The Inventor Who Vanished: Crash Course Recess #1

Crash Course: Film History
https://youtube.com/watch?v=RokCkouFFtg
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/RokCkouFFtg

On September 16, 1890, a man boarded a train in Dijon, France, waved goodbye to his brother, and headed for Paris. He was carrying one of the greatest inventions of the age, the world's first motion picture camera technology, two years before it was developed by anyone else. In fact, our man was on his way to New York to complete his patent and unveil the discovery to the world, but when the train pulled into the station in Paris, the man was nowhere to be found. He, and his invention, had disappeared without a trace.

[Intro Music]

Louis Le Prince was an artist and inventor, a painter and a photographer, who entered the arms race to create the first movie camera in the 1880s. His initial attempt, completed in 1886, was a camera with 16 different lenses arranged in a grid pattern that would each capture a sequential frame of film. The problem was that each lens took its photo from a slightly different angle. When played back, the resulting movie looked odd and disjointed. Like any good scientist or artist, Le Prince went right back to work, revising and refining his technology.

In 1887, he created a much simpler camera that used a single lens and took photographs onto small glass plates, but Le Prince wasn't satisfied. In order to both capture and project the images fast enough to achieve the illusion of motion, he needed a material that was strong enough but still flexible, heat-resistant, and transparent. He experimented with systems that used glass plates and paper-back film strips, none of which worked very smoothly.

Then, in 1889, while visiting his brother in France, he got his hands on a new medium that would soon revolutionize the world of photography, the flexible, emulsion-coated material known as celluloid. Seeing its potential, Le Prince immediately began cutting it into stripes and reworking his camera and projector to take advantage of this new medium, and it worked! The world had its first dedicated movie camera and projector. Huzzah! Punches eagle! Le Prince contacted his wife and told her to set up an event back in New York to unveil his invention, and initiate new patent proceedings. Then he hopped on a train bound for Paris, and just like that, he disappeared.

So, what happened to the man who invented the first motion picture camera? No one knows, his body was never found. Some have suggested that he committed suicide and threw himself from the train. Others wonder if his brother might've killed him, though no motive leapt to mind. Another theory, one advanced by Le Prince's family at the time of his disappearance, pointed the finger at competing inventors. Less than a year later in 1891, Thomas Edison applied for his first motion picture patents. By 1894, he'd opened his first kinetograph parlors in New York. And, in December 1895, the Lumiere brothers held the world's first commercial movie projection in Paris.

So, if Le Prince actually made the first movie camera and filed for the patent, why is the invention credited to Edison? Under American law at the time, a person was not considered dead until seven years after their disappearance. So, during those years, it was hard for the Le Prince family to legally pursue or protect Louis' patents, though they tried. The Le Prince family joined a lawsuit against Edison soon after his disappearance. Their star witness was Le Prince's son and assistant, Adolphe. But, despite his best efforts, the trial ended in 1901 with a ruling for Edison. That same year, a distraught Adolphe dies of a gunshot would while duck hunting on Fire Island, New York. Whether it was a suicide or an accident, we may never know... Whatever really happened, Le Prince's reputation, and his contributions to cinema, have survived. He didn't, though. Might have been better if he survived... If I were him, I'd prefer to have survived, myself.

His camera and projector design concepts, as well as his use of celluloid film, are strikingly similar to the technologies that Edison, W.K.L. Dickson, and the Lumiere brothers would come to in the following years. Even though he may not get enough credit, there's no doubt the Louis Le Prince got there first. And today, many film historians consider him the father of cinematography. Other than WheezyWaiter, of course. Not to mention, the subject of one of the great unsolved mysteries of film history, as well as the subject of the great animated CrashCourse video that you just watched.

[Outro Music]