

Longest Continuously Running Movie May Not Have Been Registered

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Before motion pictures became copyrightable in 1912, brothers Ellsworth and Emery Kolb dreamed of an epic adventure captured as a movie. With little experience as photographers, the Pennsylvania natives bought a photo studio in Williams, Arizona, and relocated it to the very edge of the Grand Canyon in 1903. There they took photos of tourists and scenery.

But their dreams stretched thousands of feet lower, that is, to the bottom of the Grand Canyon and to the nearly unexplored Colorado River carving its way through rock to expose the beginnings of the earth. In his book *Through the Grand Canyon from Wyoming to Mexico*, Ellsworth said, "This was our secret hope, hardly admitted to our most intimate friends—that we could bring out a record of the Colorado as it is, a live thing, armed as it were with teeth, ready to crush and devour."

After an extensive search, the brothers found someone to sell them a motion picture camera. Setting out in 1911, they intended to replicate the extraordinary 1869 voyage of Major John Wesley Powell (see the August 2011 issue of *Copyright Notices*), whose party was the first to traverse the Grand Canyon by boat. Defying death, Ellsworth and Emery rode two flat-bottomed, wooden rowboats through all the rapids of the Colorado River, filming everything with their hand-cranked camera.

The result was *The Grand Canyon Film Show*, the first motion picture of the Grand Canyon and a film that holds the record as the longest continuously running movie ever. Emery traveled around the United States showing the movie to crowds of eager Americans. In April 1913, the *Washington Post* reported, "The lecture and pictures constitute one of the most remarkable travel talks ever given in Washington." In November 1913 in Detroit, the *Free Press* announced only 1,200 tickets available for a



PHOTO TAKEN DURING KOLB BROTHERS EXPEDITION

Camp in Marble Canyon

movie so "thrilling that audiences have to hold their breath as the little frail boats shoot these wonderful rapids."

Back home, the brothers built an auditorium onto their house on the canyon's South Rim. There, Emery showed the film daily from 1915 until his death in 1976 at age 94.

But did they copyright their movie? No record of a copyright has been found, although registrations exist for dozens of the Kolbs' still photos. Perhaps the brothers felt that infringement of their movie was unlikely because the task of copying it would have been beyond the skill and resources of most people.

Not today. Movie piracy has gone big-time. The Institute for Policy Innovation reports that major U.S. movie studios lost \$6.1 billion to piracy in 2005. In 2009, the Office registered claims to more than 13,000 motion pictures, thus helping protect the rights not only of studios but also of intrepid individuals like the Kolb brothers. ©