



HippFest

18 — 22 March 2026



The White Heather

**Dir. Maurice Tourneur | USA | 1919 N/C PG | b&w, tinted & toned English intertitles |
1h 10m + short**

With: Holmes Herbert, Ben Alexander, Ralph Graves, Mabel Ballin, John Gilbert

Performing live: Stephen Horne (piano, accordion, flute)

Programme notes: Kathy Rose O'Regan

Thurs 19 March 20:00 - 21:20

*Restored by San Francisco Film Preserve, San Francisco Silent Film Festival and Eye
FilmmuseumBox.*

In 2024, I spent many, many hours digitally restoring *The White Heather*. The digital restoration process was a painstaking one, with a catalogue of damage, dirt, and instability in need of remediation. Much of this work was undertaken frame by frame, which is of course time consuming, but does provide the restorer with an unparalleled familiarity with the film in hand.

The longer I spent working on *The White Heather*, the more captivated I became by its astonishing underwater sequences. This point of interest sent me down a rabbit hole of research on early underwater cinematography, and led me to learn much about the Williamson Brothers — the innovators responsible for *The White Heather's* captivating trip beneath the waves.

The first underwater photograph is widely credited to William Thompson in 1886, while Louis Boutan is acknowledged as the father of reliable underwater photography. However, these static glimpses of the watery underworld were not enough to give an immersive impression and understanding of what life below sea level really looked like. With the advent of moving image technology in the late 1800s, efforts to intimate the appearance of life underwater became an immediate goal. As early as 1898, Georges Melies was re-imagining divers visiting the wreckage of the USS Maine in his “Visite sous-marine du Maine”. By 1901’s “Un drame au fond de la mer” by Ferdinand Zecca, deep sea divers on the hunt for treasure were battling on the sea bed, cutting air supplies when the spoils were not to be shared, in a reflection of the climax of *The White Heather*, then a popular play, as pointed out by Richard Abel in *The Cine Goes to Town*.

Interest in showing audiences the realities of the deep sea was clearly high, and it wasn't long until the endlessly resourceful inventors of the earliest days of cinema began to develop solutions for the question of how to film underwater. Foremost among these minds were the Williamsons — father Charles and sons Ernest and George. Charles Williamson was many things — seafarer, hotelier, entrepreneur — but for our purposes the



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most important facet of the man was that of prolific inventor of underwater technology. Between 1903 and 1932 Charles Williamson designed and patented eight apparatuses to improve and enhance the possibilities of underwater work and exploration.

While Charles's inventions were primarily intended for submarine repair work and salvage, in 1912 he patented a design for a pleasure apparatus, essentially an underwater room with portholes connected to the surface via a tube that would enable users to visit the seafloor without putting on a diving suit. Charles's inventions were soon expanded upon by his son Ernest, who developed the famed Williamson Submarine Tube.

Ernest harbored a passionate interest in ocean adventure due to his father's days sailing and his own youth surrounded by the rising shipyards of Britain and the United States. As he grew older and developed a career in journalism and illustration, the younger Williamson—working in close collaboration with his brother George—felt sure that his father's technologies could be readily adapted for use by motion picture cameramen.

To enable space and comfort for a cameraman and director at the bottom of the sea, Ernest developed the photosphere, a large steel chamber of a reported five feet in diameter attached to a vessel via the adjustable, retractable Williamson tube. This photosphere housed not just the camera, but phone lines to communicate with the main ship, and valves and gauges to control the pressure inside the sphere. Two large portholes were made of 1 ½ inch thick optically perfect glass sourced from Germany, allowing clear, sharp photography underwater.

After testing the photosphere in the naval yard of Norfolk, Virginia, the Williamsons raised private funding for an extended trip to Nassau in the Caribbean to shoot the first underwater film. Nassau was selected for its crystal-clear waters, with the hope that these spotless seas would enable long range, un-occluded visibility from the photosphere. As cameraman and director for this trip the Williamson's engaged a true renaissance man of early cinema—Carl Louis Gregory. Gregory's extensive knowledge of film technology combined with the Williamsons' engineering prowess and genuine daring resulted in the successful execution of the first underwater film, 1914's "30,000 Leagues under the Sea", also known as "Terrors of the Deep" or sometimes simply as "The Williamson Expedition".

In 1919, the Williamsons had the opportunity to work with one of the great silent era directors – Maurice Tourneur. This prolific French director had been working in the US for five years at this point, but *The White Heather* was to be his first film made in California. Set in Scotland, it is surprising how often contemporaneous reviews praise the film's Highland vistas – actually, and as a California resident I would say quite obviously, these scenes were filmed on the arid hills of the Golden State!

The film is credited as being the first actually *directed* underwater, with Tourneur learning to dive so that he could submerge with the performers and direct the action using hand signals while the camera rolled in the photosphere. The underwater sequences were shot in San Pedro, California, with the Williamsons on hand in person to operate the photosphere while Tourneur directed the action beyond the glass just out of view of the



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camera. This marrying of the Williamsons' incredible technology with the artistic prowess of Tourneur resulted in truly striking subaquatic scenes. San Francisco Film Preserve is very proud to return this masterful film to the big screen for the first time in over a century!

KATHY ROSE O'REGAN

Kathy Rose O'Regan is the Executive Director of San Francisco Film Preserve, previously served as the Senior Film Restorer with San Francisco Silent Film Festival, and led the preservation department of the Bay Area Video Coalition.