The Hole in the Doughnut: The Last Days of Buster Keaton

John C. Tibbetts

In the Fall of 1995 Eleanor Norris Keaton will come to Kansas to celebrate the 100th birthday of her late husband.[1] Part of an extensive itinerary that also takes her to other centenary observances in New York, Muskegon, Michigan, and Los Angeles, the Kansas trip is particularly poignant. Keaton was born on October 4, 1895, in the tiny farm community of Piqua, in southeast Kansas, while his parents were performing with a medicine show.[2] Although he may have been a Kansan only through sheer accident of circumstances—the baby and his mother remained in Piqua only two weeks before rejoining the troupe on the road—he returned there many times as a child on tour with his parents.[3] Later, the classic slapstick comedian paid tribute to his home state in many of the themes and situations of his best films, most notably in the cyclone sequence in *Steamboat Bill, Jr.* (1928). To my mind, even his trademark "deadly horizontal" hat (as James Agee described it) evokes the stark flatness of the Kansas prairies.[4]

While the Keaton phenomenon will be fully explored throughout the centenary year, Eleanor herself should not be forgotten. By all accounts, she was an important force in Buster's later years. "She has seen Buster Keaton through a long period of painful adjustment, relapse, and readjustment and a dozen partial comebacks," wrote Rudi Blesh, shortly before Buster's death on February 1, 1966. "She has carried him, content and at times happy, across the threshold of his seventies. She has lived with that most difficult and tragic of human beings, the exiled and estranged artist. Through it all she has retained both love and admiration for him."[5]

They must have presented quite a striking contrast when they first met in 1938. At age 44, Buster's once-beautiful face was a ruined map of deeply etched lines and furrows. His glory days at MGM during the late 1920s and early 1930s were over, and his career was in a tailspin. Studio interference had robbed him of creative control over his films, two failed marriages had left him broke and estranged from his two sons, alcoholism had ravaged his mind and body, and a recent series of cheap short comedies seemed only to confirm that he was washed up. By the time Eleanor Norris came into his life, he was living alone, dividing his time between card games with friends and occasional work as a gag writer for MGM for $200 a week—a far cry from the $3,000 a week he had been making just a decade earlier.

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Eleanor was a young dancer living with her mother and younger sister in Hollywood. She had been dancing professionally since the age of fifteen when she went on an around-the-world tour with a nightclub act, "Six Blondes from Hollywood." She had appeared in several MGM films, like *Born to Dance* (1936) and *Rosalie* (1938). Blonde, blue-eyed, and attractive, Eleanor was popular and had her share of boyfriends. Thus, she could hardly have foreseen that she would share the next 28 years of her life with the grim-faced gentleman sitting across from her at the card table.

Yet, as I have found in several conversations with her, she possesses the kind of sturdy independence, inner reserve, and genuine caring nature that must have appealed to Buster. One can imagine long silences between them both, agreeable spaces in which both personalities meshed in mutual respect and compatibility.

Eleanor Keaton now lives in North Hollywood, about a mile from Universal Studios. The past sits lightly on her shoulders. At age 76 she's still slim and vivacious, without a trace of pretention. The walls of her split-level condominium are tastefully decorated with dozens of photographs and paintings bearing eloquent testimony to a long life with Buster. Especially valued is a 1929 John Dekker painting of Buster and a number of photos of Buster with successive generations of his beloved St. Bernards, all named Elmer (named after the character he frequently played in the MGM films, beginning with *Spite Marriage* (1929). And, speaking of dogs, she breeds St. Bernards. Her most famous dog is the popular St. Bernard, "Beethoven" of movie fame.

Tibbetts: Did you and Buster ever come back to Kansas?

Keaton: Yes, in 1957 we came to the Kansas State Fair in Hutchinson, and afterward we drove through Piqua. We were only there for a few minutes. I think it was the only time Buster had been there since he was a boy. Last year I visited the little Keaton Museum in Piqua and attended screenings and discussions in Iola, where they have a beautiful Fine Arts Center.[6]

Tibbetts: How did you first meet Buster?

Keaton: I was a dancer at MGM when we first met. We were making musicals, one after the other, and MGM had signed me up along with many other singers and dancers. My father, who had been an electrician at the Warner Bros. studio, was killed when I was fourteen, so I became an adult pretty early. I was never a teenager, I guess. I was a pretty direct and straight-forward young lady, and I knew how to take care of myself. I hated to tell lies, and I have always hated people who do.

Buster worked occasionally on the MGM writing staff at that time and was also making some shorts for Columbia. I didn't care about any of that, I just wanted to learn to play bridge. One of the fellows that I worked with at the

studio, a dancer named Art Whitney, said, "I know where there's a great bridge game going on all the time. I'll take you there."[7] So I went to the Keaton house in the Cheviot Hills and after awhile I was going there a couple times a week. But it was a full year before I ever had a date with him. The romance kind of sneaked up on me, it really did. By then, I'd learned to play bridge! He used to play for 25 cents a point. You couldn't lose too much in an evening at that price! The first year I knew him it was all bridge; the second year we dated.

Tibbetts: What did you know of Buster at the time? Had you seen his movies?

Keaton: As a child I saw very few movies except at the Saturday matinees—Laurel and Hardy, that sort of thing. I never saw one of Buster's pictures until after I met him over bridge. Sure, I saw them all later, many times; but not before. I guess I never realized at the time how big a star he really was.

Tibbetts: Were there people who warned you against the relationship with Buster?

Keaton: Oh, yes. They said he had had enough trouble in his life without adding me; and that I should go away and leave him alone.[8]

Tibbetts: So you were seen as the troublemaker here?

Keaton: Right. He'd had two bad marriages and he didn't need a third.[9] But there was one time when he said he was going to marry me. I said, "Oh, no, you're not." And then others took me aside and tried to straighten me out and get me to go away. His drinking problems had been explained to me in words of one syllable. I knew what I was getting in to.

Tibbetts: You must have had a strong will to withstand all of those warnings.

Keaton: Yes.

Tibbetts: Nobody could have accused you of being a golddigger, could they? I mean, he wasn't wealthy.

Keaton: No, not at that time, no. We were both working and making a living, but neither one of us was ever going to get rich.

Tibbetts: What did you see in him, and what did he see in you?

Keaton: He was just a kind, gentle, wonderful soul. He never had an enemy. Everybody loved him. And I suppose I just joined the group. But he told me one time—or he told somebody else—that I was in and out of the house for probably six months before he even noticed me or even looked up from the deck of cards long enough to see who was sitting there. Then, one day, somebody said something to me—made some kind of nasty remark about a card I'd played, or whatever—and I yelled back and said, "I don't know this game well enough yet; leave me alone!" And I went on yelling at this person, and Buster looked up at me. He said later that was the first time he'd ever noticed me. And from then, he thought it was a pretty good idea that I had lost my temper and yelled like that. He taught me baseball, and we enjoyed going to wrestling matches and camping out.

(They married on May 29, 1940 and moved in to a house on Victoria Avenue that Buster had bought his mother years before. Buster made more shorts for Columbia and some bit appearances in features, including the part of "Lonesome Polecat" in *L'il Abner*; and Eleanor divided her time between chores at home and continuing as a contract dancer at MGM. It wasn't until 1957, however, when proceeds from the biopic, *The Buster Keaton Story*, enabled the couple to purchase their own ranch in the San Fernando Valley.[10] When he wasn't on the road or making a commercial or cameo appearance in a film, he lived quietly at home, working in his garden, and puttering around the house, surrounded by mementoes from his career, including his Oscar and an Eastman Award. He was especially proud of the Eastman Award, one of only twenty in existence. Adorning the walls were pictures of his children and grandchildren, mentor Roscoe Arbuckle, the French comedy master, Jacques Tati, his father, Joe Keaton, and a colored lithograph of the original "General" locomotive.)

Tibbetts: Tell us about the wedding and what happened after that.

Keaton: We were married on May 30, 1940. I looked so much younger than Buster that the judge thought my mother was the bride! He kept getting it mixed up. Afterward, I only gradually realized what kind of family I was inheriting. His mother, sister and brother (and his family) all lived with him. Plus two cats, a dog, and a St. Bernard. He supported them all. That's the way it always had been, until his mother died in 1955. After that we put the house up for sale and moved to the Valley. Buster's two sons, James and Robert, had been living with Natalie, his first wife, and they were in the Coast Guard all through the War. After that I think they lived in Santa Monica down at the beach. Sometimes they would drop in and visit. Jim was married and had a child. He lives now in Santa Ines, which is halfway up the California coast near where Michael Jackson has his hideaway place. Bob lives down at Delmar, which is an oceanside village with a racetrack and everything.

Tibbetts: What was Buster's condition regarding alcohol all this time?

Keaton: Well, he had had a period of drinking that went for no more than about two years. But people have stretched it out to make it seem like a lifetime. And he had been on the wagon, dry, for five years before I met him. He kind of stayed on the wagon from then on. Yes, he did go over the edge and get drunk a few times. But other than that, he came out of his problem pretty quick. We did agree that he could have a drink before dinner. He wanted to get my opinion of whether I thought he could handle it. So, for the rest of his life, he had two glasses of beer before dinner, and that was his cocktail hour. And that's the way it was.

Tibbetts: I guess it's obvious he needed you, you were kind of a stable influence on him.

Keaton: He had never been alone in his life. Growing up, he was in vaudeville. He was from a close-knit family. And from the time he was 11 or 12, he used to handle buying all of the railroad tickets and all that kind of thing for their tours. In a way, he became an adult early, like I did. And then, after that, he got married and he had the entire Talmadge clan, plus his own family.

Tibbetts: When did you begin working together professionally?

Keaton: That was in television. All you had to be for Buster was a sort of breathing prop. Well, it helped if you had good timing, too. Buster had meticulous timing, almost mathematical. We went to television the very first year television was in Los Angeles. This was for *The Buster Keaton Show*. I think we did 17 or 18 shows. They were kinescoped, but those kinescopes were so bad that no out-of-town stations would buy them. Then we did 13 more on film. Those went around forever.[11] After that we went to Europe for a summer theater tour. We didn't think much of them at the time. They weren't spending any money on them, and they gave us a director and editor who didn't do much but stand around. Buster and the script clerk were the ones who really made those shows. The script clerk was a dear lady who had been around for years and knew what she was doing. Buster recycled a lot of his old comedy routines. He repeated the bit where the wall falls down on him and the window opening passes over his body in a "Romeo and Juliet" sketch. I don't think today's audiences would make much of them. They're only good for Saturday morning children's TV.

(In 1955 Raymond Rohauer, then head of the Society of Cinema Arts in Los Angeles and owner of the Coronet Theater, began collecting Keaton's films. Actor James Mason, currently living in Keaton's former home, the Italian Villa, had just discovered a cache of positive prints of films in a secret vault behind the

private projection room. Building on this collection and negatives and positives from the MGM vaults, Rohauer set up a corporation for Buster and transferred the films to safety stock. After a long and complicated series of negotiations he obtained the rights to the films from Leopold Friedman, then the surviving trustee of Buster Keaton Productions, Inc., and began exhibiting them in festivals all over the world. Within a decade 16mm rental prints were delighting audiences on college campuses.[12])

Tibbetts: What did Raymond Rohauer mean to Buster?

Keaton: In many respects it was a good relationship. But in terms of money—no. Our contracts with Raymond stipulated that he paid all expenses and Buster got 50 percent of the profits. Well, there were no profits for 17 years, because he kept pouring the money back in—you know, paying attorneys and getting the rights cleared and all that. Raymond kept Buster's films going, and he kept his name before the public. He had new, clean prints made from the old nitrate stuff. I admit that many people hated Raymond, because he wouldn't turn loose of the films and let them come out onto the market. But I don't blame him. If anybody was going to make money off of them he should, because he was the one who spent all the money to get them back. I still have a partnership with the Rohauer estate.

Tibbetts: Were you with Buster on his travels?

Keaton: I always went everywhere with him. I was his babysitter, secretary, mother, whatever else was called for. We had 28 years together, and I think only twice he was on the road alone—to make a couple of commercials, one in New York and the other in Colorado Springs.

We had a particularly wonderful time when we went to Canada to make *The Railrodder*. Buster had just finished the Beckett thing [Film] in New York and Gerry Potterton had us come up to make a movie for the National Film Board.[13] That was in 1964, I think. We started in Nova Scotia and ended up in British Columbia, just south of Vancouver. Almost 5,000 miles we traveled—about five or six weeks— making that movie. It was a travelogue, really, just Buster in this little train called a "speeder," going all the way across Canada. We all travelled in the Queen's train car, courtesy of the Canadian National Railroad. And we had the Queen's steward and her chef and her dishes and china and crystal. We stopped at various places, and they always came out to meet Buster. A whole pipe and drum corps met us in Manitoba, I remember, and gave Buster a huge key to the city. Otherwise, on the train, it was just Buster and me, Gerry and his assistants, and Johnny Spotton, who was making a documentary of the thing.[14] They were wonderful. They even gave Buster a big birthday cake on his 69th birthday. We became such good friends with Gerry and Johnny; and we saw them often later. I still correspond with Gerry. Johnny's gone now . . .

Keaton: They got along fine. There was only one thing they fought about, and that was about the scene where Buster's little train goes across a high trestle. There's a gag in the scene where he's reading a newspaper and the wind blows it in his face. With that newspaper wrapped around him, he could lose his balance and fall. Gerry thought it was 'way too dangerous and he wanted Buster to try a different gag. Buster wouldn't listen—naturally. They argued for an hour. Then I got in to it and tried to explain Gerry's point of view to Buster. But Buster just said, "No." And so they did the gag—Buster's way. It came out fine.

I remember other trips. We would be away about six months every year. In England, France, Belgium, a lot of times to New York. And a national tour in 1957 with *Once Upon a Mattress.* We started in Chicago and went to the Coast, then Denver, Ohio, Washington, D.C. and Boston.

Tibbetts: I understand that some film was shot of Buster that was used in that production.

Keaton: It was one reel of things we shot for the second act—that's when the characters in the play are looking at some rushes from a movie they're making. Anyway, that stuff was just ten minutes of Buster hamming it up. I remember a bit where he's wearing a toupee and he loses it in the lake and he retrieves it and dries it out by placing it on top of a light bulb. "That hairpiece had a weird summer," he used to say. And there's another bit where Buster is a duck hunter, wading into the water after some ducks. He disappears under water. When he comes back up, a duck swims toward him and bites the gun barrel. Buster roared. He said he had done something just like it as a gag in *Battling Butler.* Only now, it was real! I'm afraid most of that footage is lost now.

Tibbetts: Tell me more about working with him on stage. Did it require a lot of physical stamina?

Keaton: Well, yeah. But I had been a dancer so I could take falls. There was this routine that he'd done in *Spite Marriage.* His girl friend has passed out and he has to put her to bed. We did it a lot on television, like the *Ed Sullivan Show,* and on the stage. I remember once in Leeds, England, there was this hardwood stage with a steep rake. It was a brand new, slippery floor, and we put some throw rugs down at the places where I'd have to fall. Buster got me into a fireman's carry, my feet over his shoulder, the rest of me dangling down almost to the floor. He started around the foot of the bed, and the rug went out from under him and he ended up down in the orchestra pit. He scrambled up and couldn't find me! He looked down to the pit and saw I wasn't there. I was under the bed. He saw my legs sticking out and hauled me out and we finished the act. I wasn't hurt, though. The audience loved it and wanted us to do it every night!

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Tibbetts: Did he ever smile in front of audiences?

Keaton: Oh, no. He turned his back to the camera or to the audience if he laughed.

Tibbetts: You both toured Germany a lot, didn't you?

Keaton: The big resurgence in his career really started in Europe. They had never forgotten Buster, the way audiences in America did. We hit all the major cities in Germany in about seven weeks. At each stop we'd show Buster's films. We started in Munich and hit half a dozen different cities like Essen and Bonn and Hamburg. We flew into Berlin and had MIG jets flying on each side of us—I guess to make sure we didn't stray off the path! He drove a train into the station of every town. It scared the wits out of the German engineeers. They thought he was going to wreck the train. They couldn't believe it when he would just step in and say, "O.K., let's go!" He'd get it up to speed, and then we'd come into the station exactly where we needed to be. I think those engineers are still talking about it!

Tibbetts: Did Buster attend the screenings of his films?

Keaton: Once in Munich he refused to go into a screening of *The General.* Raymond and I went to the opening night, but he stayed back in the hotel. It was a roaring success. I think it was just that he didn't want to be disappointed. He used to say, "When we made these films, we made them to play for approximately a year and a half and hoped they'd make money. When they quit making money, that was the end of it. By then, we would have made one or two more." The fact that they have come back after all the years and have been such a success all over again—he just couldn't believe it! And he hated crowds bearing down on him. He was paralyzed by crowds. He'd panic and want to run away sometimes. You can see that in his face when *This Is Your Life* surprised him with a live television show about him. That was in 1957, I think, just before *The Buster Keaton Story* was released. You can tell he hardly knows what to do or say.

Tibbetts: What kind of person was he at the ranch in Woodland Hills?

Keaton: He was very shy, extremely shy. He had his garden. He had a vegetable garden and fruit trees and he spent hours standing with a hose in his hand, watering this and that. He had his "girls," as he called them—a dozen Rhode Island Red Hens with names like "Zsa-Zsa" and "Marilyn" and

Tibbetts: I can't help but wonder what it was like to see Buster climbing out of the pool: Did his body bear any of the scars of years of rough-and-tumble punishment?

Keaton: No, not really. The only real scar that he had was one here [pointing to the right side of her forehead]. And he had a scar near the hairline. I'm not exactly sure where he got that. but other than that, he didn't show anything. He broke his leg one time, you know, but you didn't notice anything. And he broke his neck, too, but nothing showed.

Tibbetts: Who would come to visit?

Keaton: We had as many friends as could lure out for picnics and bridge games. Buster loved to play the ukulele for hours on end; and he always showed off his train. It was a miniature train that he had set up—it started in the garage, went out beyond the swimming pool, around the picnic table and back in. The train cars were just the right size to hold a Coke bottle, a hot dog, pickles, hardboiled eggs, whatever. He used to deliver the food to the picnic tables from off the train!

Tibbetts: What were your favorite times together during these last years?

Keaton: I guess just being home alone with each other. We figured we were away at least six months of the year, sometimes more. When we got home we treasured the quiet moments. We knew soon we'd have to take off again. Our home time was the best time.

Tibbetts: Was Buster working on his routines, even while he relaxing at home?

Keaton: Well, if a stranger had come to our house, he might have thought a madman was loose. Because Buster would be down in the den and the family room in the middle of the floor doing some weird thing. His way of "writing" would be working out sketches in the middle of the floor. He never put anything down on paper. It was in his head. And if he was working with somebody, he'd have to take them through it rather than give them a script.

Tibbetts: Was he always thinking about sketches?

Keaton: Yes, and he was always acting out gags—many times just for himself. He didn't seem to care if anybody was watching him or not. I remember one time we were on a trip on an ocean liner and after dinner, we were dancing and talking and all of a sudden he was gone. I looked up and there he was, outside in the foyer, standing before a huge glass window, wiping at a tiny spot with his handkerchief. I said, "Look," and all of a sudden the room was quiet and

talking and all of a sudden he was gone. I looked up and there he was, outside in the foyer, standing before a huge glass window, wiping at a tiny spot with his handkerchief. I said, "Look," and all of a sudden the room was quiet and everybody was watching him clean that glass. When he finished, he was satisfied it was clean, and he put his handkerchief away. The thing was, there was no glass there! It was just empty space. But you saw the glass—or thought you saw it. That was Buster.[15]

Tibbetts: Did he keep in good shape?

Keaton: He swam every day, and he exercised. He'd been doing it since the age of five, and he never quit. Later, of course, he didn't do those fancy tricks and falls that he'd done before. But ordinary falls were still o.k. for him.

Tibbetts: Did he have any regrets in those last years?

Keaton: His main regret was when Joe Schenck left MGM and Buster was handed over to his brother Nicholas at MGM. He was never allowed to be his own man and make his own kind of films after that. That was his big regret.

Tibbetts: Did he have a favorite film?

Keaton: I think it was probably *The General.*[16] Because it was a book, a true story; and he read the book and took it to the studio and got all the writers to read it. Then they got together and made the film. A big change he made in it was that at the end of the true story the twelve Union spies were caught and hanged from one limb of a giant tree. Well, of course, you don't do that in the movie, certainly not in a comedy. Yes, I think *The General* was one of his big joys.

(Eleanor Keaton interrupts our conversation to show me a video cassette she has just received in the mail. It's a promotion for the new restorations of Keaton films that have just been released by Kino International (see Note #1). As we watch it, she keeps up a running commentary. She's particularly delighted in the excerpts from the short, "The Playhouse," and the feature, *Steamboat Bill, Jr.* She knows every frame of all the films and remembers when and where she attended revivals of them with her husband. She adds that she's looking forward to screening several of them during a trip she's taking in February to the Berlin International Film Festival, which is paying tribute to Buster.[17])

Tibbetts: There's a lot of renewed interest in Keaton because of the centenary, isn't there?

Keaton: Yes, but even before that I've heard from many people. Kevin Brownlow came here for three hours while he was making his documentary about Buster [*A Hard Act to Follow*, Thames Television, 1987]. I thought it was a great time talking with him. We had met Kevin before, you know, back in the '60s.[18]

Tibbetts: What do you think of the biographies by Rudi Blesh and Tom Dardis?

Keaton: Rudi Blesh was pretty factual. My only complaint was that if Buster would tell him a story about vaudeville or something, Rudi would "improve" on it and kill it stone dead. Other than that, he did very well—he just couldn't help embellishing those stories. Dardis, no. He and his family are still around, so I'm not talking for publication.[19]

Tibbetts: Keaton has become the darling of the aestheticians and scholars. They've elevated him to something like god-like status. What do you think of that?

Keaton: People like that would ask him about his "philosophy"; they'd ask, "What were you thinking about when you fell off the bridge?" Buster would just stop a moment, then say, "To be funny." What else? But they had to find all sorts of hidden meaning. There's a whole article in a recent *Film Quarterly* written by two psychologists or something—and they have a sexual meaning to everything he did.[20] Now, he never had a sexual thought in his mind in his life. Those people are out of their minds! There were things about Buster I guess nobody could reach, and maybe they shouldn't try! Maybe the French said it best. They called him names like "Zero" and "Malec." I found out "Malec" means something like "hole in the doughnut." Who knows what to make of that?[21]

Tibbetts: When did you and Buster know that the end was approaching?

Keaton: Well, he did an Italian movie in the summer of '65.[22] And we were there for six or seven weeks and he wasn't feeling well. As far as he knew, he had bronchitis, and he continued to smoke. Then we went up to the Venice Film Festival where he became quite sick. A lot of it was exhaustion. From there we went to Spain, where he did *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum.* We were there about three weeks, and it was freezing cold. Then, in Toronto, he made a film for the government called *The Scribe*. It was about safety on construction sites, why construction workers on high-rise buildings should wear hard-toed shoes and helmets.[23]

Tibbetts: This film is virtually unknown. Did he have a good time with it?

Keaton: He did. They worked way up in the air on a building under construction. He took about ten days or so to work on it, but he was getting sicker all the time. I got him on a plane and he started having breathing problems. The stewardess gave him an oxygen mask. Back home I called the doctor, who took chest x-rays. He said, "Take him to the hospital—immediately." They did all kinds of tests and stuff. Only half of one lung was operating and the other was just about gone. Later the doctor said, "I'll give him anywhere from a week to three months."

Tibbetts: Buster himself must be aware of the seriousness of this.

Keaton: He knew he was sick. But he didn't really know the problem. Nobody ever told him he had lung cancer. The doctor said not to tell him, that it would scare the wits out of him. So that was that. They put him on a strong drug program and it seemed to be doing a lot of good. He kept smoking, though. He lasted two weeks more than the three months that the doctor had predicted. With lung cancer there's no pain involved, because the lungs have no nerves. So Buster was never in pain. But he had breathing problems. He'd get a coughing spell and have an awful time getting his breath back. That was the only part that really bothered that much. The only time he ever complained was one day when he said, "How are we financially?" I said, "Fine, why?" And he said, "Well, I don't think that I'm getting well as quickly as I think I should." And I said, "Don't worry about it, we've got enough money to last as long as it takes." That was all—he was terrified we were going to run out of money.

The last day, January 30, 1966, we played bridge until 5 o'clock, and just after that he starting having problems. We took him to the hospital. The doctor thought at first he had had a stroke, but that wasn't the case. The cancer had metastisized and gone to his brain. He was gone in 24 hours. From the bridge game to his death was 36 hours.

Tibbetts: It's been almost 30 years since Buster passed away. What do you still miss most about him?

Keaton: I guess just having him around, you know? I'm kind of a loner, and I don't really have a great many friends. A lot of acquaintances, but maybe only a few friends.

Tibbetts: Could that description fit Buster, too?

Keaton: Yes, I guess so. We were quite happy, just to be alone, just the two of us.

Notes

1. This interview with Eleanor Keaton transpired in her North Hollywood home on 21 Jan 1995. Events celebrating the Keaton centenary in 1995 include many film retrospectives in the spring, summer, and fall of 1995—programs at the Pacific Cinematheque, Vancouver BC (April); the Cinematheque Ontario in Toronto (May); the Castro Theater in San Francisco (July); Pacific Film Archives in Berkeley (July), the Brattle Theater in Boston (September-October 1995); and the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus OH (November). Among the conferences and symposia are the Society for Cinema Studies in New York (March), the Third International Buster Keaton Festival in Iola KS (September), and the First International Convention of Damfinos in Muskegon, MI (October). Another noteworthy event is the release by Kino International Corporation of newly-restored prints on video and laser format of 11 Keaton features and 19 two-reel shorts from the 1920-1928 period. All titles have been digitally remastered from archival materials and contain new, original music scores. (Contact Kino International, 333 West 39th St., Suite 503, New York NY 10018.)

2. Piqua has been frequently mispelled as "Pickway" in books about Keaton. This error doubtless was compounded when it appeared that way in Keaton's own autobiography, *My Wonderful World of Slapstick* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, 1960) 20. Details about Keaton's birth in Piqua are sketchy. The best account is in a newspaper article, "Buster Keaton's Birthplace is Piqua," Yates Center News, March 1, 1990, 1, 13. The Keatons were performing with the Mohawk Indian Medicine Show when they arrived in the tiny farm community in the eastern part of Woodson County along U.S. Highway 54 on October 4, 1895. Papa Keaton performed that evening in Catholic Hall (now known as the Piqua Knights of Columbus Hall), and little Joseph Frank Keaton (later dubbed "Buster" by magician Harry Houdini) was born across the street in the home of Mr. and Mrs. Jacob Haen on the south side of Second Street (now Main Street). The identity of the midwife is unknown and has been a controversial topic in the town for many years. Two women have been principal claimants—Mrs. Haen and a local midwife named Mrs. Ulrich. Later, in 1935 members of the Keaton family wired Piqua for confirmation that Buster had been born there. An affirmative reply went to the family, but there was no further correspondence on the matter. The Haen house no longer stands. Near the site now is a small Keaton Museum.

In 1966, the year of Keaton's death, it was reported by native Piquan Frank Specht that a proposal came from Keaton's lawyers to rename the town "Keaton, Kansas." Nothing came of the idea. "To be honest," said Specht, "I kind of thought his lawyer's letter was a joke. Back in 1966, people in Piqua didn't know him all that well. They weren't aware of his accomplishments. We're a farming community. We're not terribly worldly." (See Eric McHenry, "Silent Genius," The Topeka Capital-Journal, October 2, 1994, B1-2.)

3. The subject of Keaton as a Kansan was addressed at the first Keaton Festival in Iola, Kansas, 24 September 1993, by Fred Krebs, a Humanities Professor at Johnson County Community College:

> Destiny indeed made Buster Keaton a Kansan. . . . Who else but a Kansan, always living in a hostile world of storms, drought, insects, heat, foreclosures, could stare back at these terrors with cold impassivity? Moreover, who else but a Kansan could turn the impending, even constant, tragedy of the situation into humor? However, it would take a Kansan to laugh at irony inside, while giving away nothing to the torrents, twisters and terrors on the outside. (Reprinted in The Iola Register, September 28, 1993, and *The Keaton Chronicle*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Winter 1994), 7-8.

4. James Agee, "Comedy's Greatest Era," in Daniel Talbot, Ed., *Film: An Anthology* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1966) 143.

5. Rudi Blesh, *Keaton* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1966) 361.

6. See Frank Scheide, "Iola, Kansas, Honors Buster Keaton," The Keaton Chronicle, Vol. 2, No. 4 (Autumn 1994) 7.

7. Biographer Tom Dardis claims that Buster's brother, Harry, arranged the first meeting. See Tom Dardis, *Keaton: The Man Who Wouldn't Lie Down* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1979) 250.

8. In his autobiography, Buster confirms this: "On hearing of our plans, a couple of my middle-aged friends took the liberty of advising Eleanor against marrying a man more than twice her age. They said no good could come of it. Their concern by the way was not for her, but for me." *Buster Keaton, My Wonderful World of Slapstick* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, 1960) 258.

9. Keaton's first marriage was to Natalie Talmadge. They were divorced in 1933. His second marriage was to Mae Scribbens in 1933. It was, to put it mildly, a fiasco that lasted a little more than two years. In his autobiography, he dismisses the matter in one sentence: "That second marriage of mine did not last long, which is the nicest thing about it I remember" (246).

10. Few biopics have been more vilified than *The Buster Keaton Story*. Blesh declared, "The story was not Keaton at all but a bit of protective Hollywood hokum" (364). Kline complains it is an "ineptly written and poorly directed fiasco" (224). The Paramount film was directed by Sidney Sheldon and starred Donald O'Connor as Buster. Buster was paid $50,000 as a technical consultant.

11. *The Buster Keaton Comedy Show* was produced in 1949 and filmed before a studio audience. A year later another series, The Buster Keaton Show, was produced for Los Angeles' KTTV. Filmed episodes from the latter series have been released on video under the titles, *The Misadventures of Buster Keaton* and *Life with Buster Keaton*.

12. The Rohauer collection of the Keaton shorts and features is currently available for non-theatrical 35mm and 16mm rental from the Rohauer Collection, 209 South High Street, Suite 310, Columbus OH 43215 (614-469-0720).

13. Film was scripted by Samuel Beckett, directed by Alan Schneider, photographed by Boris Kaufman, and released by Evergreen Films in 1965. Schneider and Beckett had originally wanted either Chaplin, Zero Mostel, or Jack MacGowran for this one-character study. Buster was suggested as an alternative by James Karen, a longtime Keaton friend and associate. (Interview with the author, 24 September 1994, Iola KS). Jim Kline (211) and biographer Tom Dardis (268) claim that it was Beckett himself who decided on Buster.

14. *The Railrodder*, a color short, was directed by Gerald Potterton and released by the National Film Board of Canada in conjunction with Canadian National Railways 1965. It is a whimsical portrait of a man touring Canada by means of a motorized handcar, or speeder. "I had originally intended my Keaton project to be an animated film," says Potterton, a noted filmmaker who retired from the Film Board in 1983 and currently works at the Cinar Animation Studios in Montreal. "The idea was to use Buster's face in live action on an animated body and move the action across 5,000 miles of track from the Atlantic to the Pacific, from Nova Scotia to Saskatchewan, Alberta. As it happened, of course, we shot it live action. A lot of the gags were improvised on the spot. When you're being pulled across 5,000 miles of track, you find yourself on a siding somewhere with plenty of times to make the most of changing weather conditions. Buster knew all about trains, of course. He knew all about central signalling, bogey wheels—everything. Somebody suggested we document the shoot and John Spotton stepped in. He was with us all the time with his own cameras" (Interview with the author, 6 December 1994).

Spotton's documentary, *Buster Keaton Rides Again*, was released by the National Film Board of Canada in 1965. It is an invaluable, intimate portrait of Keaton working out gags on location and talking about his life and work.

15. As far as I can determine, Keaton first employed this gag in one of his short films with Roscoe Arbuckle, *The Bell Boy* (1918).

16. *The General* is the most widely discussed and analyzed of Keaton's feature films. Especially valuable is E. Rubinstein, Filmguide to *The General*, Indiana University Press Filmguide Series, 1973. A vastly informative and amusing account of the location work at Cottage Grove, Oregon is in George Wead, "The Great Locomotive Chase," *American Film*, Vol. II, No. 9 (July-August 1977) 18-24. A comparison of the film story with historical events is in Dick Kishpaugh, "The Real General: Film Blends History, Fantasy," *The Keaton Chronicle*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Winter 1994) 1-2.

Keaton worked as a gag writer on a loosely-styled remake for Red Skelton, *A Southern Yankee* (1948). In 1956 the Disney studio stayed closer to the historical record in its *The Great Locomotive Chase*, starring Fess Parker.

17. For an analysis of all of Keaton's films, see Jim Kline, *The Complete Films of Buster Keaton* (New York: Citadel Press, 1993).

18. *Buster Keaton: A Hard Act to Follow* (1987) is still available from HBO Home Video. It was produced by Kevin Brownlow and David Gill. See Frank Thompson's review in *American Film*, Vol. XV, No. 2 (November 1989) 66. Brownlow's first interview with Buster appears in *The Parade's Gone By* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968) 474-494.

19. Dardis' examinations of Keaton's private life, especially his problems with alcohol and in his relationships with women are documented in far more grim detail than in Blesh.

20. Judith Sanders and Daniel Lieberfeld, "Dreaming in Pictures: The Childhood Origins of Buster Keaton's Creativity," *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 47, No. 4 (Summer 1994) 14-28. The authors' thesis is that traumas suffered by Buster from his abusive, alcoholic father led to some of the peculiarities of his comic style: "Our approach has two basic premises: First, that adults' personal struggles are often traceable to childhood traumas, the emotions of which have been repressed. Second . . . that artists frequently use their art to recreate their emotions without being aware they are doing so" (14).

In its florid, almost hysterical effusions, no work has surpassed J. P. Lebel, transl. P.D. Stovin, *Buster Keaton* (New York: A.S. Barnes, 1967). Some examples make the point: On Keaton's impassive face: "If Keaton's face attains a sort of classic perfection, in its stripping down and its almost total nudity, that is because it harbours within it an energy and an expressive richness concentrated to the point of rarefaction. The slightest change of expression, the slightest movement of his physiognomy—i.e., the smallest efficacious expenditure of energy on his face—is alive with an extraordinary amount of accumulated energy. Keaton's face might be compared to a fissionable atom . . ." (26). And on Keaton's use of the camera: "In Keaton's use of the cinema-object as a means of action on reality, there is both a surpassing of the contradictions of an object and an enrichment of the object, which reveals all its potentials in a concrete manner at the same time as it permits Keaton's self-accomplishment" (149).

21. Buster's seemingly impassive face aroused many curious epithets wherever he went. Walter Kerr, writing in *The Silent Clowns* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1975) discusses another nickname given him by the French, "Zero": "The cipher was not simply a matter of Keaton's composed countenance, though of course there is an emotional Zero to contend with there. It has also to do with the cancellation of masses and stresses, horizontals and verticals, by the equalizing solemnity of his presence . . ." (219). In his autobiography Keaton seems bemused by yet another appelation given him by the Spainiards, "Pamplinas"—meaning "a little bit of nothing" (220-221). Regarding his face, Keaton concluded: "People may talk it up or talk it down, but my face has been a valuable trade-mark for me during my sixty years in show business." (ll)

22. *War Italian Style* was released in 1967 by American-International. The setting is World War II, and Buster portrays General von Kessler, a Nazi general and former concert pianist. It's an odd, dissatisfying film, but the final scene is a poignant valedictory to Buster. Buster is released after being captured by the Allies. He removes his general's uniform and dons his familiar costume of porkpie hat, string tie, black suit, and slap shoes. "Since the film was released nearly a year and a half after being completed in September 1965," writes Tom Dardis; "—and eleven months after Buster's death—the final wistful shot of him wandering away from the camera is the last Keaton image the public saw on film. No more fitting final image could have been planned for the funny, unsmiling little man in the flat hat" (215).]

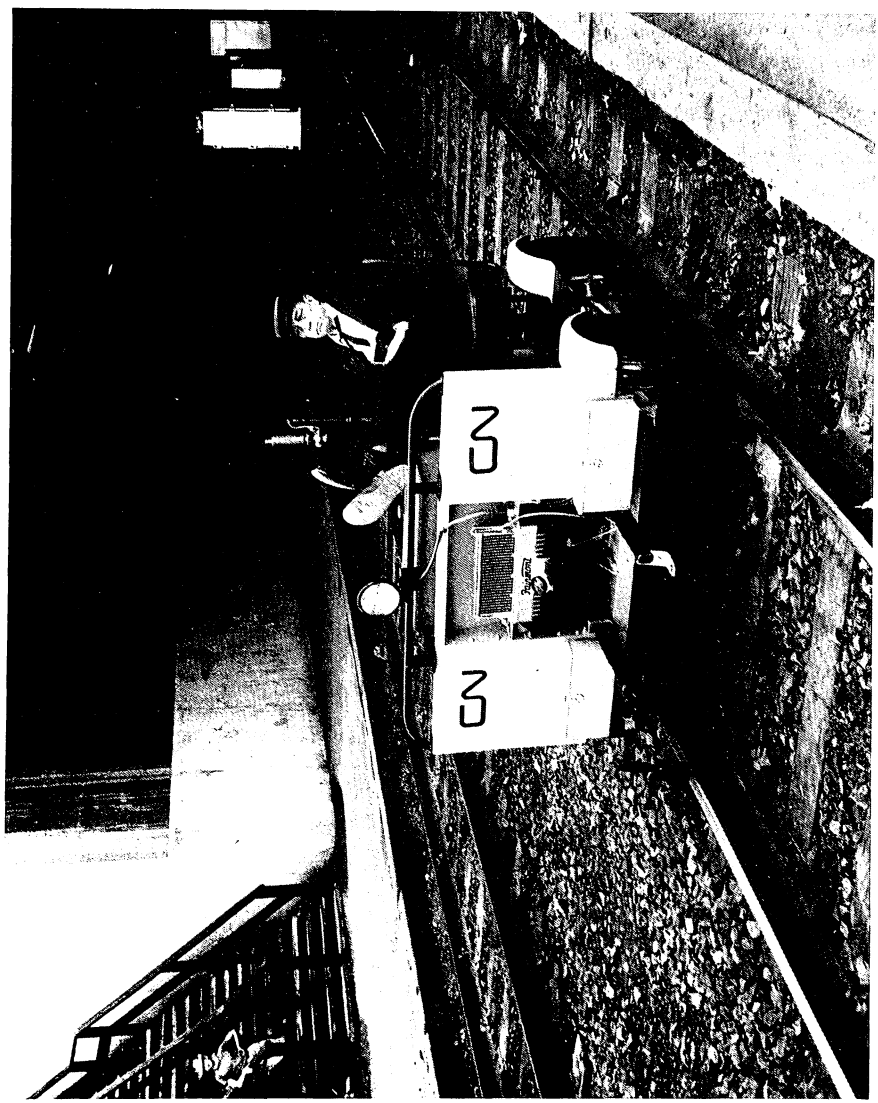
23. A full account of *The Scribe* (1965), a short film made for Ontario's Construction Safety Association, is in Jim Kline, *The Complete Films of Buster Keaton* 216-218.

Eleanor Keaton (Credit: John Tibetts)

On Location for *The Railrodder*. Never before published (courtesy Sam Tata).

Keaton and director Gerald Potterton on location for *The Railrodder*. Never before published (courtesy Sam Tata).

Keaton and Director Gerald Potterton for *The Railrodder*. Never before published (courtesy Sam Tata).



Between takes on *The Railrodder*. Never before published (courtesy Sam Tata).

Eleanor Keaton at Home. (credit: John Tibetts).