



# THE MUSEUM OF WESTERN FILM HISTORY

## The Great Train Robbery (1903) America's First Western

### EDISON FILMS THE GREAT TRAIN ROBBERY



**EDISON FILMS**  
THE GREAT TRAIN ROBBERY

**CAST:**  
Butch Cassidy  
Doc Blade  
Frustrator  
Harp  
The Sheriff  
The Conductor  
The Engineer  
The Fireman  
The Passenger  
The Bandits  
The Train

**SALES AGENTS:**  
THE EDISON FILM EXCHANGE, 150 N. W. 10th St., New York, N. Y.

**THE ORIGINAL AND ONLY**

One of the milestones in film history was the first narrative film, *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), directed and photographed by Edwin S. Porter - a former Thomas Edison cameraman. It was a primitive one-reeler action picture, about 10 minutes long, with 14-scenes, filmed in November 1903. It was not shot in the western expanse of Wyoming but on the East Coast in various locales in New Jersey (at Edison's New York studio, at Essex County Park in New Jersey, and along the Lackawanna railroad).

The precursor to the western film genre was based on an 1896 story by [Scott Marble](#). The film's title was also the same as a popular contemporary stage melodrama. It was the most popular and commercially successful film of the pre-nickelodeon era, and established the notion that film could be a commercially-viable medium.

The film was originally advertised as "a faithful duplication of the genuine 'Hold Ups' made famous by various outlaw bands in the far West." The plot was inspired by a true event that occurred on August 29, 1900, when four members of George Leroy Parker's (Butch Cassidy) 'Hole in the Wall' gang halted the No. 3 train on the Union Pacific Railroad tracks toward Table Rock, Wyoming. The bandits forced the conductor to uncouple the passenger cars from the rest of the train and then blew up the safe in the mail car to escape with about \$5,000 in cash.

### Many Firsts

The film used a number of innovative techniques, many of them for the first time, including parallel editing, minor camera movement, location shooting and less stage-bound camera placement. Jump-cuts or cross-cuts were a new, sophisticated editing technique, showing two separate lines of action or events happening continuously at identical times but in different places. The film is intercut from the bandits beating up the telegraph operator (scene one) to the operator's daughter discovering her father (scene ten), to the operator's recruitment of a dance hall posse (scene eleven), to the bandits being pursued (scene twelve), and splitting up the booty and having a final shoot-out (scene thirteen). The film also employed the first pan shots (in scenes eight and nine), and the use of an ellipsis (in scene eleven). Rather than follow the telegraph operator to the dance, the film cut directly to the dance where the telegraph operator enters. It was also the first film in which gunshots forced someone to dance (in scene eleven) - an oft-repeated, clichéd action in many westerns. And the spectacle of the fireman (replaced by a dummy with a jump cut in scene four) being thrown off the moving train was a first in screen history.

In the film's fourteen scenes, a narrative story with multiple plot lines was told - with elements that were copied repeatedly afterwards by future westerns - of a train holdup with six-shooters, a daring robbery accompanied by violence and death, a hastily-assembled posse's chase on horseback after the fleeing bandits, and the apprehension of



the desperadoes after a showdown in the woods. The steam locomotive always provided a point of reference from different filming perspectives. The first cowboy star, [Gilbert M. 'Broncho Billy' Anderson](#) played several roles: a bandit, a passenger who was shot in the back, and a tenderfoot dancer. The remarkable film was greeted with the same kind of fanfare that Sam Peckinpah's

violent ***The Wild Bunch*** (1969) received many years later.

The action of each scene is told with only one shot. Almost every shot is a static, long shot, confining the action to the perspective of the camera at eye level. Tension and excitement is achieved by moving the players, rather than moving the camera angles.