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Movie Mountain

A few years ago we were traveling on a remote dirt road through the Chihuahua Desert near Sierra Blanca – a vast desert region of Mexico and Texas. We were with a rancher, who at one point, gestured nonchalantly at a hill in the distance. He said, “that’s Movie Mountain.” He remembered that his grandfather told him the mountain got its name because a silent picture was shot there.

This set us on a journey tracing early silent-era film production and a peculiar relationship between Movie Mountain and the Star Film Company, run by the illusionist and famous filmmaker, Georges Méliès and his lesser-known brother, Gaston. In the early 1900's, George Méliès sent Gaston to the United States to guard the Méliès film copyrights. In 1902, Gaston also began making his own films in New York and then Texas. In April 1911, Gaston Méliès relocated his movie production from Texas to California. Departing from San Antonio, Gaston loaded up his crew, actors, equipment and animals on the Sunset Express train. Our research of historical train records and early motion picture trade magazines indicate that during their journey west, Méliès and his company got off the train at Sierra Blanca. They spent a few days in the region before heading on. Perhaps they made a short B-Western, Gaston's speciality at the time. We will never know for sure, as only a few of Gaston's films from this period have survived.

Gaston Méliès went on to travel the world making more films, but none of them ever received the lasting recognition of Georges' films, like his fantastical film about a rocket journey: "A Trip to the Moon." Less than 25 miles away from Movie Mountain is a facility named Blue Origin. Owned by Jeff Bezos, founder of Amazon.com, the company is planning to send paying tourists into outer space. From the top of Movie Mountain, it's possible to see the test rockets launch towards the sky.