

# Penrod and Sam

US : 1923 : dir. William Beaudine : First National  
prod: : scr: : dir.ph.:

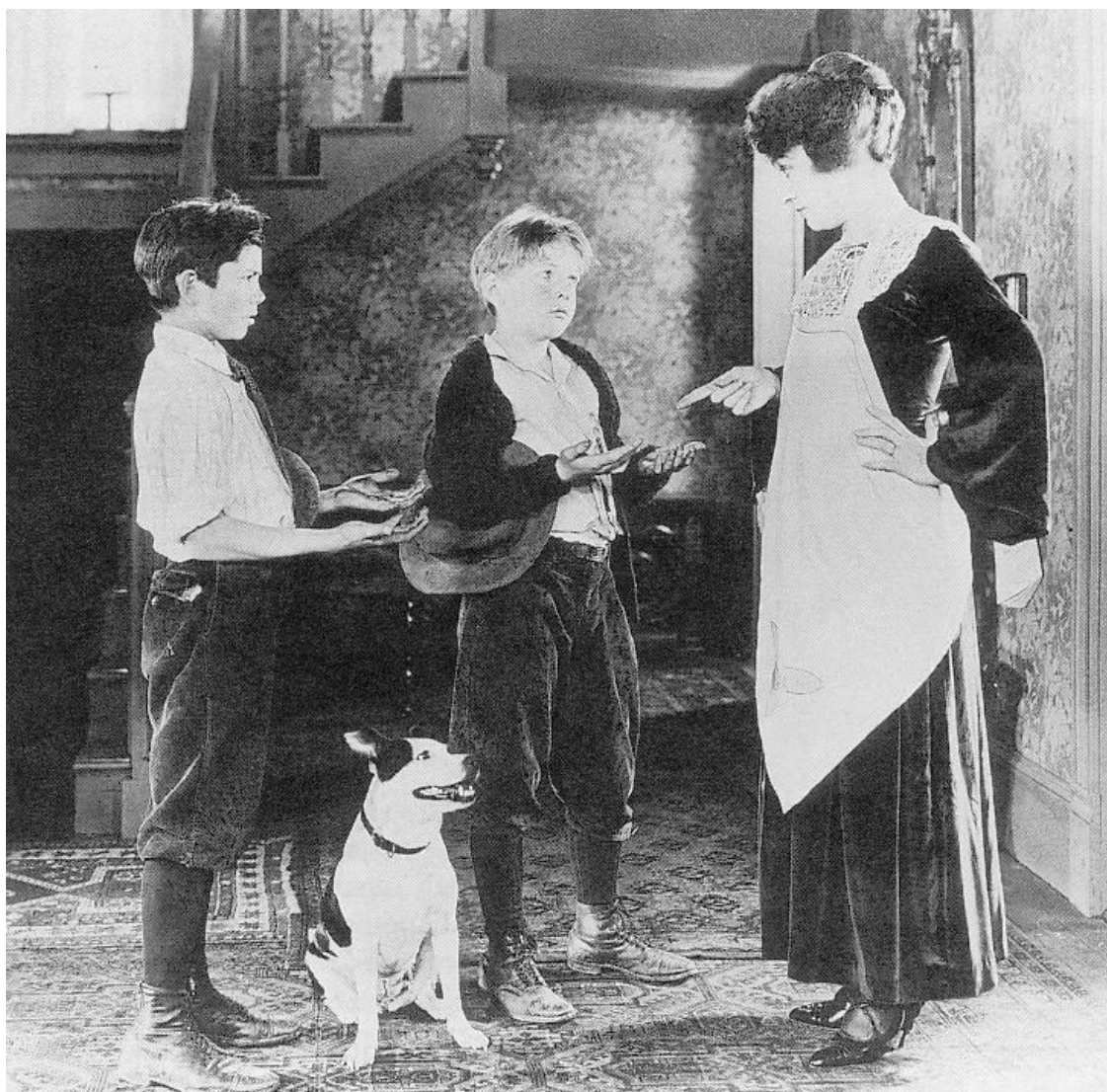
Silent : ? min

*Ben Alexander; Joe Butterworth, Buddy Messinger; Bobby Gordon; Newton Hall;*

*Eugene Jackson* .....

Gladys Brockwell; Cameo the dog

| Ref:  | Pages | Sources | Stills | Words | Ω | 8 | € | M | ⌘ | Copy on VHS | Last Viewed |
|-------|-------|---------|--------|-------|---|---|---|---|---|-------------|-------------|
| 3101b | 4.5   | 3       | 3      | 1,356 | 3 | - | - | - | - | No          | unseen      |



*"You needn't think you're bringing those hands into my house!"*  
*Joe Butterworth, Ben Alexander (note the hat) and Gladys Brockwell*

*Source: The Moving Picture Boy*



L to R: **Our Gang** dog Cameo, Ben Alexander, Joe Butterworth and Buddy Messinger Source: *A Pictorial History of the Silent Screen*

**Halliwell's Filmgoer's Companion** general note on Penrod:

"Booth Tarkington's American boy character, in his mid-west small town setting, was for many years a favourite Hollywood subject. Marshall Neilan directed Gordon Griffith in a 1922 version. In 1923 William Beaudine directed Ben Alexander in the title role in "**PENROD AND SAM**", which was remade by Beaudine in 1931 with Leon Janney, and again by William McGann in 1937 with Billy Mauch. Mauch and his twin brother Bobby appeared in two sequels: "**PENROD'S DOUBLE TROUBLE**" (38) directed by Lewis Seiler, and "**PENROD AND HIS TWIN BROTHER**" (38) directed by McGann. Two Doris Day musicals, "**ON MOONLIGHT BAY**" (51) and "**BY THE LIGHT OF THE SILVERY MOON**" (53), were also lightly based on the Tarkington stories: Penrod, unaccountably disguised as "Wesley", was played by Billy Gray."

**NFT Bulletin** – July 79 – review:

"Booth Tarkington's Penrod was the American equivalent and predecessor of Richmal Crompton's William. He first appeared in novel form in 1914, had a sequel in 1916, and was filmed in 1921 with Wesley Barry a perfect embodiment. Ben Alexander, who plays Penrod in the film version of the sequel, was a more aristocratic child, with a greater gift for pathos, but he and his pal Sam (Joe Butterworth) pull no punches in a running feud with the fat bully (Buddy Messinger)."

**The Moving Picture Boy** incidental note on Wesley Barry's first screen PENROD:

"1914 Booth Tarkington best-seller. Penrod, for the benefit of non-American readers, was the American fore-runner of Richmal Crompton's William, who saw the light eight years later - a creature of wild imagination and grandiose stratagems, from the ruins of which, by a mixture of luck and bluster, he emerges unscathed. Subsequent screen Penrods included Ben Alexander, Leon Janney and Billy Mauch..."

Excerpt from **The Moving Picture Boy** entry on Alexander:

"The freckled expounder and interpreter of a child's soul, to whom nice little Jackie Coogan and all the other studious Baedekers of child psychology must bow the knee.. Incredible artistry." Such was the verdict of Germany's *Filmwoche*, in 1924, on the playing of Nicholas Benton Alexander III, better known as Ben or Benny. (But, later, Nick to his friends.) His first public appearance was on the cover of a rose catalogue, his second as Cupid in "**EACH PEARL A TEAR**"; and after two years in the movies he won the world's heart as "the littlest brother" in Griffith's World War One epic "**HEARTS OF THE WORLD**", jealously sticking his six-year old tongue out at his brother's girlfriend.

Ben Alexander began as a cuddlesome, strikingly Aryan infant, sleepy and sensual in a Robert Mitchumish way, gradually becoming more aquiline as adolescence approached. He was the screen's second "**PENROD**",

handsomer than Wesley Barry had been, more passionate than puckish. Though never a star again – the real magic left him with the onset of puberty, and he became, in his own words, purely a commercial actor – the handsome Alexander continued to get good secondary roles during the Twenties and early Thirties...”

Excerpt from **The Moving Picture Boy** entry on Butterworth:

“The dark and personable Joe was probably, but not certainly, a kid brother of Ernest and Frank. With a scowl as fine as Billy Gray’s thirty years later, he had leads in "**HEROES OF THE STREET**", in Ben Alexander’s "**PENROD AND SAM**" (as Sam) and the title role in "**THE GOOD BAD BOY**". He was one of Mary Pickford’s knickerbockered tormentors in "**LITTLE ANNIE ROONEY**".”

Excerpt from **The Moving Picture Boy** entry on Gordon:

“Nine-year old Bobby was spotted at a prizefight by the director William Beaudine, looking for a Jewish boy to play the hated Martin Levy in "**PENROD AND SAM**". (Racial caricatures are a depressing feature of Booth Tarkington’s otherwise likeable "Penrod" books, and have undoubtedly assisted them into oblivion. One would rather not recall the names of the little black brothers, Herman and Verman).”

Excerpt from **The Moving Picture Boy** entry on Buddy Messinger:

“Melvin Joe Messinger was a great bruiser of a boy, inclining to fat though not in the Arbuckle or Joe Cobb class. He and his comelier sister Gertie sprang to fame around their ninth year in the Kiddie Comedies which the Franklin Brothers, Chester and Sidney, turned out for Fox between 1915 and 1918... After the Franklin series ended, he remained in great demand, and was seen as the hulking bane of Johnny Jones in the **Edgar** comedies and of Ben Alexander in "**PENROD AND SAM**"...”

... and **The Moving Picture Boy** entry on Newton Hall:

“The fair-haired Newton Hall tended to play rather gentlemanly (not to say prissy) little boys. Inevitably, he was Georgie Bassett in the "**Penrod**" films.”

[no listing in "Classics of the Silent Screen", "Hollywood in the Twenties", "Silent Movies: A Picture Quiz Book", "Halliwell's Film Guide", "Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide 2001", "Speelfilm Encyclopedie", "The Critics' Film Guide", "The Good Film and Video Guide", "Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89", "Rating the Movies (1990)", "The Sunday Times Guide to Movies on Television", "The Time Out Film Guide", "TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995", "Variety Movie Guide 1993", "Video Movie Guide 1993" or "The Virgin Film Guide"]

No further information currently available. Any boy born with a handle like [Nicholas Benton Alexander III](#) did not, we can assume, enter the performing arts merely to keep life and soul together. Here 12, Ben is more familiar today as hero of the still-impressive "**ALL QUIET ON THE WESTERN FRONT**", and for his role much later in the TV cop series "**Dragnet**", but his early career is what interests us – evidently something of a jewel adorning the silent screen.

In 1923 he also starred as the misunderstood scalawag in **"BOY OF MINE"** (a remake of which, incidentally, also featured the next screen Penrod, Leon Janney). In 1924, age 13, he made a **"Juvenile Comedies"** series, in 1925 played another Booth Tarkington character, rich brat Georgy Minafer, in **"PAMPERED YOUTH"**, and in 1926 appeared in the serial **"SCOTTY OF THE SCOUTS"**. He died in 1969.

Loyal henchman [Joe Butterworth](#) was 12, and himself played a spank-magnet in **"THE GOOD BAD BOY"** (24), appeared with the first screen Penrod, Wesley Barry, in **"HEROES OF THE STREET"** (22), with Jackie Coogan in **"LITTLE ROBINSON CRUSOE"** (24), and otherwise made a handful of Westerns.

[Newton Hall](#), 10, here reprises his Georgie Bassett role from the 1920 **"PENROD"**. [Bobby Gordon](#), also 10, went on to play other Jewish boy roles, not all so unsympathetic, and finally [Eugene Jackson](#), 6, had his best role in the early black talkie **"HEARTS IN DIXIE"** (29).



*Ben Alexander seen here in a studio publicity shot with Wesley Barry, the first screen **PENROD**. Barry was 16*  
*Source: The Moving Picture Boy*

Despite much websearching and rummaging in second hand bookshops, I am still no wiser as to the plots of the **Penrod** stories, or even how many books there were, but it seems fair to infer that, like Twain's boyhood tales, Tarkington's are suffused with the social mores of Dixie, but a turn-of-the-century Dixie (as in "**THE REIVERS**"). Hal Roach's **Our Gang** series (few enough of which I've also seen) reflect a similarly awkward racial posture – benign, patronising, implicitly contemptuous, and a similar enchantment with rascalhood, which is just as unkosher today. Boys are not rascals anymore, they are "vulnerable young persons", with "attention deficit disorders".

See other versions from 1931 and 1937, "**PENROD**" (22), "**PENROD AND HIS TWIN BROTHER**", "**PENROD'S DOUBLE TROUBLE**" and subject index under **DOGS, RASCALS & SCALAWAGS**, [SILENT CINEMA](#) and **BOOTH TARKINGTON**.