Thomas Dixon Successful Pl

'The Birth Of A Nation' And 'Clansman' Big Money Makers

Tar Heel Author Tells of Struggle to Get His Great Motion Picture Produced; and How It Brought Millions to Producers—Played Part of Son in "Sins of the Father."

BY CHARLES H. DICKEY.

Thomas Dixon, Jr., was playing The Clansman in the city of Charlotte, which is only a short distance from Cleveland county, where his father, the Reverend Thomas Dixon, Sr., lived.

When the young playwright, author and actor knew the date of his showing in Charlotte, he sent a letter to his father, enclosing complimentary tickets and asking him to come down and see the play.

His preacher-father sent back this letter: "Dear Son, I have your letter and tickets, for which I thank you. But I have lived all these years without ever going inside of a theater. And, by the help of the Lord, I shall not go in now. Nevertheless, I wish you good success."

This story was told to me by J. S. Farmer, editor of the Biblical Recorder, Raleigh, and gives a high-pitched peep into the conflicting ideas of father and son.

However, this takes us too far from the beginnings, and we shall do well to hear this flavorful account from the words of the young actor himself:

"The greatest excitement I ever had in my life was the launching of The Clansman. The opening night was in Norfolk, Virginia, on the legitimate stage.

"That was my first experience on the stage. I was directing and held the script in my hand all that night and never had to correct an actor or actress. I knew nobody else could do that.

UTILIZED TELEPATHY.

"I had an idea that I could get my mind into the brains of those players and that they would not fail me. I did just that. I never failed to pull an actor out of his difficulty without opening my mouth.

"That night there were many moments when those fellows went perfectly blank. I just stood there and watched them until I got the idea into their brains. It was a sort of mental telepathy. It was the first thing of the kind I ever did in my life, and I never repeated it. I never had occasion to do it again.

"Later on, I was in Wilmington with The Sins of the Father. I had produced it and put it on. I directed it and went to Wilmington to launch it. I had just finished drilling the company and was ready to leave Wilmington and was ready to go back to New York, when the members of the troup went down to Wrightsville Beach, where my leading actor was killed.

"All of them were in bathing except me. This young man from Baltimore had not a great deal of experience, but he was a very fine actor. His name was Robert Barton.

"I saw him killed by a shark."

"He was an expert swimmer and was out beyond the fourth breaker; then, all of a sudden, I saw him throw up his hands, and his face looked to me as though he were suffering.

DIXON BECOMES ACTOR.

"The director beside me said, 'He is joking.' I said, 'That boy is not playing a prank. Go after him as quickly as you can.'

"Then, two boys, who were expert swimmers, plunged in to try to rescue him. But when they reached the place where they had last seen him, they were unable to find him. A shark had taken him under, and the next day his body was washed ashore, and it was found that his left leg was off.

"The shark had cut his leg off when I first saw him fighting. He went under, and the undertow took him out, and the boys could not find him."

At this point, I remembered that Mr. James A. Parham, present managing editor of The Charlotte Observer, had once told me that he remembered this instance and was in Fayetteville the next evening, where The Sins of the Father was to be played. He had told me that under these circumstances, and within fewer than twenty-four hours, Thomas Dixon, Jr., had to walk into the breach and play the part of the young man whom the shark had killed.

This seemed so interesting an incident that I asked the famous author of The Sins of the Father if he recalled it, and if he would relate the incident to me as he remembered it.

RECALLS FAYETTEVILLE NIGHT

Thomas Dixon never forgets anything. At once, he was off with the story:

"Our company was to go on with the play in Fayetteville the next night after our actor was drowned. I had to go in and play his part.

"Of course, I had never played the part. Yet, I knew I could do it, because I had created it, and I knew every bit of it.

"I had no difficulty in playing the part at all. I just had the young lady who played opposite me, rehearse all of it before we went on the stage. And I enjoyed the performance.

"I could not get a man to take the place at once, so I had to go on with the company. The seats were all sold out in advance in Fayetteville. The performance was a big success; and I had to stick to it until I could get a boy to come down from the north. At this time I was on the road about two weeks.

"Then I had a man to come in to play the part who was a failure. I had to replace him. I sent for a man to take his place, and I could not get him. So, I let this young man go, and I went in and played the part, and played it throughout the entire season.

"I went with the company over the whole south and came back into Chicago and presented the play in the Great Northern Theater. I played the lead and made them pay me $500 a week as my salary for acting."

MADE HIT AS ACTOR.

At this point, I remembered to have heard Mr. Parham say that he recalled very distinctly that occasion in Fayetteville and the circumstances which made it doubly interesting. "I remember," said Mr. Parham, "as though it had been yesterday, how Mr. Dixon looked that night so many years ago. He stood six feet two and one-half inches tall and was a very handsome young man. I recall that he was dressed in a double-breasted very light brown suit, which seemed to accentuate his youth."

At this time I said to Mr. Dixon: "Mr. Parham was under the impression that you did that work superbly that night in Fayetteville and said you made a distinct hit. Is it your opinion, now, that you acted the part well, and could you easily conceive of yourself in the role of an actor; and if events had shaped themselves that way, is it your opinion that you could have probably attained some outstanding success on the stage?"

Mr. Dixon answered: "I did not like it as a business in life, because I had to be in the theater at the same hour every night. I never could be induced to do that kind of work."

As Mr. Dixon went on with his story, one naturally recalled that The Clansman later on evolved into The Birth of a Nation. I was anxious to hear him talk about this. It seemed that the great author was just as anxious to talk as I was to hear him talk.

"The Clansman ran on the legitimate stage for five years without stopping. It was all over the United States and then was revived three times afterward.

"The Clansman earned half a million dollars for its producers, and at that time I owned one-half interest in it, as well as the authorship.

"I invested my money in my own production, over the protest of my wife and every friend I had. My friends said that it was nonsense to invest one's own money in one's own play.

"But I had faith in it. And so, I invested in it—about $4,000. They paid me a quarter of a million dollars.

"The Clansman, of course, was a very successful play. It made a fortune. It was a towering success. It was an unexpected success.

"That made it naturally a subject for pictures.

"I could not for two years place it. The producers of pictures then, as now, cut circles. They would not have it, because they wanted jazz.

"I invested my own money in it, and now, in vain, I tried to show them. They would have nothing to do with it.

"Finally, I got a new company that had never produced a picture. D. W. Griffith was in that company. They had a little money, but not much; and up to that time had never made a picture.

"I placed the contract with them on a royalty basis. They could not pay for it—luckily, for me.

"They gave me a royalty contract in lieu of cash, under which I made a fortune.

"They paid me over $600,000 in royalties.

"That picture grossed more than $10,000,000 for the producers.

"It is still running.

"It is going to be made into a

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To
My friend
Charles H. Dickey
With our good wishes.
Sincerely.
Thomas Dixon

New York
March 26, 34.

Thomas Dixon's autograph of a copy of The Clansman, the book which brought him most fame and fortune.

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BY ANNE JACKSON

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talking picture as soon as the company is re-organized.

"The Birth of a Nation first appeared in the year 1915. I think that it has never been surpassed in the cinema world. It is an old, silent picture, but the dynamic powers in it have never been surpassed—or even attained by any other picture I know.

"It was a picture made of ideas and not of scenery. It cost only a trifle to produce it—$85,000, I think it was, while it is popularly supposed to have cost $1,000,000.

"The largest salary paid any single actor was $75.00 per week.

"It took two years to make it.

"That company became the richest and most powerful organization in the business.

"It evolved, eventually, into a number of various companies. Griffith's corporation grew out of it. It revolutionized the whole business.

"I sold the rights of the novel, and of the play, to this company and did all I could in the way of assisting with the scenario, which I wrote and gave them with it — then, gave them all the books and papers which I had, and from which they could make up the picture.

"I, myself, wrote the scenario. At that time, scenarios cut very little figure. Griffiths put it on his cuff and selected the things he thought were best."

All this time I was wondering where the 70-year-old author would come in if, and when, The Clansman had finished it's process of evolution through The Birth of a Nation on the silent silver screen and on into a talking picture near the end of the first third of the 20th century.

The versatile and still young Thomas Dixon could tell me everything I wanted to know:

"I own all the rights.

"They came back to me. The company's rights to The Birth of a Nation were forfeited by the forfeiture clause, which enabled me to call the forfeiture when they failed on royalties.

"Anything else that may be done with any or all of my books, with any or all of my plays—and especially with The Birth of a Nation, whether it be talkie or not, the disposition of it is still in my hands. This is especially true for talking pictures. No rights have ever been sold for talkies."

So this present generation will be looking forward to the revival of The Birth of a Nation and wondering what it's success will be.

One cannot but hope that the gifted playwright will live to see the complete evolution of The Clansman on through to the end —which will be its production in a modern talking picture theater.

Thomas Dixon knows now that his chief fame and glory came from his novel, The Clansman. He spent two full years in gathering material for that book, then wrote it in thirty days. He is still receiving royalties on that production. The old silent picture — The Birth of a Nation—ran for more than sixteen years. He is still receiving some royalties from that source.

The Clansman sold more than one million copies. It outsold The Leopard's Spots. It ran through twenty-five editions—at one time, selling a single edition of half a million. That was just after The Birth of a Nation was made.

Thomas Dixon, in addition to writing 21 novels, has written nine plays and six motion pictures.

The names of some of his plays are: The Clansman, The Leopard's Spots, The Sins of the Father, The One Woman, A Man of the People, and Robert E. Lee.

Christian. Alexander the Great said to a coward in his army, another Alexander, 'Either imitate my example, or give up my name.' With the Christian it is likewise: either imitate the example of Christ who hated evil, or give up the name of Christian."