

Tom Sawyer

US : 1917 : dir. William Desmond Taylor : Paramount
prod: : scr: Julia Crawford Ivers : dir.ph.:

Silent : ? min

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Jack Pickford; Robert Gordon; George Hackathorn; Antrim Short; Edythe Chapman;
Clara Horton; Carl Goetz

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	Words	Ω	8	∞	M	♀	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
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Not a boy by the strict meaning of the act, Mary Pickford's kid brother was pushing 21, but if the stills of him are any indication, he fell into the category of "honorary boys" – older actors whose boyish looks and figure allowed them to continue playing kid roles well into their twenties. Ralph Macchio would be one recent example, Matthew Broderick another. It's a felicity of nature that generally proves a drawback as their careers progress. And so it was for Mary Pickford.
Source: *The Moving Picture Boy*

Halliwell's Filmgoer's Companion general note:

"Mark Twain's boy hero has been played on film by Jack Pickford in 1917 (also in "**HUCK AND TOM**", 1918), Jackie Coogan in 1920, Tommy Kelly in 1938 (the Selznick production), also in 1938, by Billy Cook (in "**TOM SAWYER, DETECTIVE**") and in 1972 by Johnny Whitaker."

Excerpt from The Moving Picture Boy entry on Pickford (born Jack Smith):

"...Jack had a sensitive oval face, and brown hair which fell becomingly forward unless brilliantined. According to need, he smiled impishly or suffered beautifully, and was a much loved juvenile lead right up to the late Twenties. He was a highly-strung creature, and led a rackets life not untouched by tragedy... It's hard to assess the limits of his career as a "boy actor", since he didn't make his first film till he was 13, and created the screen's first notable "**TOM SAWYER**" when he was nearly 21! The film – with Robert Gordon as Huck, George Hackathorne as Sid and Antrim Short as Joe Harper – is more like a whimsical documentary on the young unemployed. But Jack Pickford was unquestionably a charmer."

Mark Twain Forum website review:

"The first motion picture adaptation of Mark Twain's 1876 novel "*Adventures of Tom Sawyer*" was produced as the silent film called simply "**TOM SAWYER**" in 1917 starring Mary Pickford's younger brother Jack in the title role and William Desmond Taylor

directing. A newly restored and scored version of this adaptation produced by The Library of Moving Images Inc. will soon be released on video tape and is now currently on tour accompanied by a four piece chamber ensemble. This musical score, written by Maria Newman and performed by the Kairos String Quartet provides the soundtrack for the video tape. Well intended, the score is very highbrow in a sort of vintage avant garde style vaguely reminiscent of Igor Stravinsky's beautiful musical accompaniment for "*Histoire du Soldat*" (A Soldier's Tale) written in 1918. Newman's score for "**TOM SAWYER**" is so strong that it sometimes overwhelms the viewer/listener. The ideal score for a silent film performs as an unobtrusive supporting player. Achieving that delicate balance can't be an easy endeavour.

"**TOM SAWYER**" is actually the first of two films which, if they were combined, would make a more representative version of the novel. "**TOM SAWYER**" is devoted to the more light-hearted episodes of the story and concludes with Tom, Huck and Joe showing up at their own "funeral". The second film, "**HUCK AND TOM**", made the following year (1918) included many of the cast members from "**TOM SAWYER**" and tackled the more melodramatic plot lines of Tom and Huck witnessing the murder by Injun Joe, the framing of Muff Potter and Tom's testimony that vindicates Potter. "**HUCK AND TOM**" concludes with the boys discovering Injun Joe's treasure and sets up the third film in the trilogy, "**HUCKLEBERRY FINN**", in which Tom and Huck would be played by different actors (1920). All three films were Paramount releases directed by William Desmond Taylor and scripted by Julia Crawford Ivers.

What the film makers decided to film they did by the book and scenario writer Ivers stuck very closely to the original narrative, editing and embroidering it where she saw fit but respecting the material. Certain sequences of this new version were personally tinted by producer Elaina B. Archer. Blue tinting is her favorite, but it is used sparingly. The bluish main titles over painted generic landscape cards proclaim:

"Jack Pickford in Mark Twain's Great American Classic 'Tom Sawyer'. By arrangement with Mark Twain Company, Copyright 1917 by Oliver MoroscoPhotoplay Company. Directed by William Desmond Taylor."

The prologue scene shows an elderly actor with receding white hair, moustache and white suit playing Mark Twain sitting at his desk in a darkened study – never mind that Clemens was only forty when he finished writing "*Tom Sawyer*". Suddenly a miniaturised Jack Pickford as a barefooted Tom materializes sitting on a stack of books or something (it's a very darkened study.) Twain does a "take" but quickly gets down to business and starts writing. Tom obligingly offers this titanic old Twain a bite of his apple as he swings his legs cheerfully. A title is superimposed over him: "*Tom Sawyer who is not the model boy of the village.*" Suddenly we are into the first chapter of the book, but we have come in too late to see the crime for which Aunt Polly is punishing Tom – probably stealing jam.

Edythe Chapman plays Aunt Polly as the character incarnate – bespectacled and aproned. When she hams it up she's likable so you forgive her excesses. Tom eludes his Aunt, sprints through the jimson weed-choked garden and escapes over the high board fence. Looking for trouble he finds it in the person of the dandified Alfred Temple (Carl Goetz) who is designated "*the model boy of the village,*" though in the book he was a stranger, new to the village.

Faithful to Mark Twain's narrative, the boys circle one another and exchange challenges; then Tom elaborately draws a line in the dirt with his big toe and Alfred obliges him by crossing it. Alfred gets thrashed with a vengeance by a virile Tom – a real cat fight filled "with dust and glory" concluding with Alfred face down in the dirt and Tom perched on his back demanding that he "holler 'nuff".

This is a no holds barred event – partly because Jack Pickford was twenty-one years old when the picture was made and pretty much "grewed up" – so the supporting cast of children had to be at the very least adolescents to be in scale to him. (A very tall man is cast to play the schoolmaster, but he's not a character actor like you would expect, his height was what qualified him.) Not that this sort of casting was uncommon in the silent film era – in the same year, 1917, Jack's sister Mary at age twenty-four played little girl "**REBECCA OF SUNNYBROOK FARM**".

During the encounter with Alfred Temple we are introduced to Huckleberry Finn (Robert Gordon) who sits nearby and witnesses the massacre. Huck is the most overblown character in an otherwise fairly understated

cast. Dressed in an exaggerated ragged costume reminiscent of burlesque theatre, and grinning a gap-toothed daft smile, Huck sits watching the fight, holding a watermelon under one arm. Huck's hat has the remnants of a brim left; mostly just a shabby crown. After Alfred has been vanquished, the retreating boy hurls a rock at Tom's back and Tom chases him home where Alfred torments him from inside the house while his mother remonstrates Tom with, "You're a bad, vicious child!" (Or young hoodlum judging by his size and temperament.) To celebrate Tom's victory Huck breaks his watermelon in half and splits it with the champion.

Next day Tom is assigned his whitewashing punishment. Aunt Polly's young slave Jim, who is as big as Tom, walks up with an empty bucket on his way to the pump and is waylaid and tempted by Tom as a candidate to do the whitewashing. Jim demurs until the unveiling of Tom's sore toe proves to be more than he can resist and he bends over to survey this wonder. In a nice bit of staging we see Polly come out of the house, size up the situation and put quite a bit of effort into removing one of her slippers. Thus she telegraphs Jim's fate – Polly has his rear end in her sights and follows through with style. After Jim runs off, Polly elaborately replaces the slipper on her foot and goes back inside.

The part Mark Twain wrote for Ben Rogers is replaced by Joe Harper as Tom's first whitewashing victim. Joe is played by Antrim Short who bears a striking resemblance to young Ron Howard during his "**Happy Days**" stint. Pickford does a lovely job playing Tom as an absorbed artist lost in the sheer ecstasy of creative expression as he swipes the brush on the fence as if it indeed was a joy to do. Joe Harper has to coax Tom into sharing this privilege at which point scenarist Ivers indulges in a little inflationary language as she expands Twain's original dialogue from "there ain't a boy in a thousand, maybe two thousand, that can do it the way it's got to be done" to "ain't one boy in a thousand, maybe a hun'ed thousand."

Huck Finn once again shows up as spectator, watching Tom fleecing at least eight boys that we see on screen who all divest themselves of some of their boyish treasures for their turn as whitewash artists. Once his victims have gone, Tom gloats over his booty and laughs with not a little contempt at those gullible fools. During this and several other close-ups the camera irises in on the actor's face, another stylistic

feature peculiar to the silent cinema along with its narrative and dialogue title cards. Director Taylor displayed a fully developed style of shooting and editing that is still in vogue today and it is remarkable to see it fully employed in 1917.

After Tom's whitewashing triumph he walks back into Polly's house, hides his treasure and finds his Aunt just as Twain described her sleeping in a chair with her cat in her lap. Tom takes Polly outside and she responds with a hands up "take" of shock and disbelief. She escorts him back into the kitchen and rewards him with an apple while Tom clandestinely "hooks" two doughnuts. Here Ivers took Twain's mention of Polly's "happy scriptural flourish" and gives her the line, "*What you earn by honest effort and without sin has the best flavour.*"

Footloose and fancy free, Tom roams the neighbourhood and spots Clara Horton as Becky Thatcher picking daisies in the front yard of her home. Clara was in sore need of one of those cinematographers who specialised in glamour photography. She is filmed in harsh sunlight in a Baby Jane wig with braids and decked out in a wedding cake dress and full length pantalettes which make it hard to look demure. The whole effect is quite unflattering and you are left to wonder what charm this Becky holds for Tom. Tom throws a few cartwheels and retrieves with his toes a daisy Becky coquettishly dropped for him.

Sunday finds Tom being forced to wash up and don the same ridiculous apparel that his fellow Sunday school students wear – a tight waist length roundabout – and crowned with a precious beribboned little straw hat. The fact that the actors are too old to be dressed this way underscores the absurdity. Tom parlays his whitewashing booty to buy out the prize tickets that will earn him the coveted Bible and squirms with embarrassment when he misidentifies David and Goliath as the first two apostles in front of Becky and her father Judge Thatcher. In a departure from the original text, the Widow Douglas is introduced as Tom's Sunday school teacher in this sequence, although she won't have anything else to do until she appears in the two sequels.

Monday morning Tom tries to avoid going to school by claiming a toothache. Straight from the book – Polly ties one end of a string to Tom's tooth and the other end to the bed post. She's about to shove the flaming end of some firewood in his face to complete the procedure

when there is an inexplicable cut to Huck Finn outside shooting at something off screen with his sling shot. In the following shot Tom surveys his tooth dangling from the string. The set dressing in Polly's home is unusual – an elaborate cooking stove which probably post dates the Civil War is a prominent fixture and Polly's four poster (in which Cousin Mary also sleeps) is in the same room with the stove.

A following scene finds Tom arriving late to school and confessing that he was delayed for stopping to talk to the forbidden Huck Finn. He is walloped on the shoulders by the schoolmaster with something that looks like a small sagebrush before being sent to sit with the girls, Becky Thatcher in particular. When Tom writes "I love you" on his slate for Becky, he is caught by the teacher and made to sit disgraced in front of the class wearing a dunce cap. During the noon hour Tom and Becky stay in the classroom and Tom quickly proposes an engagement, chases Becky around on top of the benches before getting the promised kiss, then blunders by confessing a previous engagement to Amy Lawrence.

Becky's rejection is the first of several events that bruise his boyish feelings. At supper Sid breaks the sugar bowl and Tom waits for "that pet model Sid" to get punished by Polly at last. Instead Polly hits Tom upside the head naturally assuming he was the culprit. Crushed, Tom retreats to Becky's house and lies down below Becky's window where he is unceremoniously drenched by a bowl of water thrown out by a black servant.

Another scene finds Tom crossing paths with Joe Harper and the two decide to visit Huck Finn at his "home" – a big old empty "hogshead." As they approach we see tobacco smoke from Huck's corn cob pipe wafting out between the barrel staves – the movie's funniest sight gag. Tom drafts his buddies to join him in piracy and dubs Huck "The Red Handed" at which point Finn surveys his own left hand to verify the claim. The boys commandeer a raft on the shores of the "Mississippi" (probably the Sacramento River in California which closely resembles Old Man River in many places and consequently became a favourite stand-in for Hollywood film makers.)

This sequence is obviously meant to take place at night but was shot in broad daylight; however, the audience is not supposed to notice. At "2 AM" the boys land on Jackson's Island and inexplicably let the raft float away

though they don't hesitate to jump in and swim in the river the next day. A propeller driven steam lugger (a rare vessel for that stretch of the Mississippi at this early date) discovers the abandoned raft miles down the river and the boys are presumed to have been drowned. Back on the island Huck watches with demented glee as Tom and Joe puff away on their first corn cob pipes and then stagger away to be sick.

That night Tom makes his stealthy visit home but decides not to leave a message for his Aunt when he learns of the memorial service planned for him and his companions. Tom returns to the island and plots their auspicious return to the village. On the day of the funeral the congregation is properly broken up and the minister appropriately dumbfounded when the three drowned boys brazenly and unhesitatingly march down the aisle of the church to be reunited with their families. Widow Douglas hugs and kisses Huck and he grimaces with distaste at this unwelcome attention. The choir sings; Becky reconciles with Tom; and Huck, wiping the Widow's kisses off his face, beats a skulk out of the church grinning like a feral animal. Tom and Becky hold the same hymnal and sing as we iris out. The End.

A review in the 1918 *Moving Picture Review* stated, "Jack Pickford was simply beyond compare. To see him is to see the original Tom with all his gay impishness brought back to life." *Variety* echoed this appraisal with, "The fresh young kid to the life."

It is evident that The Library of Moving Images wants to reintroduce Jack Pickford to today's audiences and bring him out from under the shadow of his famous sister Mary Pickford. In an accompanying biographical film also produced by A Library of Moving Images called **"IN MARY'S SHADOW: THE STORY OF JACK PICKFORD"** there is a tantalising clip of a smaller Jack playing a real boy at age fourteen in 1910 – at which point he would have been ideally suited to portray Tom Sawyer; but alas, seven years would roll by and the boy became a womanising, hard drinking young man who had just married the beautiful actress Olive Thomas in 1916. His worldliness shows despite a coy childishness which he effects in an almost creepy way, as when he first glimpses Becky Thatcher and nibbles on his apple rather suggestively. However, the restoration and scoring of this new re-release

are a labour of love and whet one's appetite for the two sequels.

Historical footnotes:

Jack Pickford and Robert Gordon would reprise their roles in "**HUCK AND TOM**" (1918). Frank Lanning would play Injun Joe. In 1920 Frank Lanning would play Pap Finn in "**HUCKLEBERRY FINN**", the final instalment of the trilogy in which Huck was played by Lewis Sargent and Tom by Gordon Griffith.

Director William Desmond Taylor was shot to death on February 1, 1922 in his Los Angeles bungalow. No person was ever convicted of the crime. In 1967 film director King Vidor conducted a personal investigation of the crime. Vidor concluded that a woman named Charlotte Shelby was probably the guilty party. Shelby was opposed to the relationship Taylor had with her daughter, actress Mary Miles Minter. Charlotte Shelby died in 1957 and the crime is still officially unsolved. An extensive account of the Taylor mystery and Vidor's investigation is given in Sidney D. Fitzpatrick's "*A Cast of Killers*", E.P. Dutton, NY 1986.

About the reviewer:

Dave Thomson has been a Mark Twain aficionado since he read "*Tom Sawyer*" at age

twelve in 1958. That same year he made his first trip to Hannibal, MO and has been a frequent visitor ever since. In 1986 he designed the first of a series of book jackets for the publications of Hannibal historians Hurley and Roberta Hagood. Thomson's collection encompasses Mark Twain and the history of steamboat navigation in the Mississippi valley. He spent 25 years at the Walt Disney Studio planning the photography of animated features. Some of Dave's graphics can be seen on Barbara Schmidt's Mark Twain Quotes website."

[no listing in "Classics of the Silent Screen", "Silent Movies: A Picture Quiz Book", "Halliwell's Film Guide", "Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide 2001", "The Critics' Film Guide", "The Good Film and Video Guide", "Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89", "Radio Times Guide to Films", "Rating the Movies (1990)", "Speelfilm Encyclopedie", "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. I suppose we must be grateful that Pickford's sister Mary didn't snatch the lead, given that there was such a penchant in this period for casting grown women in classical boy roles – Jim Hawkins, Peter Pan, Oliver Twist, Little Lord Fauntleroy. From the thorough synopsis above, the film seems to follow the main plot as closely as any subsequent version. However, at 20 (although he does look younger), Jack Pickford was ludicrously old to be cast as such a definitively prepubescent character. It's not as though there weren't many talented players of the right age working in film at the time. Mickey Rooney was 19 when he played Huckleberry Finn in 1939, so Hollywood producers were slow to learn that lesson. Married men should not try to impersonate schoolboys.

Pickford's earlier work included "**A CHILD'S STRATAGEM**" (1910), "**EXAMINATION DAY AT SCHOOL**" (1910), "**THE KID**" (1910, not the Jackie Coogan film), "**A BOY OF THE REVOLUTION**" (1911) and "**THE HOUSE THAT JACK BUILT**" (1911). Antrim Short, his Joe Harper, was a mere tot of 17. He made his screen debut at 12, and notched up such titles as "**JESS OF THE MOUNTAIN COUNTRY**" (14), "**THE CRY OF THE FIRST-BORN**" (15) and "**THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME**" (16, appearing with his actor parents). Further information on these early American silents is, alas, scant and elusive.

See the sequel "**HUCK AND TOM**", the later versions itemised by Halliwell, and subject index under **BOY MEETS GIRL**, **HISTORY**, **ORPHANS / ADOPTION**, **RASCALS & SCALAWAGS**, **RUNAWAYS / STOWAWAYS**, **SCHOOL**, **SILENT CINEMA** and **MARK TWAIN**.