Films Inc. in Louisiana. This is representative of distribution practices in early 1920s Hollywood, where only a few majors could distribute a film nationally and most still relied heavily on the states rights’ distribution model, whereby the rights to distribute a film were sold on a territorial basis.⁸

The film’s international distribution is also indicative of Hollywood’s newfound global supremacy in this era. Owing largely to Europe’s film industry being crippled by the First World War, Hollywood rose to a dominant position in the worldwide film market, a position it maintained for decades. Kristin Thompson, in her book *Exporting Entertainment*, argues that

8. The articles mentioning Banks’ films being sold to states rights’ distributors do not specifically mention *Oils Well!*, but it stands to reason that it was likely among these. “Monty Banks Comedies,” *Film Daily*, June 3, 1923, 40; “Get Ben Wilson Product,” *Film Daily*, December 7, 1922, 4; and “Independent Exchanges (Product Handled),” in *Film Year Book* (New York: Wid’s Films and Film Folks, 1923–24), 461–81.

“the key markets in the wartime takeover were Australia and South America rather than Europe itself,” as they were rapidly expanding film markets whose screens Hollywood quickly dominated. These two markets hold particular significance in relation to *Oils Well!*⁹

In the case of South America, the film is an interesting encapsulation of Hollywood’s changing attitude toward its southern neighbors during this time. Hollywood had long used Mexicans as stock villain characters in its films, but in early 1922, Mexico declared it would ban the entire output of any Hollywood studio that stereotyped Mexicans, a threat that Panama soon also raised. Facing economic boycott, Hollywood responded in two ways, the first being to shift the home country of this stock villain from one centered in Central American countries to one centered in South American countries, usually Argentina. The second was to use fictional country and city names so as to avoid offending any specific nation. *Oils Well!* uses a combination of these approaches by setting the action in the fictional country of Chilitina, a somewhat-mangled combination of Chile and Argentina that stands in for any real South American country. The film thus attempts to avoid specifically offending any one nation yet also deliberately plays on stereotypes of Latin America, with Chilitina depicted as a country of loose women and even looser morality. As one title card puts it, Chilitina is “many miles south of the Eighteenth Amendment,” meaning out of the reach of newly instituted Prohibition laws, which were directly linked to reformist discourses on morality. Though Hollywood was concerned with potentially offending the burgeoning Latin American market for Hollywood films, it was not yet willing to give up all its favorite stereotypes.¹⁰

9. Kristin Thompson, *Exporting Entertainment: America in the World Film Market, 1907–34* (London: BFI Pub., 1985), x.

10. Allen L. Woll, *The Latin Image in American Film* (Los Angeles: UCLA Latin American Center Publications, University of California, Los Angeles, 1980), 17–20.

Finally, that Thompson calls Australia the other key market, along with South America, in Hollywood's global ascendance also holds specific significance for this film, given that a print of the film was found in neighboring New Zealand. The two countries were inextricably linked when it came to global distribution, with either Australia or New Zealand often acting as the final stop for film prints in their global distribution. Hollywood was hugely dominant in this territory during the 1920s, with estimates for the total screen time taken up by Hollywood product in New Zealand movie theaters ranging from 90 to 95 percent.¹¹ Just as *Oils Well!* had different distributors in the United States, so did it have various companies handling distribution abroad. In most of Europe, the film was likely distributed by Interocean Photoplays Ltd., which acquired "a series of Monte Banks comedies" for distribution throughout much of Europe. Meanwhile, in early 1924 Apollo Trading Corp. closed a deal to distribute some 13 Monty Banks comedies, likely including *Oils Well!*, abroad in Australia, the Fiji Islands, and New Zealand.¹² A title card preceding the film states that *Oils Well!* was approved for general exhibition by the New Zealand film censors on Aug. 30, 1927, some four years after it had first been released in America. The film likely played for a brief time on screens in New Zealand before it began its long journey through the hands of countless projectionists, private collectors, and preservationists, all of whom helped shepherd the film to the rediscovery and repatriation that brought it back home to the United States, where it lives on at the Museum of Modern Art.

— Ben Strassfeld

11. Thompson, *Exporting Entertainment*, 138.

12. "Harper Here," *Film Daily*, February 3, 1924, 4; and "Apollo Closes Deals," *Film Daily*, March 24, 1924, 2.