 Thomas Dixon story would make great movie

RALEIGH — What does a poor boy from the Cleveland County seat of Shelby have to do with the world’s richest and most famous moviemakers? Nothing, directly. But if it hadn’t been for North Carolina’s astonishing Thomas Dixon and his talent for cooking up a good story and preying on the raw emotions of Southerners half a century after the Civil War, the film industry in Hollywood might not be in an absolute uproar these days.

You may have seen the news item datelined Hollywood: Steven Spielberg had just won the Directors Guild of America’s Life-time Achievement Award. It was an honor that until last fall was named for the groundbreaking filmmaker D.W. Griffith, who in 1915 released a movie based on a book written by Dixon. That silent movie, “The Birth of a Nation,” is famous and infamous.

It is famous because Griffith, until then an unknown filmmaker, invented cinematic techniques that revolutionized the industry. And it is infamous because its storyline, based on Dixon’s novel “The Clansman,” inflamed passions, aroused racial hatreds, fostered racial stereotypes, glorified the Ku Klux Klan and launched a series of debates that are no closer to conclusion today than at the outset of this century.

In Hollywood, the board of the Directors Guild of America quietly decided last fall to retire the award named for D.W. Griffith because his early work was so objectionable to many Americans who regard the content as incomprehensibly racist. But members of the guild no doubt were surprised that many critics, even acknowledging the obnoxious content of “The Birth of a Nation,” believed it was an absurd act of polit-