



Early Filmmaking in Tucson, Arizona

Rogelio Agrasánchez Jr.
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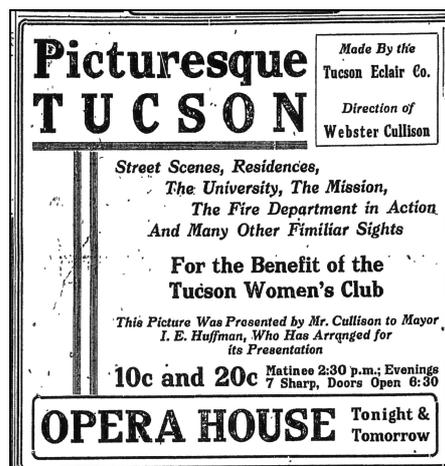
[This is part of a series on the Hispanic film pioneers in the United States, which preparation is on progress. This version does not include the list of research sources.]

An important commercial and cultural center of the Southwest, Tucson attracted all kinds of artists and businessmen. One of the first motion picture enterprises to arrive in town was the French-owned Éclair Film Co. In October 1913, the actor and director Webster Cullison established a studio at the Sorin mansion, on 430 North Main Street. Five months later, the entire crew of the Éclair headquarters in Fort Lee, New Jersey, moved to Tucson. The new location turned out to be an ideal place for movie making: “It is only two miles from the mountains, possesses scenery of practically every desirable description, and has the advantage of almost constant brilliant sunshine.” Cullison declared that the company’s main objective was to make “Western and Mexican stuff,” because these subjects “are selling well across the water in Europe because of the interest in Mexican troubles.” In addition to the western plays, Cullison planned to make dramas with a length of two and three reels. Thus, studio equipment including a grand piano was brought in from New York City. Activities at Tucson’s Éclair Film Co. were in full swing by September 1914. Four directors and a host of actors and staff members crowded the studio. At one time the company had a working force of 55 persons. They made about eighty films in nine months. Some of the most important movies were *Picturesque Tucson*, *The Caballero’s Way*, *The Stirrup Brother*, *Bransford in Arcadia*, *When Death Rode the Engine*, and *The Renunciation*, a play written by Mrs. Colvin of Tucson.

People considered Webster Cullison a theatrical genius and an astute director as well. Beginning as a stage actor in New York, he later got his first cinematographic role in a Lubin production in 1911. At the Éclair studios, Cullison did not miss any opportunity to publicize this film company. During a convention of the Universal Exhibitors of Arizona, he invited all of its members to see the brand-new Éclair studios in Tucson. A newspaper reported that as the hosts were inspecting the menagerie, all of a sudden “one of the wild cats broke loose, and while trying to restrain it Henry Alrich, an Éclair artist, was severely wounded, and is confined to a hospital.” A camera recorded the incident, which later became part of a Western Éclair release.

One film that captured the attention of people was *The Aztec Treasure*. Playing at the Garden Theater in October 1914, this two-reeler told the story of Juan Icaza (Bob Frazier), the prefect of Mescalito, his daughter Dolores (Edna Payne) and Dick Henshaw (a Yankee insurrectionist). According to the synopsis, the prefect “alone knows the secret of Montezuma’s hidden millions... [But] the governor tortures the prefect in the hope of getting the secret to the millions. Dolores with Dick’s help, has started an uprising... The governor flees for his life. He takes refuge in the treasure chamber, but is bitten by an adder and dies.” (*Tucson Daily Citizen*. Tucson, Arizona. October 13, 1914.)

Picturesque Tucson, another Éclair production, was exhibited at the Opera House on November 12, 1914. The movie contained “street scenes, residences, the University, the Mission, the Fire Department in action and many other familiar sights.” With the aim of attracting the local authorities’ support, the director of the film presented a copy *Picturesque Tucson* to Mayor I. E. Huffman. However, the following month Cullison announced that the Éclair Company was leaving for Los Angeles. The press let out some of the reasons for this abrupt change of plans. It was commented that the director’s grouchy manners and his quarrels with some residents prompted the decision. Still, the Éclair experiment had been a very productive one, as “the city has profited by their payrolls and the advertising received through their pictures.” (*Tucson Daily Citizen*. December 29, 1914.)



In June 1915, another film venture drew the attention of people in Tucson. The Chinese 6 Feature Film Company with its president, Robert M. Connell, announced the production of a movie based on a Chinese play. In order to make *On the Frontier of Heaven*, Connell began to give acting lessons to a group of aficionados that included three Chinese girls. But after a month of preparations he “acknowledged that he could not finance it.” (*Tucson Daily Citizen*. June 29 and July 13, 1915.)

At the same time, a group of Mexicans prepared to launch their own film company. Tucson had become a Mecca for Mexican artists, who fled their country as a consequence of the Revolution. These immigrants settled in barrios and engaged in diverse economic and cultural activities. They opened restaurants, barbershops, flower

mills, bakeries, bars, and theaters. In 1915, Tucson had ten theaters that provided plenty of entertainment. Two of them were located in the Mexican section of the city: the Teatro Carmen and the Teatro Royal. Soon, the Mexican community would add to its business assets a motion picture studio.

In August 1915, people gathered at the Teatro Carmen to discuss the establishment of the Cuauhtémoc Film Manufacturing Company. Lino Sanz Polo, a political refugee coming from Mexico, spoke in favor of such a venture. After his eloquent speech, seventeen persons gave their approval to the project and became the first shareholders of the company. Among them was Carmen Soto de Vázquez, owner of the Teatro Carmen; Estevan R. Aros, brother of the administrator of the Teatro Royal; and Francisco Díaz López, manager of the Ramírez Theater in Nogales, Sonora. The association started out with a capital of five thousand dollars, offering shares to the public at one dollar each. Board members of the Cuauhtémoc at this time were Lino Sanz Polo, president; M.V. Sánchez, vice-president; Estevan R. Aros, treasurer; and Alejandro V. Martínez, secretary.



Carmen Soto de Vázquez, Teatro Carmen's owner.
Sketch: AFA.

A curious mixture of businessman, inventor and supporter of the arts, Lino Sanz Polo considered filmmaking an auspicious investment. Born in Spain in 1881, he immigrated to Mexico where he engaged in agriculture and cattle raising. His ranch was in the vicinity of Torreón, Coahuila. When the Revolution engulfed that state, Lino along with many Spanish landowners packed his personal belongings and left. Reportedly, Pancho Villa confiscated Sanz Polo's ranch, all of his cattle and six automobiles. Lino found refuge in Tucson, Arizona, where he hit upon fresh business opportunities.



Lino Sanz Polo, Spanish entrepreneur and film producer. Image courtesy Ing. Jorge Sanz Polo.

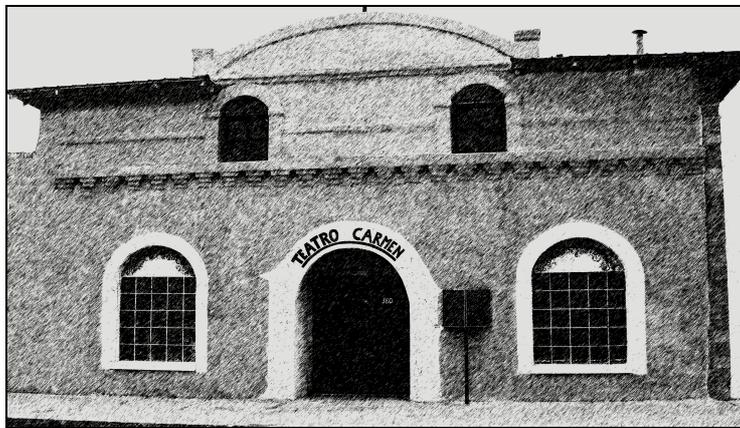
Proof of the resurgence of Hispanic art and entertainment at this Arizonian city can be found in the contemporary newspapers. In the summer of 1915, the local Spanish-language paper *El Tucsonense* carried ads for the Clifton, Lyric, Royal, Broadway, Elysian Grove, De Luxe and Opera House Theaters. On the occasion of Cinco de Mayo, the Teatro Clifton announced the debut of Professor Gálvez, a magician known as “El Faquir de las Indias Orientales.” To complement the show, the comic duo Turich and Raquito presented an act called “El Tenorio Musical.” At the Elysean, the Millanes-Caballé stage company, which was composed of very good singers from Mexico, debuted with a performance of “La Traviata.” Conchita Gentil Arcos, who later made films with the Cuauhtémoc Company, participated in this performance. The Teatro Royal, on 320 Meyer Street, reopened with a program of vaudeville and the exhibition of movies.

The revolution in Mexico kept sending people across the border. In 1915, the situation became particularly delicate as there was no central government and several armies were fighting for control of the country. In the midst of all, on September 16, Mexican refugees in the U.S. prepared to celebrate Independence Day. In Tucson, military authorities were worried that the festivities could provide the expatriates’ political factions with a pretext for aggression. To avoid that, public meetings were cancelled and all theaters in the Mexican barrio closed their doors. The next day business returned to normal and the Teatro Royal had a chance to exhibit a 1910 film of the centennial celebration of Mexican Independence. With a length of 20,000 feet, this movie had to be split in two and played on consecutive days. In addition, audiences at the Royal saw *El grito de Dolores*, a 1908 patriotic film that re-enacted Father Hidalgo’s call to arms to fight Spanish rule.

Mexicans paid close attention to the newsreels, which brought them information about political and military happenings in Mexico. Because newsreels shown at the Royal had to be shipped from across the border, the programs were cautiously advertised: “If there are no difficulties coming our way, [we] will offer the important cinematographic views of the arrival of Generals Villa and Zapata in Mexico City.” (*El Tucsonense*. June 2, 1915.) The Broadway Theater catered mainly to English-speaking audiences; it presented

in one of its programs a newsreel of the Battle of Przemysl in Poland, complemented by a film that showed the meeting of General Scott with *Pancho* Villa in El Paso, Texas.

The Teatro Carmen had just been inaugurated on May 20, 1915, as Tucson's finest recreational center. Located on 384 South Meyer Street, it became the pride of the Mexican community, "with its ample stage, excellent lighting, ornate decorations, and a capacity for 1,400 persons." The Carmen had the largest facilities in town and it attracted artists from the Spanish-language legitimate theater and opera. A month after its inauguration, a new Power 6-A cinematographic machine was installed for the exhibition of movies. (Thomas E. Sheridan, *Los Tucsonenses: The Mexican Community in Tucson, 1854-1941* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press), p. 201. Armando Miguélez, "El Teatro Carmen (1915-1923): Centro del Arte Escénico Hispano en Tucson", in *Revista Chicano-Riqueña*, edited by Nicolás Kanellos, Vol. XI, Spring 1983, No 1.)

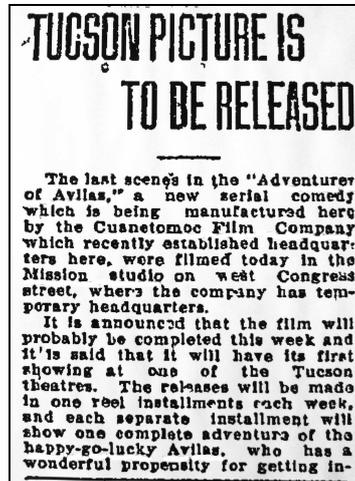


Teatro Carmen. Sketch: AFA.

The Cuauhtémoc Company was only the most recent development in film entertainment. Its offices and laboratory were first installed at the Mission photography studio, on West Congress Street. Shortly after, the studio moved its offices to one of the corners of North Court Street and Council Street. The Mission facilities, which were owned by the photographers Pablo C. Beltrán and Alejandro Martínez, continued giving service to the Cuauhtémoc. This photo lab permitted the company to locally process the films and make positive prints, avoiding the onerous practice of sending materials elsewhere, "as has happened to another company that was organized in this city." In all probability, this last statement referred to the Éclair Film Company. (*El Tucsonense*. Tucson, Arizona. August 25 and October 28, 1915.)

Immediately, the Cuauhtémoc started to shoot the first episode of a serial comedy: *Las aventuras de Ávila*. The press gave the names of three stage performers in the movie: Enrique Moreno, Miguel de Lara and Mtr. Ávila. The latter comedian was regarded as an excellent imitator of Charlie Chaplin. Some of the most important streets and commercial establishments of Tucson appeared in this 1,200-foot reel. A comic scene with the happy-go-lucky Avila had as a background the Steinfeld Co., a hardware store on North Stone

Avenue. Additional footage was completed at the Mission photography studio. J. Sánchez directed the movie and Pablo C. Beltrán did the camera work.



The movie opened on October 23, 1915 at the Teatro Royal, as part of a program that included a live show. After its initial exhibition, the company quickly announced plans to film major events taking place in the city and environs. At the beginning of November, the company's secretary and cameraman, Alejandro V. Martínez, said publicly that the films taken during the first two days of the Southern Arizona Fair had been edited and were lined up for exhibition. A local newspaper gave some interesting details about these movies.

All of the first and second day features of the fair were completed last night and were ready for showing; the pictures being exceptionally clear. The film begins with the accident Sunday to the Stutz car belonging to Harold Steinfeld, in which Richard Clarke was killed. The pictures show the car immediately after the accident. The horse racing on the first day of the fair has all been caught by the camera, as well as the aeroplane flights of Miss Stinson. The little aviatrix is shown in the action of taking the mail sack from the first aero station in Arizona at the grounds of the Southern Arizona Fair association for a flight to the post office in Tucson; and there are pictures of her reception of the schoolboys of Tucson at the fair grounds. The motorcycle races have been filmed with great success, the start and finish of the events being particularly clear. In all of the first two days of the fair nothing has been missed by the camera with the exception of the Marathon race, the automobile which was conveying the cameramen to the starting point of that event meeting with a misfortune which delayed the party on the road for two hours while the race was in progress. According to Mr. Martínez, the company will have no difficulty in filming the automobile races today, an exceptionally quick lens having been procured for the camera. (*Tucson Daily Citizen*. Tucson, Arizona, November 6, 1915.)

The reels of the Southern Arizona Fair debuted at the Lyric Theater the same month. Subsequently, they were exhibited at the Teatro Carmen in conjunction with a

performance of *Caballería Rusticana* and the screening of two more films: *Aventuras de Ávila* and *Funerales de Héctor Zepeda*. The Cuauhtémoc people did not miss the opportunity to record the burial of Héctor Zepeda, a young Tucsonian killed while riding his motorcycle in California. The remains of the eighteen-year-old Zepeda were brought to Tucson, where a crowded funeral took place on November 3. The procession started at the Cathedral and the interment was in Holy Hope Cemetery.

The activities of the Cuauhtémoc enterprise were picking up, as they now had plans to exhibit their movies in Phoenix, Nogales, Bisbee, Douglass, and El Paso, Texas. Further, they got ready for the construction of a new facility adjacent to the main studio. According to *The Tucson Daily Citizen*, the future building would be used for taking interiors: “This unique construction being built of a new variety of flexible glass, known as rubber glass, the invention of an Indianapolis man.” (*Tucson Daily Citizen*. Tucson, Arizona, November 29, 1915.) Other plans were announced, among them the filming of more episodes of *Aventuras de Ávila*. This project, however, was never carried out.



Instead, the Cuauhtémoc completed a reel of the festivities of Misión de San Javier and a two-reel drama entitled *En el camino del Piel Roja*. This movie, titled in English *Red Man's Way*, contained views of San Javier, Sierra del Gato and Sabino Canyon. An incident occurred when the camera tried in vain to film an Indian dancer. As soon as the man sighted the camera, he “refused to shake his rattle-snake-bound ankles” and took refuge inside the San Javier Mission. A newspaper reported that no one had ever filmed the Indian fiesta, recalling that when the Éclair Company was in Tucson, “Manager Cullison endeavored to get a picture of the fiesta and offered every inducement to the Indians to no avail.” A tribe’s chief explained to the Cuauhtémoc crew that his people did not allow anyone to photograph them because “if the camera eye caught them they would never die.” Surprisingly, a few days after this incident officers of the film company announced that the pictures had been taken as scheduled but decided to keep it a secret until they saw the images developed. (*Tucson Daily Citizen*, December 4, 1915.)

Little is known about the exhibition of *En el camino del Piel Roja*, as its theatrical release is not documented. An anecdote that has survived to this day points to the film’s tremendous impact on audiences. A grandson of Lino Sanz Polo has said that “in this movie about Indians and cowboys, the Indians are finally triumphant, with the result that

the public who saw it got a little anxious and tore down the theater.” (Jorge Sanz Polo Gabilondo, interviewed by author in 2010.)

In addition to filming dramas, comedies and festivities, the Cuauhtémoc made advertising for local industries. To increase the number of shareholders of the Stratton Copper Company, a film was made of the Stratton mines at the Santa Catalina Mountains. It included views of the mines, the new Stratton road and other points of interest. Supervising the shooting were the company’s president, C. N. Wilson, and manager Sheerer. The aim of this 1,500 foot reel was to provide a “first-hand idea of what the country and the new road look like.” The film catered to a specific audience on the East Coast, “the 300 stockholders who are unable to visit the company’s properties.” The movie also included footage of “a horse race between Mr. and Mrs. Jim Westfall, in which Mrs. Westfall won, and a dash by two Mexican horsewomen which ends in a thrilling and unexpected manner.” (*Tucson Daily Citizen*, November 16, 1915.) The finished picture of the Stratton Copper Company played locally at three theaters: Opera House, Broadway, and Royal. Subsequently, it was sent to New York where it captured the attention of viewers.

Among the most notorious events filmed by the Cuauhtémoc Company was the laying of the cornerstone of the Alianza Hispano-Americana building. On March 19, 1916, thousands of residents gathered on Congress Street to watch the procession of 1,000 marchers. The ceremony continued with the speeches of several Alianza officers. Chairman Enrique V. Anaya (a Mexican attorney) introduced Carlos C. Jácome, who “placed the stone on the mortared brick using a silver trowel.” Following the act, “the Espee band and members of the *logia* paraded the streets of Tucson.” The Cuauhtémoc also recorded views of the University of Arizona and the Students Building A. This reel and that of the Alianza Hispano-Americana ceremony played the following month at Tucson’s Broadway Theater. The short features were a complement to William S. Hart’s western *Hell’s Hinges* and Roscoe Arbuckle’s comedy *The Bright Lights*. (*Tucson Daily Citizen*, March 20, 1916; April 28, 1916.)

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Local feature by
Cuauhtemec Film Co.
U. A. Students Building A—Alianza Hispano-Americana
Cornerstone Laying and other scenes

In April 1916, the Cuauhtémoc published an amendment to the company's articles of incorporation detailing an increase in its capital. The stockholders announced: "The amount of the capital stock of this corporation shall be twenty-five thousand dollars, divided into twenty-five thousand shares of the par value of one dollar each." Acknowledging the amendment were Lino Sanz Polo, and José B. Aros, the company's president and secretary, respectively. In spite of this news very little filming was done afterwards. On April 22, the Broadway Theater announced the movie *Picturesque Tucson*, which had been made a few years before by Webster Cullison's Éclair Film Company. One advertisement noted: "To the picture have been added many scenes taken by the Cuauhtémoc Film Company, so that the screen version of the Old Pueblo may be thoroughly up to date. The pictures will be sent to San Diego and shown at the fair there." (*Tucson Daily Citizen*, April 22, 1916.) The following month, the Teatro Carmen exhibited the reel of the laying of the cornerstone of the Alianza building and two new movies produced by the Cuauhtémoc Film Company. The first one being announced as "The confirmation rites of children that took place recently in this city." The second film was taken at the Papago Indian reservation during the Holy Week. It showed "for the first time the traditions of this tribe and the festivities that they have during this season." To complement the program, this theater presented a comic play by the "Quinteto Bohemio." (*El Tucsonense*. May 3, 1916.)

The fortunes of the Cuauhtémoc Company took a turn after the disclosure of some unpleasant news. A scandal involved Belén Trujillo, the leading actress of a drama that was being filmed at the studio. Miss Trujillo had recently come to Tucson along with other artists that were touring the border towns. The film company contracted her for a female lead in a six-reel production. The talented young actress played a character described as "A beautiful Spanish girl, the tool and foil of a band of smugglers in the Pyrenees Mountains between Spain and France." When shooting was in progress, in February 1916, immigration authorities detained Miss Trujillo and her lover, General Luis Hermosillo. A newspaper revealed the reason for their confinement.

General Luis Hermosillo is a prominent Villista general who has been sojourning in this country since the seizure of Nogales by General Calles. It was at Nogales, it is said, that Hermosillo and Señorita Trujillo became acquainted and the man followed her here. He is married and has a wife who resides in the city of Hermosillo [Sonora]. Thirty-five thousand dollars in Mexican money was found in their possession. At detention headquarters Señorita Trujillo was inclined to make light of the affair and entertained the inmates by clever singing and dancing turns. The young woman is about 24 years of age, clever and handsome. She was formerly a resident of Hermosillo; but came to this country with a Spanish troupe of players, playing engagements along the borderland until they were engaged as actors at the studio of the Cuauhtémoc Film Company here. The general is charged with having a communicable disease and the girl with having improper relations with him." (*Tucson Daily Citizen*, February 5, 1916.)

To top all these wrongdoings, Belén Trujillo was accused of being a spy for the Villa revolutionaries. This charge was hard to prove and the Cuauhtémoc Company stood by its actress. In a letter sent to the immigration authorities, an official of the film enterprise made it known that “Miss Trujillo had always borne a good reputation with the company and had been trustworthy and conscientious in her work.” A legal fight to stop the deportation of the actress ensued. The studio was concerned that its current production would be left unfinished if the main star were taken away. In spite of this plea on behalf of the actress, authorities deported Belén Trujillo and General Luis Hermosillo to Nogales, Sonora. Another actress connected with the studio, Josefina Mijares, was also extradited for unknown reasons. The news of the expulsion of three “pernicious aliens” spread out quickly beyond the borders of Arizona. In Kansas City, Missouri, for example, the Spanish-language newspaper *El Cosmopolita* reported on the scandal. But this was only the first blow to the Cuauhtémoc film venture. Barely three months later, another disgrace involved Lino Sanz Polo, the company’s president.



At the end of May 1916, Sanz Polo traveled to Sonora, Mexico, to deliver one of the films he had made. Suddenly, he was taken into custody in Nogales and lodged in a Mexican jail. Authorities accused him of being a “Felicista,” or a follower of Félix Díaz, who was the nephew of former dictator Porfirio Díaz. Being a “Felicista” in those days meant being a traitor to democracy and to the Revolution. Although the arrest of Sanz Polo in Nogales had been illegal, he remained in prison for three days during which time he received several death threats. Upon returning to Tucson, a reporter asked him why Mexican authorities had detained him. Still baffled, the man only responded: “I guess they simply thought I had money.” (*Tucson Daily Citizen*, June 5, 1916.)

It is not known exactly the political affiliation of Sanz Polo, but shortly after this incident at Nogales he sold out his interest in the Cuauhtémoc Film Company. Although he announced that he would leave for Gijón, Spain, legal complications prevented him from doing so. At the end of June, a complaint was filed against Sanz Polo for having sold an automobile on which he held a mortgage. Teófilo Aros declared that the car had been

placed in the Aros Garage as a guarantee for certain funds that were advanced to Sanz Polo. The complaint further said that Sanz Polo went ahead and sold the car without settling the debt. The Justice of the Peace was holding him and placed an \$800 bond for his release. Apparently, the issue got settled. Three months later, the embattled founder of the Cuauhtémoc was again arrested. The police suspected he had been connected with a dynamite explosion that partially destroyed Teófilo Aros's garage. After a thorough investigation, the county attorney decided that there was no evidence against him and immediately released the suspect. (*Tucson Daily Citizen*, June 30, 1916; July 11, 1916. *El Tucsonense*, October 3, 1916.)

In spite of the troubles Sanz Polo did not leave Tucson right away. On the contrary, it appears that he settled his previous debts and embarked on a new life. After all, he was a resourceful man and began to look for ways to invest his money. In 1917 he took charge of the well-equipped "Rapid Shoe Repairing Shop," located on 126 North Stone Avenue. The shoe business was so successful that he later opened another shop in town. Around this time, the Spanish-born Sanz Polo married a young Mexican from Sonora, Angelita Ybarra. His social activities increased with a membership in the "Sociedad Mutualista Porfirio Díaz," a conservative mutual-aid society. In addition, he was involved in the "Club Comercial Hispano-Americano" and the "Mutualista Leñadores del Mundo." Throughout this time, Sanz Polo continued supporting the arts. In May 1918, for example, he arranged for a performance of the stage company of Angélica Méndez in the mining town of Silverbell, Arizona.

Lino Sanz Polo had become a well-respected resident of Tucson, notwithstanding his earlier legal problems. This active businessman possessed other less-known talents. For instance, he developed a new technique for mining. In 1920, Sanz Polo received a patent certificate for his invention of an apparatus that improved ore concentration. The gadget, as the certificate stated, could be used "to facilitate the recovery of a maximum amount of metal" by means of a special concentration system. A year later, he tried out his new system at the Arivaca mine, which was owned by Juan Conti. Another thing to be said about the industrious Sanz Polo is that he had a high regard for his country of birth. When someone suggested in a newspaper article that Spain was an uneducated country, Sanz Polo came to her defense replying with dignity and intelligence. Furthermore, he was very supportive of Mexican youths in Tucson and helped build a recreational club for their benefit. His admiration for Mexico's historical past is evident in the choosing of the name "Cuauhtémoc" for his filmmaking enterprise. After seven years of residence in Tucson, he left with wife and children for Mexico City.

During the 1910s, Tucson became an important filmmaking center. The French-owned Éclair, the Chinese 6 and the Cuauhtémoc were motion picture companies that stirred the interest of people. Although their business life was short, they succeeded in persuading artists and entrepreneurs of the practical value of this innovative medium. The establishment of the Cuauhtémoc Film Manufacturing Co. in 1915 demonstrates the initiative of the Hispanic community. Lino Sanz Polo, Carmen Soto de Vázquez, Estevan

R. Aros and other persons behind this firm, achieved an unprecedented goal. They were able to produce and commercialize an assortment of reels, some of them portraying key aspects of Tucson and its vicinity. Yet, today's film historians are unaware of the Cuauhtémoc undertaking. It is a past that has slipped away from our memory. Nevertheless, the surfacing of old documents and a renewed interest in film history allow us to visit again such feats.

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