

'Calm in the eye of a storm'

Author reflects on Keaton's genius, likeability

By Jon Stinnett
The Cottage Grove
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In his 2000 book, "Silent Echoes: Discovering Early Hollywood Through the Films of Buster Keaton," author John Bengtson follows in the silent film star's footsteps, searching out the secrets in places like Cottage Grove that became backdrops for Keaton's masterpieces. It was work that required tenacity and a commitment to uncovering secrets and documenting history. In "Silent Echoes,"

Bengtson writes of taking the BART train to U.C. Berkeley to attend a 10-week festival of Keaton's films. "This was truly one of the happiest, most exhilarating experiences of my life," he writes. "Back then, I could not have imagined in my wildest dreams that I would some day follow Buster's trail..."

So what exactly is it about Keaton's films and the star himself that has so captivated Bengtson and others? "It's hard to put into a few words," Bengtson told the Sentinel, before attempting to do just that.

"Buster Keaton was so talented, so brilliant, so clever," he said. "There was something almost otherworldly about him." Keaton, he explained, had a keen ability to remain stoic under pressure, the "calm in the eye of a storm," and the way he constructed a film was simply masterful. "Everything was connected, and there was a reason for it all," Bengtson said. "He told fantastic stories visually and did all his own stunts." Not that any of that went to Keaton's head, however. "He was an all-around good person," Bengtson said. "He

was remarkably likeable and talented in so many different ways, but he wasn't a prima donna. Instead it was, 'let's play baseball.' He wasn't pretentious at all, and a lot of people found that very appealing." And if accounts from the Sentinel that summer are any indication, Cottage Grove enjoyed itself immensely while Keaton was in town. "In a small way, the film put Cottage Grove on the map," Bengtson said. "I don't think you can overemphasize how big a deal this was in the 1920s to have

a Hollywood actor arrive in your small town. I can't imagine how exciting it must have been." Still, the townspeople weren't the only ones having a blast back then. "I can't imagine how much fun Buster must have had!" Bengtson said. "He loved filming trains, and this was his masterpiece about a train. In a small town, he wasn't bothered, and he could focus on filming. And here he was at the peak of his career."



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