

Early Movie Making comes to Prescott, 1912

By Mona Lange McCroskey

The little town of Prescott, Arizona, was still basking in Arizona's new baby-state status on July 12, 1912, when director Romaine Fielding and a cast of 19 "well-known photoplay artists" from the Sigmund Lubin Company of Philadelphia arrived on the 1:28 train, traveling in two Pullman cars with a custom seventy-foot baggage car full of props and photo equipment.ⁱ

They were there on a three-month stopover to produce silent films in the scenic areas in and around Prescott, their presence having been procured after "months of brisk correspondence" between Prescott Chamber of Commerce Secretary Malcolm Frazier and the moviemaker.ⁱⁱ At that time all Arizona Chambers of Commerce were heavily engaged in boosting their communities, and the prospect of attracting moviemakers was very exciting. Also, Frazier chaired the Arizona Good Roads Association, which was campaigning to connect the state's major cities and attractions and recognized the motion picture's potential as an "incomparable marketing tool" in the promotion of Southwest tourism.ⁱⁱⁱ

An innovative portable camera recently designed by Sigmund Lubin enabled him to send crews to film on location, and Fielding's was one of two companies assigned to capture the landscape and the romance of the West. The Prescott populace was captivated and "a

number of local young people have offered to pose for these pictures."^{iv} Fielding shrewdly used this civic boosterism to secure publicity, props, and extras for his pictures.



Romaine Fielding

Before arriving in Prescott, Lubin's Southwestern company had filmed in El Paso, Juarez, Douglas, and Tucson. The troupe started out under the management and direction of Wilbert Melville, who in June 1912 had been replaced by Romaine Fielding, a principal in the company. Fielding was a colorful and intriguing character, variously described as unconventional, dynamic, compelling, forceful, flamboyant, and even bizarre. A *Journal-Miner* reporter characterized Fielding as "one of the most peculiar and interesting human types" he had met, who "with his inscrutable smile and low-pitched voice seems to marshal and command his cohorts without the least apparent ef-

fort."^v Fielding handed out a biography stating that he was born in Corsica to affluent parents; lost his inheritance; came to the United States and attended Shattuck Military

Academy, the University of Minnesota, and Columbia University Medical School; and that he had acted on the stage in England and the U.S. for twenty years.

In fact, Fielding was born William Grant Blandin in Riceville, Iowa, in 1868. He was abandoned by his unwed parents and raised by his grandparents in Minnesota. He attended the University of Minnesota for a time, and then worked at numerous jobs, including assistant manager of an engine works, machinist, and travel agent. He prospected in the Klondike where he met authors Rex Beach and Jack London, and he established a doctor's office in Kansas City, Missouri, under the name of Romanzo A. Blandin.

In 1907 Blandin abandoned his medical practice, married local stage actress Mabel Von Valkenburg, whose stage name was Mabel Vann, assumed his stage name of Romaine Fielding, and moved to New York.^{vi} For a few years Fielding barnstormed on the Pantages and Belasco circuits. In 1911 at age forty-four he appeared on film for the Solax Film Company. After a few months he moved to the Lubin Film Company as a leading man in the traveling stock company.^{vii}

Fielding for the year preceding his promotion to director had written and acted in many of the company's films, although he did not receive individual credit. Upon his rise in position he became a high-profile spokesman for the Lubin group, where "his energy and imagination were matched only by his flair for self-promotion."^{viii} Within a month he had written, directed, and starred in five one-reel pictures in Tucson: *The New Ranch Foreman*, *The Ranger's Reward*, *A Romance of the Border*, *The Sandstorm*, and *A Western Courtship*.

The plots of Fielding's films set him apart from other directors, ranging far afield from

the stereotypical Western story. Some of them depicted Mexicans and underdogs favorably, even as heroes. His "considerable respect and romantic fascination for the Hispanic culture" was reflected in his plots and colorful costumes.^{ix} Women appeared in a more favorable light. Fielding played on the Westerner's "psychological relationship"^x to the environment, which he perceived as an evil power that mocked man's striving. Fielding's work was described by reviewers as vivid, demoniac, compelling, repulsive, gigantesque, and startling, and by himself as "physical and mental realism."^{xi} His films were of a very different genre than the child-friendly Westerns made later in Prescott by Tom Mix and Tex Ritter.

Romaine Fielding delighted the town of Prescott by praising its scenic beauty, the clean, crisp mountain air, and the enthusiasm of the Chamber of Commerce. He toured Granite Dells and Watson Lake and was pleased with "the wonderful scenic opportunities and the accessibility to the rugged granite background afforded in so many places by natural stage settings."^{xii} He intimated that the film company might stay on indefinitely. A studio was set up on property owned by Frank M. Murphy behind Mercy Hospital at 712 Western Avenue, where the wardrobe manager installed the \$10,000 collection of military garb, Spanish costumes, and evening dresses brought with the company. A fifty-foot square stage was constructed, covered by a sliding canopy. Fielding invited onlookers, who were cautioned to remain silent while scenes were being shot and not to appear before the camera without being invited. He also solicited suggestions for plots from the local populace, especially children. Secretary Frazier, too, invited Prescott's citizenry to take part in the making of motion pictures and in suggesting stories with true local color.^{xiii}

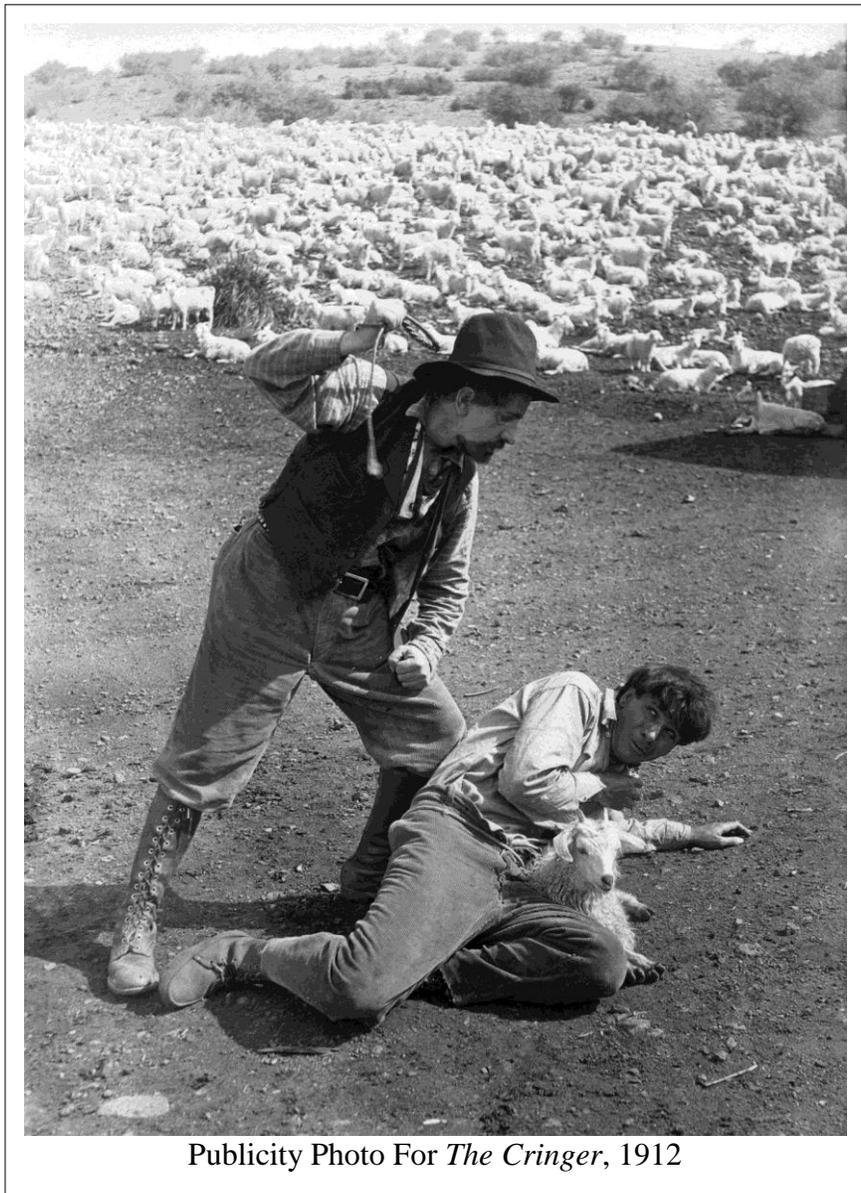
Ominously, a note in the local paper on the day of the troupe's arrival observed that the summer rains had begun with a gentle and steady downpour.

Fielding's first Prescott film was *The Cringer*, claimed to be the first moving picture made in Yavapai County. He used one hundred fifty star struck extras. The ambitious script contained seventy-eight scenes, to be filmed in twenty local natural settings. A Lubin press release recounted the plot:

A young sheep herder (played by Romaine Fielding) who is a moral coward, being much ill-used, is turned into a ferocious being. He steals a horse, rides into the mountain town, sets fire to a barn, enters a bank and holding up the cashier, steals a bag of gold. He is pursued by a posse and takes refuge in a log hut, where he is killed, and dying exclaims: "I was not afraid."^{xiv}

The director was beaming after the first day's work and thanked the locals who, "ahorse, awheel, on foot and in autos, lent action and variety" to a mob

scene.^{xv} On the following day, with permission from landowner Edwin C. Payne, he filmed local horsemen, "mounted on rugged Yavapai range ponies, breaking the calm of centuries at Granite Dells [with] some classic rides over hill and dale and through the placid waters of the lake."^{xvi} From there Fielding went to the Ungles [sic] ranch in the area of Four-Mile House to film a band of Angora goats. He was becoming impatient with shooting delays caused by summer showers.



Publicity Photo For *The Cringer*, 1912

In his quest for realism, Fielding planned to burn a house within the city limits with the Prescott Fire Department in attendance, setting off a skirmish between Mayor Morris Goldwater and Fire Chief A.A. Johns. The mayor refused to allow a fire anywhere near Prescott. This setback, combined with summer rain delays, brought on low troupe morale. Morale was quickly revived when the fire chief approved the burning of a building that Fielding had purchased in Prescott. Mayor Goldwater, however, stood firm and overruled the chief's decision. Finally, Fielding's company spent three days building a "house" outside the city limits that was then torched. This scene was followed by pursuit scenes on Willis between Cortez and Granite Streets and at Head Lumber Company and a hold-up of the Yavapai County Savings Bank.

Fielding took advantage of his victory over the mayor, making sure the burning building caught the attention of *The New York Dramatic Mirror*. *The Mirror* praised him for his dedication to realism. Prescott's citizens worried that the troupe might leave because of Fielding's conflict with the mayor, but at a meeting with the Chamber of Commerce their differences were ironed out and the film maker hinted that he would stay to film the

town's planned three-day Labor Day celebration.



Mayor Morris Goldwater

The Cringer proved to be a popular film and earned critical acclaim for its director. It was an important milestone in Fielding's career because of the attention it called to his passion for realism. Also, his character was noted for its uniqueness. The film's success prompted Lubin to spend more on advertising and publicity for his director. (A *Mirror* reviewer said the film was unpleasant and that if it had been done by anyone less than Fielding "it would be utterly repulsive."^{xvii})

When *The Cringer* opened in October 1912 at the New State Theater in Prescott, three showings attracted most of the population, necessitating an extra showing. The film was well received, although a local news report said that some of the finer points were over-

looked "because everybody was busy picking himself out in the different scenes and boasting of it to his neighbor."^{xviii} A local advertisement for the picture stated ambiguously, "Some picture. Ask your friends."

Fielding filmed three more pictures in the Prescott area in quick succession: *The Uprising*, *The Neighbors*, and *The Forest Ranger*. His desire for realism was increasing to the point that when, in shooting a scene



Fire Chief A. A. Johns

for *The Neighbors*, the leading lady fell from her horse while attempting to board a train, he filmed “take two” before seeking treatment from Dr. Yount for her injury.^{xix}

Fielding worked without a stand-in, staging fights on top of moving trains and riding off steep embankments on his horse. He enhanced his reputation as an excellent horseman when he commandeered George Carter’s horse and roped steers on Carter’s Kirkland area ranch during roundup. When the horse was cornered in the corral by a steer, Fielding stood up in the saddle and bulldogged the steer as it approached, earning rancher Carter’s praise for his “courage and quick-thinking.”^{xx} The director demonstrated his marksmanship skills when he used live ammunition to shoot within three inches of an actor’s face during the filming of *A Life for a Life*, astounding the movie company and on-lookers with his “ease and accuracy.”^{xxi} Such pistol shooting was admired in “a community where every man carries a revolver and knows well how to use it.”^{xxii}

The Uprising was shot at the Burnt Ranch to recreate a historic 1865 Indian battle. The *Journal-Miner* outlined the plot in a July 30, 1912 article: “The present photoplay deals largely with the heroic rescue of a babe, in the face of constant rifle fire by hidden Apaches. The hero [Fielding] is wounded many times but manages to deliver his tender charge into the hands of a friend, just as the last of his life blood flows out.”

Fielding’s cast included “Indians, trappers, and primitive white women” from Yavapai County. With the cooperation of a few settlers who remembered the battle, the fight scene was “true to nature and without any trimmings of the dime novel character.”^{xxiii} Some scenes were shot on Granite Creek east of the Crystal Ice Company. The Palace Saloon was refitted with roulette, faro, and craps

equipment from basement storage for filming a gambling segment. However, the cameraman could not get enough light to shoot in the bar and the scene was restaged on the set off Western Avenue. The many extras, “gathered from the local constellation of robust chivalry and mountain beauty,” in *The Uprising* attended the opening at the Elks Theater, setting an attendance record.^{xxiv} Hundreds more were turned away from the packed theater.

The weather had improved and Fielding expressed his intention of filming two films a week for the next three months.

The Forest Ranger, filmed partly on Spruce Mountain, earned praise from the local press for Fielding’s continuing attention to realism. Forest Supervisor Hinderer volunteered facilities under his control to assist in the actor’s authentic portrayal of a forest ranger. Hinderer’s office was virtually moved to the Lubin studio so that scenes could be shot depicting day-to-day work there. A Lubin release described the activity on the set: “Uniformed men from the sheriff’s posse elbowed the clerks of the office, Mexican greasers and “Yanks” down on their luck made the outside forest ring with the blows from their axes. Cowgirls, lithe and breezy, seemed to spring from nowhere. A few greasy Chinamen betokened the fate that washing was one of the local industries. Spurred cowboys rode hither and thither, and dialects and languages made a Babel of Prescott, Arizona.”^{xxv}

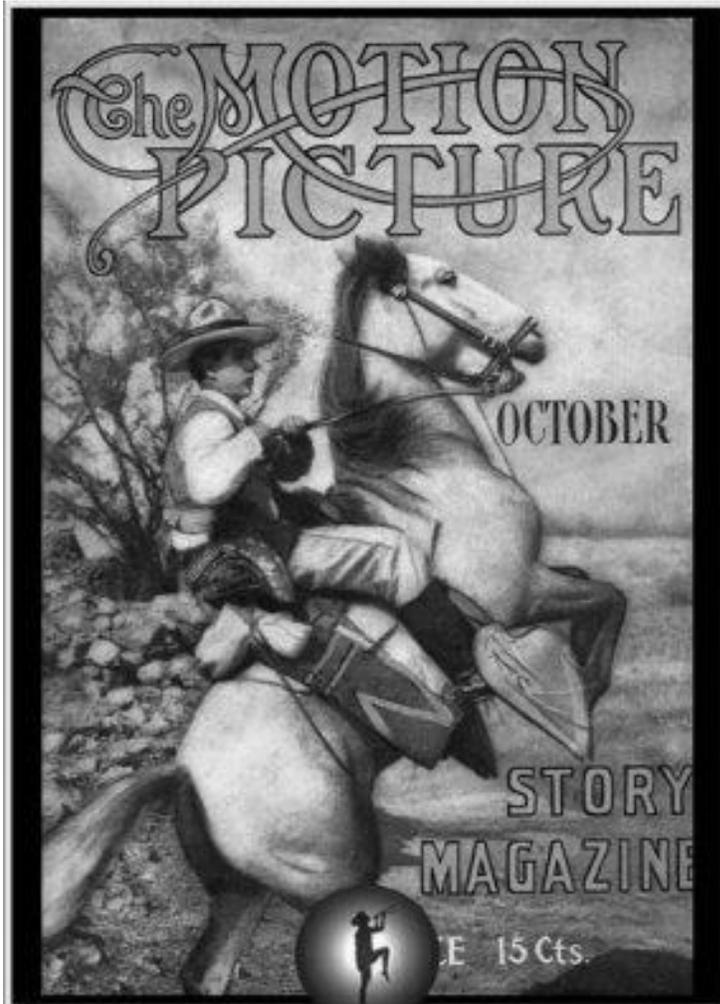
Prescott’s summer rain pattern continued to provoke Fielding, who was obsessed with his work and railed at delays. He often worked eighteen hours a day. He told Malcolm Frazier that if the rains continued he would have to “fold his tents and like the Arab, silently steal away” to California or another, drier location.^{xxvi} While awaiting a break in the weather the director again solicited ideas from Prescott residents. He filmed a roadrunner killing

a rattlesnake and Apache Indians on the reservation, clips that were later incorporated into his pictures.

Fielding then purchased a flashy Buick automobile in Prescott and transported a cast to Jerome where he filmed *Chief White Eagle* and *Who is the Savage?* Neither of these features received good reviews; in fact *The Mirror* said that *Chief White Eagle* was “one of the most senseless plays the Lubin Company has produced under Romaine Fielding for some time.”^{xxvii} Significantly, these two photoplays added to Fielding’s reputation for shooting unusual, out-of-the-ordinary films in the colorful Southwest, and in October 1912

Siegmund Lubin chose him as the first Lubin director to make two-reel films.^{xxviii}

Romaine Fielding profusely thanked Prescott for its help in filming the photoplays that paved the way to this honor and stated that he would remain in Prescott. He was inspired to make more “westerns” in and around Prescott from late August until the first week in November: *The Physician of Silver Gulch*, *Juan and Juanita*, *A Life For a Life*, *The Sheriff’s Mistake*, *The Way of the Mountains*, *A Dash for Liberty*, *The Surgeon*, *His Western Way*, *The Blind Cattle King*, *The Mexican Spy*, *The Power of Silence*, *Out of a Beast a Man is Born*, and *Courageous Blood*.^{xxix}



1913 Fan Magazine Cover featuring Romaine Fielding

In these films Fielding took the role of a doctor, Mexican characters, and a cattleman. He was criticized by Eastern reviewers for playing around racial themes. Undeterred, Fielding kept writing and directing films focused on Mexican, Indian, and Anglo mixed relationships in the West. Fielding’s acting ability, however, received praise from the critics. They seemed to be able to separate his story lines and his portrayals.

In 1913 Romaine Fielding was chosen by readers of *Motion Picture Story Magazine* as the most popular male movie player. He received over one million votes and outdistanced the most well-known silent screen stars by a large margin. An “avalanche of [Fielding] votes . . . came pouring in from the Southwest and elsewhere during the closing days [of voting].”^{xxx} In 1914 he again placed high in the *Motion Picture Story* voting and was selected as the *New York Telegraph* readers’

most popular player.

Prescott continued its love affair with Romaine Fielding. When he nabbed a forger wanted in Tucson he was appointed a deputy sheriff, “which carries with it the doubtful privilege of arresting claim-jumpers, crook [sic] gamblers and other dangerous criminals,” notwithstanding that the alleged forger was acquitted and sued him.^{xxxii} Fielding also was sued by Frank Young, a porter at the Del Monte Saloon in Prescott, for injuries caused when Fielding’s Buick knocked him from his bicycle on West Gurley Street.

On November 2, 1912, the *Journal-Miner* reported that the Lubin Company had concluded filming in Prescott for the present. The article continued that Fielding was making arrangements to move the troupe to Castle Hot Springs for the winter and that they would return in the summer to resume filming. The director and his troupe departed without fanfare.

Romaine Fielding continued his movie making for the Lubin Company elsewhere in Arizona until 1915, but he did not return to Prescott. Unfortunately, none of the 107 Southwest films made by Fielding exist today.

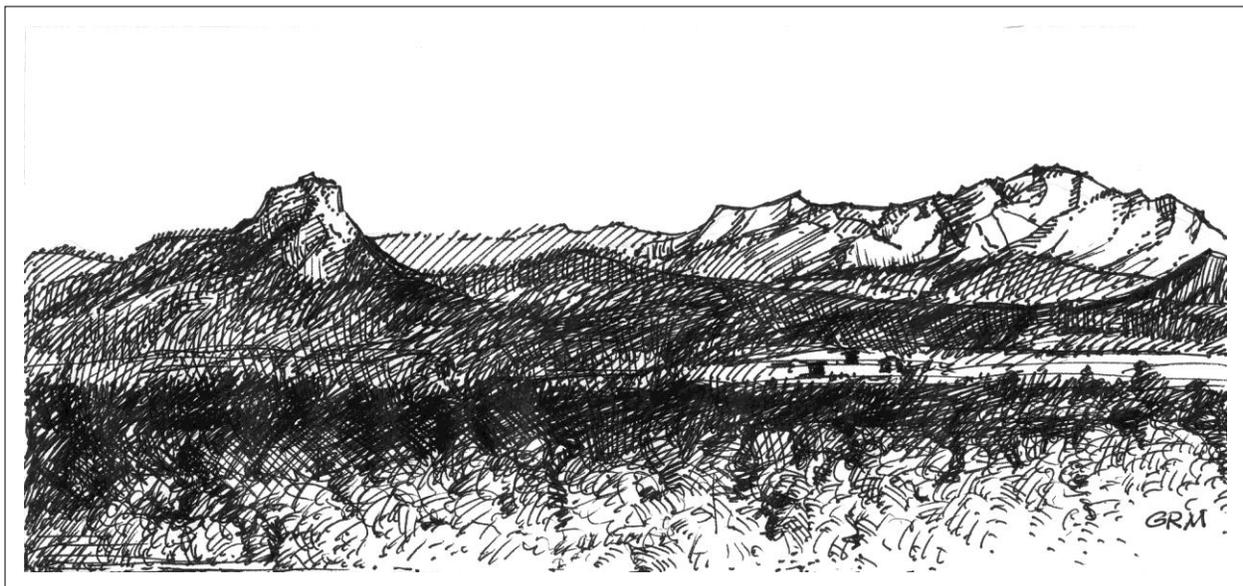
They were destroyed in a film vault explosion and fire at the Lubin Studios in Philadelphia on June 13, 1915.

Now nearly forgotten, Romaine Fielding, “out of his disjointed and irregular background, created a unique element in American cinema—realism.”^{xxxii} It is significant that he “strove for ethnic realism while virtually every other cinematic troupe in the country continued to denigrate and vilify Mexican characters.”^{xxxiii} By 1915 moviegoers preferred to escape by watching stereotypes, and Fielding returned to Vaudeville.

Romaine Fielding appeared in six silent films in 1926 and 1927. He died on December 15, 1927, at the age of fifty-nine after undergoing a rudimentary facelift that caused a fatal neck swelling. Fielding was always evasive about his private life, but at the end his first wife claimed to be his widow. It was speculated that he fathered as many as ten children out of wedlock. The loss of his films only added to the Fielding mystique.



SOURCES



Anderson, Robert. "Famous and Forgotten: Romaine Fielding: Author, Producer, Director, Actor, Realist." Master's thesis, University of San Diego, 1977.

Eckhart, Joseph P. *The King of the Movies: film pioneer Siegmund Lubin.* (Madison/Teaneck/London: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press), 1997.

Woal, Linda Kowall. "Rediscovering Romaine Fielding and the First 'Real' Westerns." Master's thesis, San Francisco State University, 1996.

Woal, Linda Kowall. "Romaine Fielding: The West's Touring Auteur." *Film History* 7, no. 4, (1995): 401-425.

Woal, Linda Kowall and Michael. "Romaine Fielding's Real Westerns." *Journal of Film and Video* 47.1-3 (1995)

Lubin Film Company Bulletin (1912-1915). Lubin Film Company records – 1881-1984. Philadelphia Free Library.

Lubin Film Company Scrapbooks. Lubin Film Company records, Philadelphia Free Library. December 1911-July 1915.

Prescott, *Arizona Journal Miner.* July 12-November 2, 1912.

END NOTES

ⁱ "Photoplay People Busy in Prescott," *Prescott Journal-Miner*, 13 July 1912.

ⁱⁱ "Lubin Company is after Romances," *Prescott Journal-Miner*, 12 July 1912.

ⁱⁱⁱ Linda Kowall Woal, "Rediscovering Romaine Fielding and the First 'Real' Westerns" (master's thesis, San Francisco State University, 1996), 34.

^{iv} "Lubin Company is After Romances," *Ibid.*

^v "Photoplay People Busy in Prescott," *Ibid.*

^{vi} Fielding divorced his first wife in 1917 and in 1918 married actress, Naomi Mary Lillian Sachs, aka Joan Arliss. Romaine and Naomi had a son, Romaine, Jr., and two more sons who died in infancy.

^{vii} Linda Kowall Woal, "Romaine Fielding: The West's Touring Auteur," *Film History* 7 (1995): 402.

^{viii} *Ibid.* 404.

^{ix} *Ibid.* 420.

^x *Ibid.* 405.

^{xi} Robert Anderson, "Famous and Forgotten: Romaine Fielding: Author, Producer, Director, Actor, Realist" (master's thesis, University of San Diego, 1977): vii.

^{xii} "Lubin Company is Enjoying Climate," *Prescott Journal-Miner*, 14 July 1912.

^{xiii} Linda Kowall Woal, "Romaine Fielding: The West's Touring Auteur," *Ibid.* 35, FN 63.

^{xiv} "Lubin Films," *The New York Dramatic Mirror*, 23 October 1912: 30.

^{xv} "Photoplay Folks Have Begun Work," *Prescott Journal-Miner*, 16 June 1912.

^{xvi} *Ibid.*

^{xvii} Anonymous, "Reviews of Licensed Films," *The New York Dramatic Mirror*, 12 October 1912, back cover page.

^{xviii} "Amusements," *Prescott Journal-Miner*, 23 October 1912.

^{xix} "Face Scratches Not Inflicted by Cat," *Prescott Journal-Miner*, 24 July 1912.

^{xx} "Romaine Fielding 'Shows 'Em'," Lubin Clipbooks.

^{xxi} "Romaine Fielding, Lubin Director, an Expert Shot," *Moving Picture World* article in Lubin Clipbooks, n.d.

^{xxii} "Mr. Romaine Fielding," article in *Pearson's Weekly*, Lubin Clipbooks, n.d.

^{xxiii} "Will Reproduce Historic Fight," *Prescott Journal-Miner*, 25 July 1912.

^{xxiv} "Indian Picture Being Filmed by Lubins," *Prescott Journal-Miner*, 2 August 1912.

^{xxv} Oscar Griffin, "The Forest Ranger," Lubin Press Release, 1912. Clipbooks.

^{xxvi} "Be Kind, Jup. Pluv or Lubins Will Go," *Prescott Journal-Miner*, 27 July 27, 1912.

^{xxvii} "Reviews of Licensed Films," *The New York Dramatic Mirror*, 27 November 1912.

^{xxviii} "Confer Honor on Romaine Fielding," *Prescott Journal-Miner*, 05 October 1912, 4.

^{xxix} Reviews or synopses of these films can be found in: *Moving Picture News*, 28 September 1912: 28; *New York Dramatic Mirror*, 13 November 1912: back page; *Moving Picture News* 26 October 1912: 22; *New York Dramatic Mirror*, 13 November 1913: 35; *New York Dramatic Mirror*, 04 December 1912: 33; *Moving Picture News*, 14 December 1912: 27; *New York Dramatic Mirror*, 08 January 1913):28; *Ibid.*, for *The Power of Silence*; *New York Dramatic Mirror*, 15 January 1913: 52.

^{xxx} "Special Notice, P.S.," *Motion Picture Story Magazine* (September 1913.)

^{xxxi} "Mr. Romaine Fielding," article from *Pearson's Weekly* in Lubin Clipbooks.

^{xxxii} Anderson, xii.

^{xxxiii} *Ibid.* 37.