

# LOST NIGHTMARE

The Mystery of the Missing  
Spider Pit Sequence



## I.

Why does *King Kong* continue to fascinate audiences?

Why are we drawn back into the savage jungles of Skull Island, into the teeming canyons of Depression-era New York? Why do we gather in the shadow of the Empire State Building, to watch tragedy unfold again and again?

For decades fans have studied the film, vainly attempting to capture the magic of the whole from a dissection of its parts. Much has been made, and rightly so, of Max Steiner's groundbreaking score, of the revolutionary effects of Willis O'Brien and his team, and of the film's marvelously succinct editing. Even the dated dialogue, which still somehow manages to inspire affection rather than scorn, works a special kind of magic that draws us into the story. And yet the question remains: why does Kong remain a permanent fixture in our collective imagination?

The answer can only lie in the transcending resonance of the story. Just as our ancestors cherished the horrors and wonders of Odysseus, Gilgamesh and Beowulf, so do modern audiences thrill to the mythic heights *Kong* reaches: the high fantasy and rousing adventure in exploring a savage lost world, the ardent romance between the hero and the girl, and the ultimate clash of man against nature.

You will have noticed the phrase "horrors and wonders" in describing the epics of ages past. Like the dual nature of man himself, our myths have a darker side. For all the bravery of Odysseus, he is powerless against the lurking horror of

Scylla. Beowulf vanquishes Grendel only to face the wrath of the creature's mother, a monster even more terrifying than the son.

We have always needed our legends, our dreams. And we have always needed our nightmares.

Which brings us to one aspect of *King Kong* that has eluded examination, a dark counterpoint to the fantasy we have come to embrace. One nightmarish scene, forgotten—perhaps lost forever—that would have rendered the jungles of Skull Island far more sinister and terrifying than the primal dreamland we remembered immersing ourselves in as children.

We speak, of course, of the missing "spider pit" sequence.

Until the 2005 remake, few casual fans knew there was originally a horrific postscript to the 1933 original's iconic log scene. At least some of the sailors survived the fall into the dark abyss beneath the log. There, they were attacked and consumed by enormous spiders and other monstrous creatures hidden in the chasm's dark depths. Like the other creatures of Skull Island, they were animated by Willis O'Brien's miniature stop-motion process. But why was this scene removed from the film? What became of it?

As the story goes, *Kong* director Merian C. Cooper previewed a rough cut of the film before a test audience, to gauge their reactions. Everything seemed to be working as it was supposed to, until the moment the sailors who survived the fall into the chasm found themselves trapped in what has become known as the "spider pit." At this point the film's

spell was broken, with horrified audience members leaving the theater, or else losing interest entirely in Fay Wray's plight as they discussed what they had just seen. Cooper realized at once the scene had to go, and out it came. From that moment since, no one has seen this excised footage. Or have they?



The iconic photo first published in *Famous Monsters of Filmland*, decades after the film's release.

It is one of the greatest mysteries in all of cinema, a legendary scene cut from a legendary movie. Depending on who and what one believes, it either was filmed, or it wasn't. Some hold the scene was cut because its gruesomeness "stopped the show," while others suspect it merely distracted audience focus from the plight of Ann Darrow. Of those who believe it was never filmed at all, some believe the scene was abandoned for mere budgetary reasons, while others believe the filmmakers preemptively

censored themselves before the real censors could.

Why does the spider pit sequence continue to generate so much controversy and speculation? The answer to that question may lie in another question: What is more powerful than that which is unseen and unknown? While generations of viewers know every frame of *Kong* by heart, we are forced to entirely imagine the events in the spider pit. And as

every child knows, our imaginations can call forth horrors far worse than anything that can be put onscreen.

Another point to consider: Skull Island's jungles may be filled with ferocious dinosaurs, but we are somehow pleased with that thought. And why not? Dinosaurs are the modern-day equivalent to dragons, beings so ancient and impossible to truly conceive that they might as well be mythic monsters. They are somehow noble, these creatures of brute strength and ponderous speed, fighting for their meals or else grazing contentedly on foliage. We want to believe there is a Skull



Another test photograph of the set and models. The spider prepares to climb onto the fallen log. On the right, a sailor has been captured by what appears to be a giant crab.

Island, somewhere. We want there to be dragons, things of terrible beauty.

The denizens of the spider pit are the polar opposite to this primal fantasy. They live in darkness, in the dim places where the sun never quite reaches. While the dinosaurs hunt and graze for their livelihoods, these creatures lie in wait, ensnaring their prey or scabbling for the leavings that trickle down to them from above. They are the carrion-eaters, wallowing in corruption even as they feed off it.

It's a haunting image; anguished sailors falling, falling, falling out of the light into a damp, reeking underworld, perishing as giant spiders, crabs and other evolutionary nightmares swarm out of their holes and overcome them one by one.

It is no wonder that this scene, completely at odds with the rest of the movie, was deleted. It was a wise narrative choice, if frustrating for the fans and film scholars who will almost certainly never see it with their own eyes.

Whether the scene was filmed or not, the horrors of the spider pit now lurk in the same myth-realm that Kong and his saurian rivals roam. Whereas the dinosaurs (and the King himself) excite our imaginations, the creatures of the spider pit evoke only disgust. They thrive yet in the darkness that exists in all of us, nightmares we can never exorcise.

## II.

Rumors. Possibilities. Some seven decades after King Kong's release, this is all we have to work with when discussing the deleted spider pit sequence. With each passing year the facts grow ever vaguer, the story more convoluted, until one comes to a book like *Kong Unbound* (Pocket Books, 2005), in which noted Science Fiction author Jack Williamson claims "Kong's battle with a gigantic spider" was cut due to Production Code censors. Although it's certainly a marvelous idea, this battle never happened.

The purpose of this article is to unravel the tangled web (pun

intended) of fact and fiction surrounding the spider pit's place in the making of *King Kong*; to discuss the possible reasons for its deletion; and to weigh the possibility that it was never filmed at all. We shall look carefully at the pros and cons of each argument, as well as hopefully organizing events, timelines, quotes and other data into a narrative that is easily understandable to both the lifelong *Kong* fan and newcomer alike.

The accuracy of any such endeavor is open to debate; all the people involved in the making of *Kong* are now dead, and the first few generations of movie scholars that were able to interview the filmmakers in their lifetimes are now dying off. The best we can hope for is to approximate a reasonable history based on what we know and can deduce. It is for the reader to decide how firm this footing is.

Another test photo shows the spider menacing two sailors.



## III.

The most logical place to begin any discussion of the spider pit sequence would be in describing the origins of *King Kong* itself. The biography of Merian C. Cooper and the influences and inspirations that

shaped the conception of his creation are now well known, but we are more concerned with the birthing process of the movie itself, not its creative origins. Without knowing the specific circumstances in which the movie was made, it is impossible to make an accurate case for the scene's existence. The creative process for every movie is unique, but in *Kong's* case it is important to trace its winding course, since the spider pit scene was conceived before the movie itself was scripted, and was deleted at any one of several different points before *King Kong's* public debut on March 2, 1933. The controversy lies in when the scene was cut: at scripting stage, during film production, or during the post-production editing.

What were these specific circumstances? Let us examine how Cooper got *Kong* into production at RKO.

As his biography *Living Dangerously* relates, Merian Cooper was thinking about his giant ape story before he ever got to Hollywood. Cooper was already experienced in filmmaking, earning fame from his "natural dramas," documentaries shot in exotic locations and edited to bring the drama of day-to-day survival among the indigenous peoples into sharp, suspenseful relief. Although pictures such as *Chang* and *Grass* were successful, Cooper and his partner Ernest B. Schoedsack were already thinking of branching out into pre-scripted dramas, using actors, sets and special effects—movies, in other words.



A pre-production sketch of the log crashing into the bottom of the chasm. The spider pit sequence would have occurred soon after.

Nurturing a lifelong fascination with gorillas, Cooper conceived the idea of a jungle expedition encountering a ferocious gorilla, which kidnaps a woman of the party. The gorilla is captured, brought back to civilization, escapes and wreaks havoc, only to die at the hands of men. The recently discovered dragons of Komodo Island intrigued Cooper, and he imagined a battle between the beasts and his own gorilla. How to execute such a scene was still vague in his mind, with Cooper imagining an actual staged battle between a real gorilla and a live Komodo dragon.

While in New York, Cooper tried to interest Paramount in his idea, but met with little interest. Paramount alumni David O. Selznick liked Cooper's idea, but he was trying to strike out on his own, and hadn't the financial means to found his own independent studio. He remembered Cooper, however, and when he later became vice president at RKO-Radio Pictures in California, he offered Cooper a job as his executive assistant.

This background information may seem irrelevant in regards to the spider pit sequence, but it needs to be told in order to understand how and when the scene was supposedly filmed. Cooper was still attached to his "Giant Terror Gorilla" idea, and moving to RKO in 1931, where his duties were to assess and greenlight (or terminate) various film projects, put him in a prime position to realize his pet project.

He still lacked the means to visualize his creatures, however, until he came across a project called *Creation*. This was a story about shipwrecked survivors trapped on an island full of dinosaurs. Cooper was not impressed with the story, and the production had little more than a few minutes of film to show for nearly a year's worth of effort. Cooper felt the script was awkward and lacked focus, but he was fascinated by the stop-motion process that special effects artist Willis O'Brien used to bring the dinosaurs to life. Here was a practical way to bring his gorilla to life. It also eliminated the need and expense of far-off locations, and the dinosaur models, already completed, would replace Cooper's Komodo dragons, which after all were only about 10 feet long in reality.



Willis O'Brien's pioneering stop-motion artistry enabled Merian Cooper to bring his vision to the screen.

The pieces were falling into place. Cooper scrapped *Creation*, but planned with O'Brien to use the artisan's creative team for *Kong*. Cooper had meanwhile put *The Most Dangerous Game* into production, an adaptation of the famous short story by Richard Connell. Cooper may or may not have planned all along to use *The Most Dangerous Game's* sets and actors for his own film, but it certainly made *Kong* financially easier for the RKO executives to approve, especially with *Creation's* effects team poised to start work using previously built models and recycling what little footage *Creation* had produced.



**The Arsinoitherium was to have chased Driscoll and the sailors onto the log, trapping them between itself and Kong. Built originally for the *Creation* project, it was replaced soon after by a Triceratops, and then a Styracosaurus. In trying to tighten up the pacing, Cooper eventually removed all traces of any other beast from the log sequence.**

Even so, the conservative RKO executives were put off by the bizarre fantasy Cooper was trying to sell them. Selznick compromised by authorizing Cooper to shoot a test reel of about ten minutes in length, part of a presentation designed to convince the executives *King Kong* was a viable, moneymaking concept. A modest budget of \$10,000 was allotted to the project.

This test reel would be comprised of scenes conceived by Cooper and O'Brien, and made canny use of *Creation* footage

and *The Most Dangerous Game's* sets. In fact, one wonders if perhaps *The Most Dangerous Game's* sets had been designed with *Kong* in mind all along. There is certainly no chasm or log bridge in the original Connell story, though there was a scene in *Creation* in which a prehistoric beast (the extinct 2-horned Arsinoitherium) knocks a group of sailors off a log that spans a deep chasm. With *Kong* now replacing the Arsinoitherium, the log-shaking sequence would become one of the major highlights of the test reel. Another scene, influenced by Cooper's earlier notion of gorillas fighting Komodo dragons, would feature *Kong* battling a Tyrannosaurus Rex.

Bridging these two iconic moments was the spider pit sequence.

## IV.

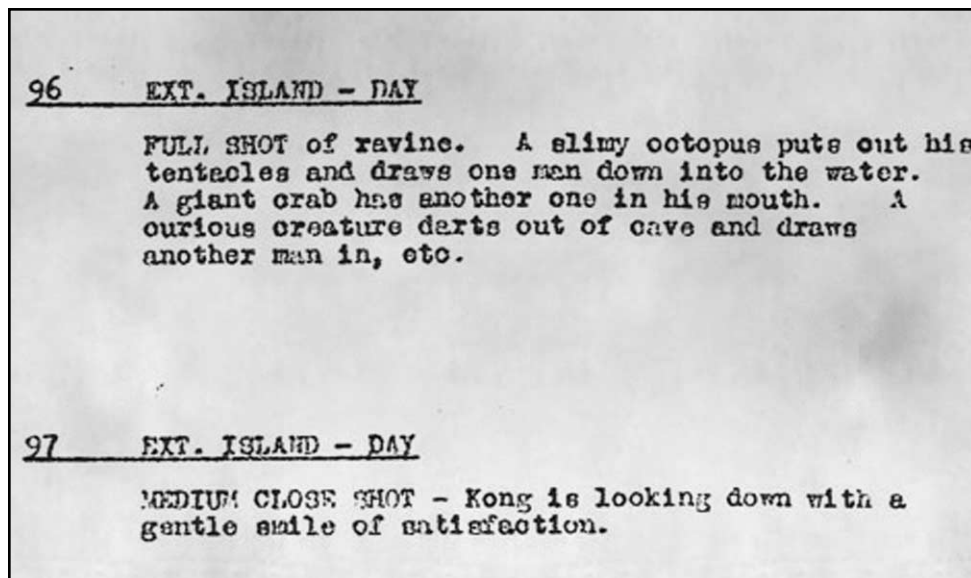
Some time before production on the test reel began in earnest, Cooper brought in RKO screenwriter Edgar Wallace to pen the script and its subsequent film novelization. Edgar Wallace is little known today, but his thrillers were bestsellers in their time, and RKO had lured the British author to Hollywood in hopes of duplicating that success with movies based on his original screenplays. Never one to let an opportunity go unexploited, Cooper planned to release the book ahead of *King Kong*, hoping to capitalize on the publicity a movie based on an Edgar Wallace book would engender.

In reality, Wallace brought little to *Kong*, and admitted as much in private. His was a well-known name Cooper hoped to use, and his participation amounted to fleshing out in long form the scenarios Cooper and O'Brien had already devised. Nevertheless, he was enthused by the concept and dashed out a first draft in a matter of days (Wallace was famed for working at a pace that would today be considered indecently fast). This draft, entitled *The Beast*, was completed on January 5th, 1932, more than a month and a half before the test reel's production was scheduled to start.

Wallace's draft differed vastly from the finished movie we know. While many scenes are familiar, such as the log scene, the T-Rex battle, the ape's capture and public display in New

York City (Madison Square Gardens in this version), the characters are vastly different. Denham's filmmaking expedition to "Vapour Island" coincides with a group of escaped convicts fleeing to the island, with a female hostage named Shirley in tow.

We delve into the Wallace screenplay in detail because the pre-production art used to refine the look of the film was based in large part on this first draft. One sketch featured a brontosaurus capsizing the convicts' stolen lifeboat; their blond captive can be seen in the lower right corner. Another sketch depicted Kong breaking his bonds in Madison Square Garden. It is still another drawing that concerns us directly: a detailed depiction of the spider pit scene.



The spider pit scene, from Wallace's original treatment. Note the octopus, the "curious creature," and... Kong's gentle smile?

The term "spider pit" is and always has been inaccurate. As the sketch demonstrates, Cooper and O'Brien always intended the scene to showcase a variety of horrors besides oversized arachnids. In the foreground of the picture a convict (note the number stenciled across the man's shirt) grapples with the tentacles of an octopus. Two other convicts face off against a giant crab, even as a tentacled monstrosity creeps up behind them; nearby, a giant wild-eyed spider stands poised to strike. As tentacles seem to writhe out of every crevice, a startled lizard hurls itself into a pool of water to escape the commotion. The chasm floor seethed with life, albeit savage and horrible.



One of the original pre-production sketches used to get RKO to greenlight King Kong. Drawn by Mario Larrinaga. The convicts (the numbers stenciled on the men's shirts are barely visible) and octopus are derived from the scenarios contained in the Wallace draft.

Even as O'Brien's artists illustrated pivotal scenes such as this one, Cooper knew the overall narrative framework was flawed. Before Wallace could revise his draft, however, he took ill and passed away suddenly from pneumonia on February 10th. Cooper had little choice but to bring in James

Creelman, screenwriter for *The Most Dangerous Game*, and put him to work on a second draft.

Within weeks of Wallace's passing, production began on the animated portions of the test reel. Filming lasted from late February until early May. These scenes included Kong's action during the log scene, the creatures of the pit, and the T-Rex battle. Once these shots were in the can, Cooper directed the live-action scenes which began in late May. While Schoedsack filmed *The Most Dangerous Game* during the day, Cooper filmed his scenes at night on the same jungle sets, which must have run Robert Armstrong and Fay Wray (both starring in both productions) ragged. Schoedsack grew

irritated when Cooper began encroaching on his own movie's schedule, but Cooper wrapped soon enough in early June. Once completed, the complicated (and revolutionary) process of combining the live-action shots with the animated miniatures began.

By July, Cooper's test reel was completed. This footage was

presented to RKO's board of directors along with a dozen pre-production sketches (including the spider pit drawing) that captured the most iconic moments of the story. By all accounts the presentation dazzled them (with some reservations at the wildness of the idea). Knowing what was included in the test reel—and what was later deleted—is of vital importance. Fortunately we have a detailed description of what the RKO executives saw that day:

“The test reel contained some 138 scenes, the first being the shot from *Creation* in which a Triceratops pursues and kills a man. Then:

The remaining nine men, including Denham and Driscoll, race madly through the jungle until they approach a gorge bridged by a fallen tree. They halt when they see Kong, who carries Ann, crossing the log. An *Arsinoitherium* charges the men, whom Driscoll leads to the log. Kong stops in a clearing and listens, then deposits Ann in the top of a dead tree and hastens back to the gorge. The men are across the log when they see Kong approaching. Driscoll descends a vine and swings into a cave about ten feet below. Denham, at the other end of the log, ducks out of sight in the underbrush. The men on the bridge are trapped between Kong and the *Arsinoitherium*. Kong lifts the end of the log and shakes two men off. *They land in deep mud.* A third man falls, then two more and then another, until only one clings to the log. Kong angrily lifts the end of the tree and lets it drop into the gorge. *Monstrous lizards and insects, a gigantic spider and an octopus-like creature swarm out to devour the men. The spider crawls up a liana toward Driscoll's cave. Driscoll cuts the vine and sends the spider tumbling just*



Another Mario Larrinaga sketch depicting the sailors falling to their doom.

*as Kong reaches into the cave.* Eluding the paw, Driscoll slashes out. Kong withdraws his hand and licks it, then reaches again. Meanwhile, Ann stirs from her faint and looks down to see a monstrous snake at the foot of the tree. A *Tyrannosaurus* enters the glade. Ann screams; the dinosaur stops and scratches its ear. Kong almost has Driscoll in his grasp when he hears the scream. Hurrying back, Kong arrives just as the *Tyrannosaurus* is about to seize the girl. The monsters engage in a titanic battle. Kong is flung against the tree, which falls, pinning Ann. Kong finally kills the dinosaur by tearing its jaws apart. Carefully, he lifts the tree from Ann, picks her up and carries her on into the jungle.

Driscoll climbs to the bank and is hailed by Denham from the other side. Unable to cross the gorge, Denham heads back to get help while Driscoll continues to trail after Kong. The sequence ends as Driscoll steals past the still-breathing body of the Tyrannosaurus, frightening away a huge vulture.” - *Spawn of Skull Island*, by Orville Goldner and George Turner, revised/expanded by Doug Turner and Michael H. Price (Luminary Press, 2002) (*Emphasis by this author.*)

*They land in deep mud.* This phrase is important. In the finished movie, the sailors fall to their deaths against the rocky chasm bottom. One of the objections people raise to the plausibility of the spider pit sequence is that the men would never have survived the fall in the first place. As the above description demonstrates, the men weren't intended to fall onto the stone floor of the chasm. There was a live-action sequence of the men landing in a pit of mud deep enough to cushion their falls. This begs the question of how high the fall was supposed to have been—what if it was only twenty feet or so? The dizzying heights the sailors now plummet from may have no relation to what the scene originally intended.

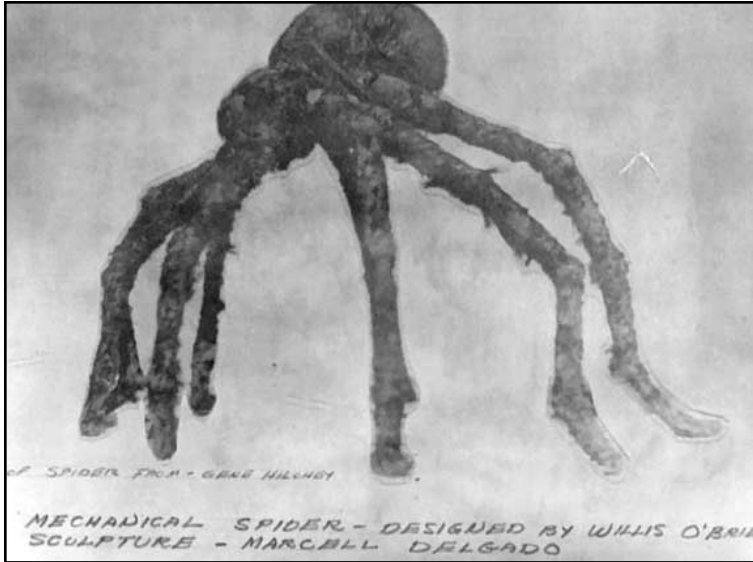
Note also the order that the sailors fall in. Two fall, then one, then two, then one again, leaving one man clinging to the log. This is different from the film's edit, in which one falls, then a second, then two at once, then a fifth, leaving one man left. If the above description was only guesswork, wouldn't it have followed the filmed scene more closely? Instead, it seems to indicate that substantial editing occurred between the test reel's debut and the final edit of the film. Close scrutiny of the movie bears this out: Driscoll runs across the log with seven sailors following. Kong shakes five sailors

off and hurls the sixth into the chasm with the log. What happened to that seventh sailor? Was he edited out for pacing reasons, or was his fate so integral to the spider pit sequence that it could not remain once the scene was deleted?

*Spawn Of Skull Island* is an updated edition of the out-of-print *The Making Of King Kong* (Barnes/Tantivy, 1975). This book, written primarily by Turner, is still the most reliable and researched book about the making of *Kong*. Goldner, while not really a writer, was invaluable to the book because he was part of O'Brien's effects team. Not only did he work on *King Kong*, he worked almost exclusively on the animated portions of the movie. Ray Morton, author of *King Kong: History Of A Movie Icon*, describes Goldner's duties as including: miniature set detailing (p56), devising rods, wires and other devices to support models leaping in the air or in

**A photo of a spider model from the deleted spider scene, believed to have been reused for *The Black Scorpion* (1957).**





Another photo, possibly of a different spider model. At least two were created for the spider sequence; one went on to appear in *The Black Scorpion* (1957), the other is believed to be the spider in the *Famous Monsters of Filmland* photo.

maintaining awkward positions (p57), and assisting O'Brien in animating complicated shots, as well as animating some minor scenes on his own (p58).

This knowledge is crucial because in *Goldner* we have a firsthand witness who worked with the miniatures and their sets. Presumably, this included the spider pit scene. It is telling that not once in *The Making Of King Kong* do the authors assert the sequence was never filmed, or that its existence was only in legend. The spider pit scene was treated as fact, just one of many scenes that were excised by Cooper in order to streamline the movie's pacing and/or budget. George Turner certainly seemed convinced of the scene's

existence; *Spawn* relates how he continued to investigate leads over the years, hoping that the spider pit sequence would turn up intact in some obscure foreign print. It never did.

## V.

The test reel was a success, but Creelman's script wasn't working. His dialogue didn't suit the characters, and he simply couldn't get the action moving as rapidly as Cooper required. Cooper replaced him with Ruth Rose, Schoedsack's wife, and immediately put her to work on the native village scene, as that scene came first in the shooting schedule. Throughout the production, Rose wrote the scenes as needed... except for the already completed test reel footage.

*Spawn* states this explicitly: "The Ruth Rose script retained intact Cooper's test reel, including the *Creation* scene with the Triceratops." (p121). We can verify this for ourselves, as her script is available online. There are several instances during the test reel's scripted scenes where her directions are clearly referring to scenes that have already been shot. The first is most obvious, naming its source in no uncertain terms:

### EXT. CREATION SHOT - FULL SHOT - DAY

The old shot from *Creation*. The striped-trousers sailor runs through the woods, followed by the three-horned beast. He seeks refuge behind a tree. The beast knocks over the tree. It falls upon the sailor, pinning him down. The beast gores him to death.

Several scenes later, Rose inserts the following notation:

**EXT. LOG - FULL SHOT - DAY**

The top of the far bank, as the last of the men rush across the log. Driscoll climbs down over the bank, using a vine for support.

(Note. This angle may not be necessary now).

Perhaps most telling is the following bit of instruction, which takes place as Kong hurls the men off the log:

**EXT. SHRUBBERY - MED. SHOT - DAY**

Suggest here a SHOT of Denham watching from his shrubbery, horrified, so as not to lose him. REVERSE ANGLE.

The alert viewer will notice that Denham is missing from the finished film's log scene. Rose recognized the need for a shot establishing Denham's whereabouts in the minds of the audience, and pointed this out in the script. Here, "suggesting" indicates the need for correcting an already-completed sequence. Obviously, there is no need for Rose to "suggest" a shot in her own screenplay. If she felt a shot was necessary, she would have simply written one in. As it turned out, Cooper never did add such a shot.

These notations and directions clearly indicate that Rose was transcribing the already-filmed test reel footage and incorporating those scenes into her draft. While interesting,

it has to be admitted that there are no such instructions applying specifically to the spider pit shots. The scene that takes place immediately after the events at the bottom of the chasm, however, may be the most important circumstantial evidence we have:

**EXT. CAVE - FULL SHOT - DAY**

Kong on the bank senses Driscoll's presence in the cave below. PAN down to the cave with Driscoll. He looks up, warily watching for Kong above. Continued to PAN DOWN revealing a huge spider climbing up on a vine from the ravine bottom to the cave.

In the finished movie, of course, Driscoll is menaced by a giant lizard. Driscoll dispatches this curious creature in the same manner as the spider, by cutting the vine to which it clings, sending it crashing down into the chasm depths. Sharp-eyed viewers will note the lizard has only two legs; we will talk more about this in due course.

So where did the spider come from? Where did it go? As we read earlier in *Spawn of Skull Island*, the vine-climbing spider was included in the test reel footage. As such, Rose wrote the scene into her script. We can thus safely surmise the spider pit scene was filmed, and was considered a part of the movie at this point, or else Rose wouldn't have bothered. If, as some skeptics suggest, the spider pit scene had been abandoned before filming because of budget constraints or self-censorship (we'll address both points later), then Rose would have scripted a giant lizard in the first place. The reasons why this spider was jettisoned along with the spider pit sequence are unclear, but we can reasonably speculate that

perhaps, when Cooper realized the spider pit scene had to go, he elected to remove all traces of spiders and replaced the vine-climber with a more innocuous lizard.

## VI.

We stated earlier that the route to *Kong's* completion was circuitous. Before going any further, we must define our terms when discussing the scenes that didn't make it into the finished version of *King Kong*. This is to prevent confusion, as there have been rumors over the years of various alternate versions of *Kong* surfacing, with "censored" scenes intact. It is sometimes hinted that the spider pit scene has surfaced among these finds, although, as we shall now examine, these scenes were cut for other reasons, by different hands, and do not necessarily relate to the spider pit scene's deletion and/or recovery.

A production sketch for the abandoned asphalt scene.



The scenes that were cut from *King Kong* can be roughly divided into three categories: abandoned, deleted and censored. The categories and names are arbitrary, but will serve our purpose here. All of the cut scenes can be found in the script and in the novel by Delos Lovelace, where fans of all stripes can compare them to the finished film and wonder what might have been.

The abandoned scenes are scenes that were scripted and put into production, but for one reason or another filming was not completed. We know from Mark Cotta Vaz's biography of Cooper, *Living Dangerously*, that Cooper was extremely budget-conscious. In August of 1932, Cooper sent a letter to RKO president B. B. Kahane assuring him that he was "fighting costs on this picture," cutting out any "extraneous trick shots" and reducing the number of bit players (p224). It is probable that budget was chief in Cooper's mind when he ordered work stopped on a scene in which Kong battles three

triceratopses in an asphalt pit, wounding or killing them. The scene doesn't advance the story in any way, although it did segue into the test reel's *Creation* scene (which was also cut, probably for continuity/pacing) where the last triceratops pursues and kills a sailor. Budgetary constraints are often cited as the primary reason for the spider pit sequence's abandonment, but, as we have seen, the test reel had its own budget, and several photos documenting the set and some of the models survive. No such pictures have turned up documenting the aborted asphalt pit sequence.

Another scene dropped before filming depicted Kong's escape across the rooftops of Manhattan, as he leapt from building to building. It proved simply too difficult to realize, although a test shot survives from this scene and appears in *King Kong: History Of A Movie Icon*.

The second category of cut scenes are the scenes that were filmed as scripted, but then cut by editor Ted Cheesman and Cooper in post-production. Much has been made of

Kong's marvelous editing, and rightly so. It is an exercise in flawless pacing, building its suspense naturally and inexorably and propelling the viewer into a roller-coaster ride

the likes of which have seldom been equaled in cinema. But to get to that point, Cooper cut out sizable chunks of the film, from its initial running time of 125 minutes down to a lean 100 minutes. As was well documented in *The Making Of King Kong*, anything that didn't propel the initial story of Ann's plight and/or Kong's tragic arc was deleted or trimmed. Among the deletions was a *Styracosaurus* (replacing the *Arsinoitherium* from the test reel) that trapped the sailors on the log even as Kong shook them off. The spider pit sequence, of course, was deleted at some point after inclusion into Rose's script, but we'll say more about its deletion-timeline later. Also lost was a scene in which Ann Darrow was threatened by a giant snake as she sat in the treetop. A bit of this scene survives in the finished film; just as the T-Rex emerges from the jungle, Ann is clearly reacting to something below her and off screen. It is not the dinosaur, as she only



A poster advertising the Janus Films re-release of *King Kong*, the first release since 1938 to include the censored scenes.

notices it for the first time seconds afterward. In addition to the effects shots, numerous dialog trims and scene-tightening cuts occurred, but this is often overlooked when compared with the deleted pit monsters and dinosaurs.

The final category of scenes cut from *King Kong* are the censored scenes, removed to appease the Hays Office when the film was re-released to theaters in 1938. The Hays Office was an attempt by Hollywood filmmakers to censor themselves before outside federal intervention could decide the matter for them. Always on guard against the salacious and horrific, the Office ordered many cuts be made to *Kong*. This censorship occurred despite the fact that the film had run in 1933 exactly as Cooper had envisioned it. These shots, comprising the most violent and troublesome scenes in *Kong*, included the brontosaurus killing more sailors (three was fine, but five was apparently

too much); Kong's chewing on natives and grinding them into the mud with his foot; a horrific scene in New York in which Kong pulls a sleeping woman from her bed, realizes it isn't Ann, then drops her to her death far below; and the most notorious scene of all, in which Kong pulls off the tattered remains of Ann's dress and sniffs them curiously.



A Marcel Delgado sketch of a giant spider. First printed in *Famous Monsters of Filmland*.

These scenes, once cut, were discarded with little thought to preservation, and were thought lost for decades. When even a search of RKO's vaults in the '50s proved fruitless, fans resigned themselves to the loss of this tantalizing footage. It was not until the late '60s that the scenes were recovered, although it was gradually

realized that British and other European prints hadn't been censored as the American prints were, and the scenes had survived all along in the foreign market. On both sides of the Atlantic, 16mm prints of the censored scenes were struck from these 35mm originals (*Kong* was shot on 35mm film),

and enterprising collectors were able to splice the scenes back into their own copies of the film, although the 16mm format was inferior in quality to the 35mm. When Janus Films reissued *Kong* to theaters in the early 70s, their print also utilized 16mm duplicates to create an edit approximating Cooper's original version, as they didn't have ready access to a 35mm source.

Here is where confusion arises. In the years since the censored footage circulated among fans in 16mm format, rumors occasionally spread that the "censored" spider pit scene has turned up in some collector's possession. As recently as 2005 a seller on Amazon.com claimed to have the footage in 16mm, and was prepared to sell to the highest bidder. These claims are highly improbable, and the reader will realize this once he recognizes the fine but important distinction between the deleted and censored scenes. Cooper deleted the spider pit sequence before the film was released, and nobody has seen this footage since. If it ever turns up, it will be in the original 35mm format. The censored scenes were cut years after *Kong's* initial release, but still existed in obscurity and in foreign prints, and thus survived until their duplication onto 16mm. It was always much more likely the censored scenes would turn up rather than the spider scene, which nobody has seen since the film's post-production stage.

We are still left with the obvious question of why and when the spider pit scene was cut, which we skirted around earlier. To address this issue, it now becomes necessary to move on from what we know and can reasonably deduce, to what has been said by the film's primary player, Merian C. Cooper.



Merian C. Cooper

Unfortunately, his remarks have fanned the flames of controversy rather than smothering them, but perhaps the controversy is not as provocative as it seems. The real question may not be whether the scene existed at all, but where and when Cooper decided to cut it.

## VII.

One would think that in Merian C. Cooper we would have the final authority on the subject of the spider pit sequence. Cooper closely supervised every aspect of *Kong*, and if anyone knew the ultimate fate of the footage, it would be him. Indeed, he had much to say on the subject, most of it tantalizing, little of it clarifying.

**FANTASTIC FILM SETS NEW PACE**

Amazing Processes Used in Making "King Kong"

Gigantic Ape, Thirty Feet High, is Chief Actor

Ingenuous Tricks Employed to Gain Effects

BY JOHN SCOTT  
They called D. W. Griffith and his cameramen mad when these two film pioneers first produced a ghost on the screen and they called the same man introduced the close-up. What was the great mistake they made when it comes to "King Kong," Marlon C. Cooper's film for R.-K.-O., which, in addition to other startling things, will reveal a thirty-foot ape running amuck in New York City, building automobiles at the Stock Exchange Building and making his last stand against civilization atop the tower of the Empire State structure?

There this giant anthropoid, with a fragile young woman in his paw, falls a distance of one thousand feet which remarkably pump bullets into its body. In a finale, but insignificant gesture, it plucks a plane out of the air and burrs it into the street far below.

**WORKING IN SECRET**  
Cooper, who also produced "Chang" and "Gwen," has been working secretly on "King Kong" for two and one-half years. He had had the cinema industry by the ears during this time, revealing nothing of his brain child, but quietly working to build his original idea what beauty can dominate all brute power.

Here, for the first time, the creature who had led the frightful side, tells about "King Kong."  
"Only a man with the spiritual courage of his convictions would attempt a production such as this," he said, "is this, I don't know what will happen—it may mean my demise from the movie business."

The story of the unusual film is this: A movie trailer travels to a far-off place in an attempt to film a monstrous ape. A black village is found surrounded by a huge wall, built to keep away the frightful creature. The adventurers find only that the animal has been driven into a jungle where they discover other prehistoric creatures. They fight to the death between a man and an ape. The combined weight estimated at 100 tons and eventually only a few of the humans escape. They subsequently capture the ape and bring it to New York, where it runs amuck, searching for Fay Wray, in whom it has recognized beauty for the first time.

**SEMPRESSING TECHNIQUE**  
"We have gone farther in process technique than was ever before possible," Cooper declares. "A few years ago the story of 'King Kong' would have been impossible filming—it might have been reproduced in words."

"Several of the scenes required as many as seven processes, although the average was two or three (it is believed that not more than two processes have been used on one piece of film heretofore). Out scenes requiring seven processes used a Williams shot on top of a Dunning shot that time this has been done.) a miniature projection in one extreme, an enlarged projection in another, a normal projection of animated objects as well as a projection of running water and the interposition of a section of the ape's body. Glass shots were used in only one scene."

Cooper said that of the 5700 feet of film shot there for only 400 in dialogue. The action takes the place of words in the most important scenes, although, of course, music will run as a background theme.

The fight between the ape and



Another Monster Loosed by Cinema

Whenever the human actors fail to intrigue audiences, the film technicians can always reach into their bag of tricks and produce a fantastic character designed to thrill or amuse them. That's what they have done in "King Kong," a gigantic prehistoric ape who is made so powerful and crafty that he almost destroys our prized civilization with his ruffian might. He is pictured here by Artista Maria Larraingis and Byron Corbitt in a devastating scene before the New York Stock Exchange.

duced an unearthly bull-like groan. Cooper insists that he has not made a horror picture. In fact he threw away one of his best scenes (in which men are hurled into an abyss alive with prehistoric spiders) in order to keep the adventure and fantasy notes dominant. The producer says he has not wasted a nickel on the film although

Left: Article about King Kong's production in the LA Times (January 15th, 1933). Above: Detail from the article.

It should have been a simple answer. After all, the reason for its deletion is clear-cut. According to *The Making Of King Kong*, the spider pit scene was but one of many sequences trimmed or entirely deleted from the film prior to release.

Ultimately, the scene was and is extraneous to the story, and that alone was good reason to cut it. Showman that he was, however, Cooper elaborated on the story of its deletion over the years, to the point that a legend now surrounds the missing spider pit sequence, a legend to rival any other cinematic El Dorado. The only way Cooper could have topped himself would have been to completely deny filming the sequence at all, which he also did. Or did he?

Though his story may be unreliable and exaggerated, he is still the primary source for all things *Kong*, and we must take into account his statements on the subject. Therefore, we will take a chronological look at how his story changed, weighing its merits at each point in time, and perhaps we can fit it into the framework we are building to prove the scene's existence.

Perhaps the first public mention of the spider pit sequence occurred before the film's release. In the January 15th, 1933 edition of the *LA Times*, there is an article about Cooper's upcoming extravaganza. More a promotional piece than hard news, it is still fascinating reading for its effects-centered approach and for a brief mention of the spider pit near the end:

"Cooper insists that he has not made a horror picture. In fact he threw away one of his best scenes (in which men are hurled into an abyss alive with prehistoric spiders) in order to keep the adventure and fantasy notes dominant."

The interesting thing to note here is that there is no direct quote from Cooper on the matter. He is quoted elsewhere in the article, but at this point the spider pit is mentioned only in passing. Of course, Cooper did manage to get in that this

was “one of his best scenes,” a declaration he would make, in different circumstances, decades later. Also note that the reason stated here for the scene’s deletion was that its horrific overtones contrasted with the overall adventure/fantasy feel of the film. We made that point at the beginning of this article, but it is also a restatement of the basic premise: the spider pit was deleted because it didn’t suit the story. Finally, we must emphasize the date of the article, January 15th. This will become important shortly, when we see Cooper beginning to craft his dramatic version of the spider pit’s deletion.

*King Kong* was released on March 2, 1933, smashing box office records. Of course, the spider pit sequence was cut by then. The only mention of it appeared in odd bits and pieces of *Kong’s* promotional material (which we’ll deal with in a later chapter) and in the movie novelization, released that prior winter. The scene as written in the novel must have raised quite a few eyebrows among fans, but was probably written off as fantasy, an author’s over-exuberance. It would be more than three decades before evidence to the contrary surfaced.

By the early 1960s, *Kong* had cemented its place as the grandfather of all big monster movies. With periodic re-releases of the film, newer generations continued to fall under its sway, and *King Kong* slowly became regarded as an American classic. As such, critics and movie historians began paying closer scrutiny to the film and its makers. Cooper, in the twilight of his life, was more than willing to talk about his past achievements with interviewers and fans. His loquacity, combining with fans’ growing interest in all things



Another sketch of the sequence, showing the sailors menaced by a spider with crablike claws.

*Kong*, resulted in a renewed focus on the lost spider pit sequence that continues to inspire debate to this day.

Samuel A. Peebles, who became recognized in later years for his westerns, science fiction and screenplays, came to the spider pit controversy via a different route: he happened to own a copy of the final *Kong* script, which included the scene. He interviewed Cooper in 1961 for an article later published in *Films In Review*. As Peebles explained in the article, Cooper used to have the scripts for his movies bound and given away as Christmas gifts to friends and coworkers. It is unclear how Peebles obtained one, but he went on to describe an interesting aspect of all the bound *Kong* scripts:

“In the copy I own, every shot that was filmed is marked SHOT—and it is annotated by Cooper himself.”

Peeples tells his readers that pages 62 and 63 of the script describe the log sequence and the men falling into the chasm. Every scene is marked SHOT, in Cooper’s own hand. But when the spider pit sequence begins,

“...the half of page 64 with the insects is not so marked, which, judging from the rest of the shooting script, implies that it was *never actually filmed*.”

Peeples’s logic is reasonable. In fact, it’s the cornerstone argument used by those who doubt the spider scene’s existence. But it raises some very serious questions. As we already noted, the spider pit sequence was described in *The Making Of King Kong*

(later revised as *Spawn of Skull Island*) as being but one scene in the original test reel. Remember, this test reel was created before the final script was written—and we have shown there is good cause to believe Ruth Rose simply transcribed the test reel scenes into the yet-to-be-filmed draft she was writing. Therefore, it makes no sense that all the scenes

were marked SHOT except for the spider pit, since it was one of the first scenes created for the film. There’s no telling what Cooper had in mind as he wrote notes to himself on his copy of the script; perhaps he left the spider pit scene unmarked because he was already planning to delete it, while the surrounding scenes were still in consideration.

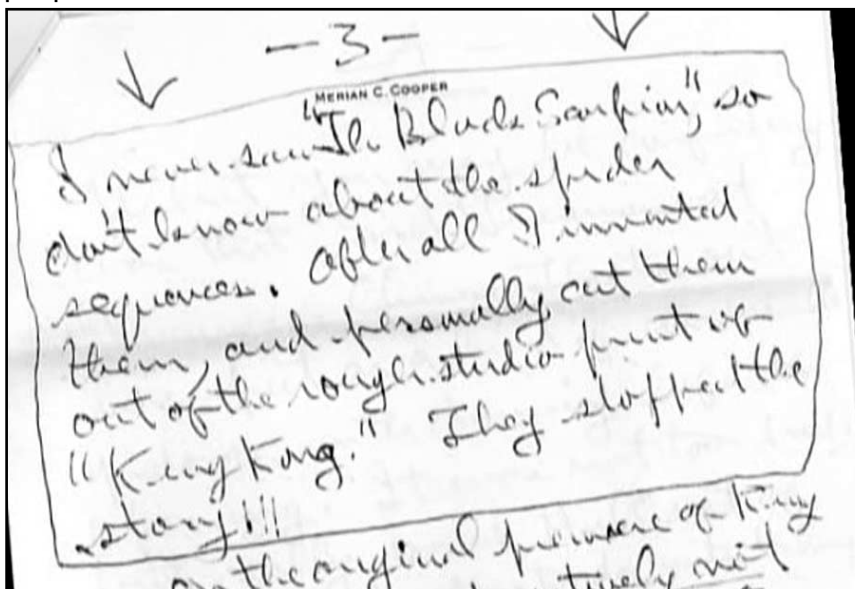
If Peeples had stopped there, we’d still have a confusing time of it. But immediately after solving the spider pit mystery, he gives us this:

“I have seen a flash-cut at the bottom of the ravine of creatures who spring up on many legs and scurry towards camera, but this scene is not tied into the men who have fallen down. I have been told by a hundred people that they have seen the spiders eating

the men. In ‘61 I asked Merian C. Cooper about this; he said that the sequence was never filmed, as the front office at RKO was certain it would be censored.”

Imagine! In one paragraph he states that the spider pit scene wasn’t filmed since it was never marked SHOT, then in the very next paragraph he claims to have seen a “flash-cut” of many-legged creatures rushing towards the camera.

DVD Screencap (from the documentary on the 1933 Kong DVD) of a Cooper letter discussing the spider pit sequence.



What a “flash-cut” means in this context, or how it would relate to Kong if not tied to the fallen sailors, is never explained.

Also curious is Cooper’s assertion that the scene was abandoned before it was filmed, as RKO feared censorship. How RKO could fear a scene’s reaction before it was even filmed is unclear, although certainly possible in the early days of cinema.

Although Peeples was a well-respected writer, and his word shouldn’t be doubted simply because we may disagree with his conclusions, it must be pointed out that Cooper is not directly quoted in the entire article. Could it be possible that Peeples merely misunderstood the matter, and that Cooper was actually saying the scene was filmed but never included in an edit of the film, as RKO was sure it would be censored? It is unknown if Peeples knew about the test reel and its role in getting *Kong* made, or that it was the first portion of the film to be completed.

This point is not raised in a desperate grasping of straws. Cooper was genuinely ambiguous on the matter, as we can see in the following quote:

“Actually, I included everything I did in that test reel in the final cut except a shot that everybody asks me, who made me take it out of the picture. That’s where the men hit the bottom of the canyon and then—it’s not in the picture, never was—then the spiders got ‘em ... but it stopped the story and I cut it out. I’m a very ruthless editor, and so is every other good director and producer.” - Hanson, John Stag. “The Man Who Killed King Kong.” *Movies International*. Volume 1 Number 3 (1966): 20-26, 65.

One can take this quote both ways. Did Cooper abandon the scene at the conceptual stage, as some argue, or did he intend to say that he cut the scene from the film’s final edit? It should also be pointed out that Cooper’s quote is factually inaccurate; as Goldner and Turner state, scenes of the *Arsinoitherium* and a giant snake were also removed sometime between the test reel’s debut and *Kong*’s final cut.

Some of Cooper’s critics go so far as to suggest he didn’t film the scene at all, but loved to imply that he did, as it made a good story. One can imagine him doing this in interviews intended for an adoring public, but what about in private? Did Cooper stick to his story when off the record?

He did, more or less. When looking for a private mention of the spider pit, one need go no farther than the 2005 DVD release of *King Kong*. The mini-documentary “The Mystery Of The Lost Spider Pit Sequence” on the extras disc features a photograph of a letter Cooper wrote on his own stationery. This time there is no ambiguity in his explanation:

“I never saw “The Black Scorpion,” so don’t know about the spider sequences. After all, I invented them, and personally cut them out of the rough studio print of “King Kong”. They stopped the story!!!”

Cooper’s letter isn’t dated, and the circumstances surrounding its writing are unknown, but his explanation is short and to the point. Of interest is his claim to have personally cut the sequence out of the rough studio print. Does he mean he edited it himself, or did editor Ted Cheesman do it under his direction? Either way, the result was the same. We can also infer that the footage survived at

least until this stage of production. A “rough studio print” is the preliminary edit of a movie, often before scoring, sound or special effects are added. It is often at this stage that scenes that played well on paper are discovered to be lacking or contrasting to the overall tone, and are deleted. When Cooper stated earlier that “it’s not in the picture, never was,” he might only have meant the spider scene was never included in the final theatrical edit.

It’s a common occurrence in filmmaking: an interesting but minor scene is edited out of a film because it disrupts the pacing and/or tone. It’s happened since the dawn of cinema. How then did the spider pit become one of the most controversial and sought-after scenes in Hollywood history? Once again, the blame can be laid at Cooper’s door, only this time his words came to us well after his death.



Cooper noted this famous publicity photo was faked by the RKO advertising department. The Styracosaurus (right) must have been in the movie at some point, or else why add him into the photo? Note Driscoll’s presence in the lead, also faked.

*David O. Selznick’s Hollywood*, by Ronald Haver, published in 1980, was an enormous success, detailing the life and triumphs of one of Hollywood’s most influential producers. The book recounted Selznick’s rise to power, including his tenure at RKO as Head of Production. *King Kong* was an

important early success for Selznick, and much space is devoted to the story of its making. Of course, the story of *Kong* isn’t complete without mentioning Cooper’s substantial role in developing it.

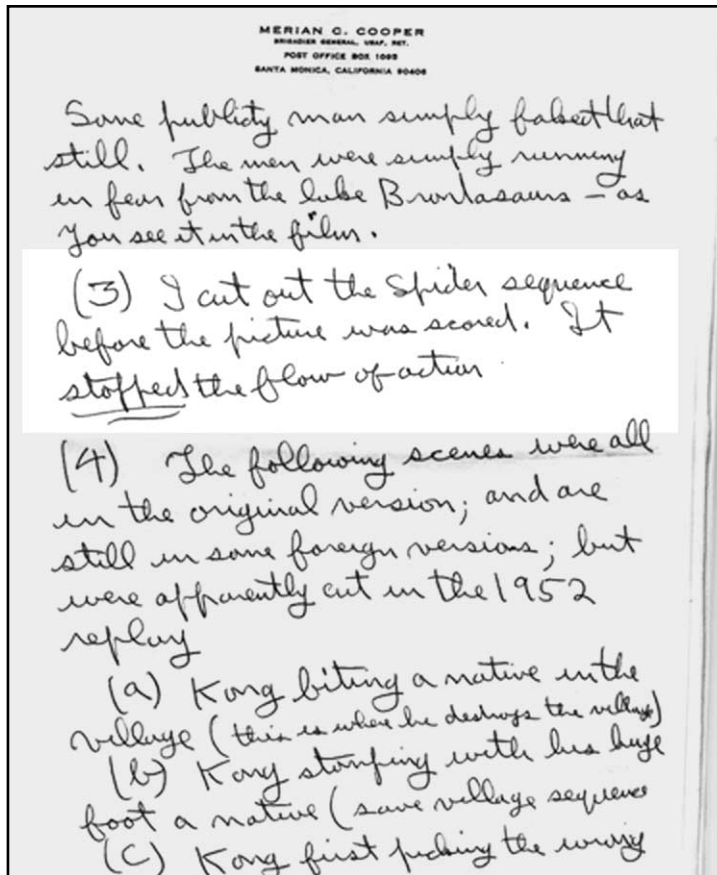
Haver acquired cassette tapes of interviews journalist Kevin Brownlow conducted with Cooper, for which Brownlow is thanked in the credits. This source material was also used in Mark Cotta Vaz’s

biography, *Living Dangerously: The Adventures Of Merian C. Cooper*. One gets the feeling Cooper enjoyed recounting the story of his most celebrated creation, as his stories were never

juicier—or more suspect. For example, on page 104 Haver relates how Willis O'Brien developed gangrene in his hand while in the midst of animating scenes from *Kong*, and Cooper was “forced to work on much of the animation himself.” This is highly improbable, of course, akin to a patron taking over the painting of a portrait if his artist gets sick.

Cooper's lasting contribution to the spider pit controversy was yet to come. One page 113 he told the following story, which can only be quoted in full:

“In the last week of January, Cooper told Selznick that the film was ready for preview. Selznick, who had seen only bits and pieces of it, was as eager as everyone else in the studio to see what Cooper had wrought, and he immediately set up a preview in San Bernardino, hurrying back from a planned weekend in the mountains. At the preview, the picture played exactly as Cooper thought it would, with one exception. As Kong shook his pursuers off the log and into the chasm below, they were set upon by huge, slimy insects



Letter from Cooper to Jack Polito, a young Kong fan. Besides the spider pit scene, Cooper talks about the log/styracosaurus photo (see opposite page) and lists the scenes censored for later releases.

and snakes and graphically eaten alive. The screaming on screen was matched, in this case, by the screaming of the audience in the packed theater, a great many of whom left; those who stayed kept up a buzz of conversation for the next few minutes, making it difficult to keep up with the continuing story. “It stopped the picture cold,” said Cooper, “so the next day at the studio, I took it out myself. O'Brien was heartbroken; he thought it was the best work he'd done, and it was, but it worked against the picture, so out it came.”

And there you have it. Over the years the story mutated, to the point that *Newsweek* stated in its December 5, 2005 issue that “the scene made several people barf.” This cannot be blamed on Cooper, who died decades before, of course, but it illustrates how easily legends take root and become as established as fact.

We can point out one error immediately—as we noted earlier, the spider pit scene was already cut by the time of the January 15th edition of the *LA Times*. Of course, we can't fault Cooper for getting his timeline wrong decades after the

fact. But it does call his story into question, especially since there is no other corroboration of this preview screening. Cooper's version is exciting and provocative, but due to the unreliability of his story over the years, a healthy skepticism is necessary when evaluating it. This is not to say that Cooper was deliberately lying. Although he was prone to exaggeration, by all accounts Cooper was a very moral man with a strict code of honor. And it is hard to imagine him making up specific details such as Selznick organizing a preview in San Bernardino.

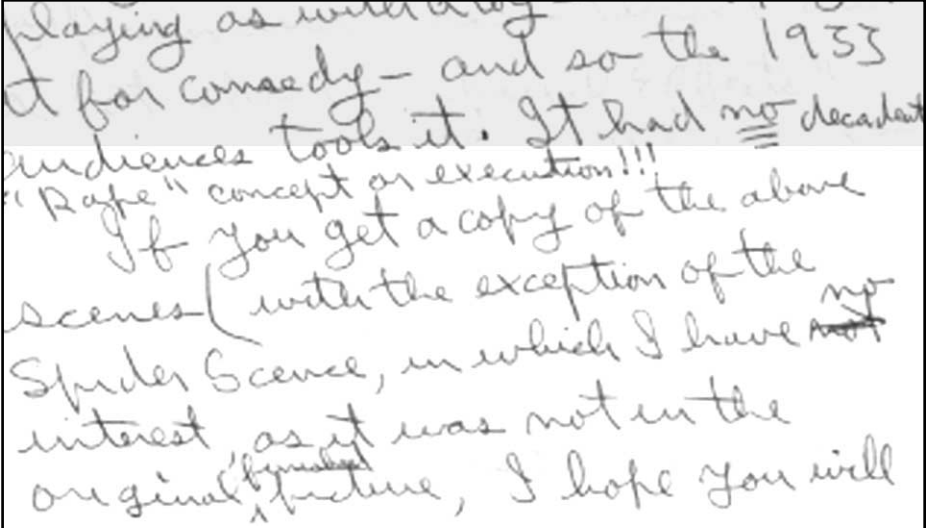
No, it was more Cooper's style to sell his creations with a lot of hyperbole and some modicum in fact. Although there is little evidence of such a spectacular public preview screening, it is entirely possible that Cooper screened a rough cut of the film for studio insiders and coworkers. He might have gauged the public reaction to the spider pit by the reactions of RKO executives who, judging by movie studio executives of any time and place, were probably a conservative and timid bunch. Perhaps the real reaction he got merged over time with the possible public reaction he imagined, becoming one in his mind. To someone who loved a good story, the imagined reaction would have been irresistible. Of course, this is only a theory, completely unsupported by facts.

Some fans' imaginations were captivated by the latter part of Cooper's quote. Cooper stated

that not only was O'Brien heartbroken at the spider pit's deletion, O'Brien believed it was his best work. How that must have tantalized fans of O'Brien's artistry! Unfortunately, no one else has verified this part of Cooper's tale either, so we must take it as it is. Since the publishing of *David O. Selznick's Hollywood*, this story has become part of spider pit lore, repeated as recently as 2005 by one of the participants in Kong's DVD documentary.

Besides Cooper's extraordinary story, Haver's book also reprinted an actual photograph from the spider pit sequence, perhaps the first time it saw print in a mainstream publication. The photo was published previously in Forrest J. Ackerman's *Famous Monsters of Filmland*, an influential

**Excerpt from Cooper's letter to Polito, where he clearly differentiates the censored scenes from the deleted spider pit sequence. It also demonstrates he did not have any of the footage himself, and that he clearly didn't burn any of it.**



playing as with a  
it for comedy - and so the 1933  
audiences took it. It had no deleted  
"Rape" concept or execution!!!  
If you get a copy of the above  
scenes (with the exception of the  
Spider Scene, in which I have ~~not~~ <sup>no</sup>  
interest, as it was not in the  
original <sup>finished</sup> picture, I hope you will

magazine devoted to monsters and horror films. Here was visual proof at last that at least some models and a set had been constructed for the sequence, belying the theory that the spider pit had been cut in the scripting stage. The photo showed a large, hairy spider poised to rush the viewer, clambering over the broken log Kong dropped in the previous scene. A giant lizard lurks off to the side. The positioning of the models seems to indicate the photo was some sort of publicity still or a lighting test, instead of a specific shot from the sequence, but this is merely a guess.

The photo, appearing in the March, 1964 issue of *FMoF*, reignited interest in the spider pit among fans, and it seemed to be the subject Cooper was asked about most often. Don Glut, a prolific author (*The Empire Strikes Back*; *Dinosaurs: The Encyclopedia*) and filmmaker, told this author that he met Cooper briefly on the street in the 60s and asked him about the spider pit, receiving Cooper's standard reply that he cut it because the scene stopped the story.

Other fans received much more of a response. Jack Polito, a young *Kong* fan, wrote to Cooper asking all sorts of questions about the movie. Cooper graciously answered each

MERIAN C. COOPER  
BRIGADIER GENERAL, USAF, RET.  
POST OFFICE BOX 1095  
SANTA MONICA, CALIFORNIA 90406

Oct 23, 1966

Jack, my friend:

First I wish to thank you for the lost sequences — I cut them into my 16MM print. Thanks you — Now to answer your questions on the Spider Scene. I shot this scene for the test reel and it was in the first cut. The picture was running too long so I edited the original <sup>version</sup> down. The Spider sequence took the audiences' attention away from Kong; it stopped the flow of action — Other scenes were also cut before I felt the picture was ready to open in theatres. O'Brien made a number of Spider and log models and other miniatures that did not make the finished picture. The Spider sequence was not one of my favorite scenes. —

The first page of a letter from Cooper to Polito, concerned primarily with the spider pit scene..

- 2 -  
MERIAN C. COOPER  
BRIGADIER GENERAL, USAF, RET.  
POST OFFICE BOX 1095  
SANTA MONICA, CALIFORNIA 90406

Over the years this scene became more famous than it really was - The success of Kong only proves that the cuts I made were apparently right to tell my story and the reason Kong has endured since 1933.

All the scenes I removed were kept at RKO and were there when I left. RKO had a big fire in the 50's and much of their back lot and film library were destroyed - I believe the Kong material was part of what was lost. The Spider sequence was never seen in any theatre; I cut it out before Steiner scored the picture - I do believe I have some Spider and War Eagles material back

one, and struck up a correspondence with Polito that eventually led to them meeting in person. Polito kept his letters from Cooper, one of which was quoted from in Vaz's Cooper biography *Living Dangerously*. This letter, dated February 10, 1966, is interesting because Cooper addresses the issue directly, with little of the humbug he used in public:

"I cut out the spider sequence before the movie was scored. It stopped the flow of action."

Cooper went on to detail each of the scenes censored from Kong's later re-release, and professed an interest in obtaining a print of his own with the scenes intact:

"If you get a copy of the above scenes (with the exception of the spider scene, in which I have no interest, as it was not in the original *finished* picture, I hope you will knock off a good print for me—as I would like to cut them into my present new 16mm print."  
*(Emphasis by the authors—Cooper himself forgot the latter parenthesis, and so we have reproduced his error.)*

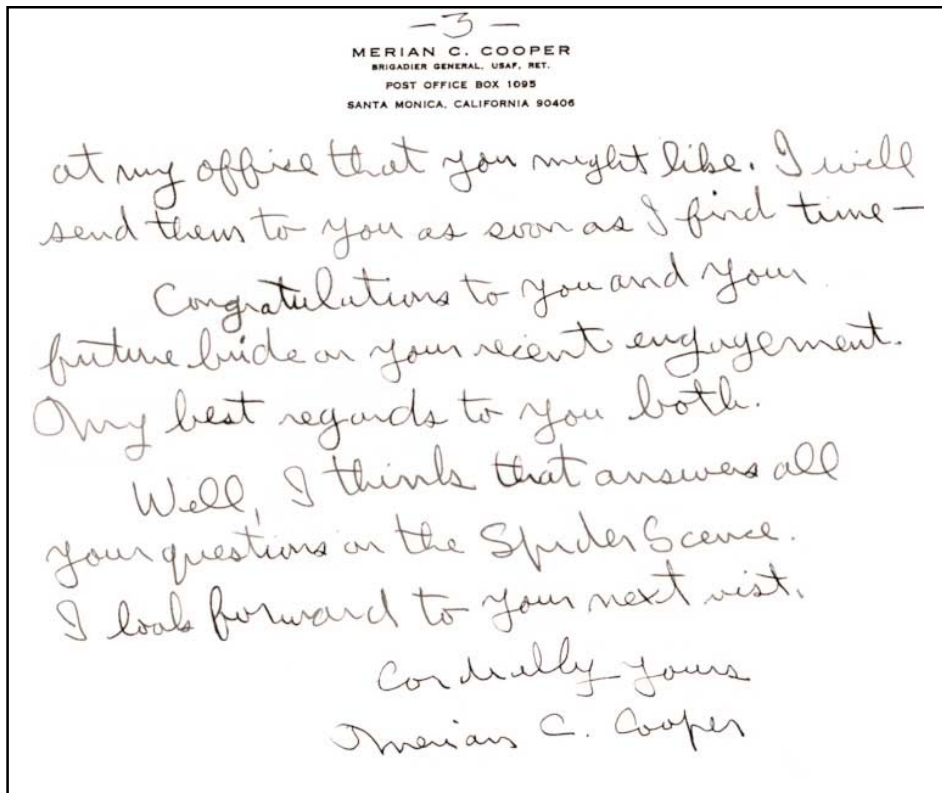
This quote is fascinating in that Cooper clarified "original picture" with the word "finished" (inserted as an afterthought between the two words), meaning that it was cut from the final released film, but was included in some early work print. It also

The second page; here Cooper explicitly says he cut the scene out of the rough cut before Steiner scored the film.

indicates that Cooper didn't have the spider pit footage in his possession, or indeed any of the censored scenes. These were presumably still held in an RKO vault somewhere, if at all.

Later in the letter, Cooper offered to send Polito an autographed copy of the *Films In Review* issue featuring the Peeples article. He cautions that while the article "has a few minor errors? and many omissions, it is more factual than most of this kind of writing." To know that Cooper himself found fault with the accuracy of the Peeples article is interesting; unfortunately, he doesn't specify which is fact and which is fiction. Given that in the same letter he refers to the spider pit as an actual deleted scene, not just a legend, Cooper's probably talking about either the "flash cut" or the pre-emptive censoring of the scene to appease RKO.

Recently, Polito unearthed another letter from Cooper, and began selling facsimiles of it on ebay. This letter is possibly even more interesting than the first letter, as Cooper goes into an extended discussion of the scene. The authors obtained a scan from Mr. Polito, and verified its authenticity with the curator of Cooper's estate, James D'Arc of Brigham Young University. This letter, dated October 23, 1966, is clearly a sequel to the earlier letter. Cooper began by thanking Polito for sending him the



The third page of Cooper's letter to Polito.

censored scenes in 16mm format. Then he went on to clarify his decision to cut the scene:

"...now to answer your questions on the spider scene. I shot this scene for the test reel and it was in the first cut. The picture was running too long so I edited the original down. The spider sequence took the audience's attention away from Kong; it stopped the flow of action—other scenes were also cut before I felt the picture was ready to open in theatres. O'Brien made a

number of Spider and bug models and other miniatures that did not make the finished picture. The spider sequence was not one of my favorite scenes.”

“Over the years this scene became more famous than it really was...

“All the scenes I removed were kept at RKO and were there when I left. RKO had a big fire in the 50’s and much of their back lot and film library was destroyed... The spider sequence was never seen in any theatre; I cut it out before Steiner scored the picture...”

Cooper then offered to send Polito some “spider and *War Eagles* material” when he found the time. *War Eagles* was an abandoned project featuring more of O’Brien’s masterful work—an article in itself.

After pausing to savor the thought of this amazing offhand promise, we can draw a few conclusions. First, Cooper’s story follows closely the story we’ve laid out: the scene was included in the test reel, it was among the first scenes created for *Kong*, and was included in a preliminary edit of the film. The scene, among others, was removed to shorten the film’s length. What’s remarkable is the admission that a number of models were created, and that the spider sequence was not a favorite of Cooper’s. Of course, he never exactly praised the spider scene, beyond saying it was O’Brien’s best work, but perhaps he grew tired of the attention it received over the years and was trying to “put it in its place.”

We can verify one point at least: Cooper edited the extraneous scenes out of the film before it was given to Max Steiner to score. Although it wasn’t spelled out as clearly (in terms of the spider pit), *The Making Of King Kong* agrees with

this timeline. We also have independent confirmation, revealed by Michael Pellerin in an interview with [AintItCoolNews.com](http://AintItCoolNews.com):

“Yeah. From my evidence, from the little detective journey we went on... You’re not going to find (the spider pit scene). It’s just not going to be found. The reason is, that we discovered very carefully from all the evidence, (Max) Steiner never scored it. Steiner never, ever scored it. That means it never even made it to the scoring stages, meaning it never would have really made it anywhere, you know what I mean?”

“It may have been, it MAY have been... MAY, and this is a wild shot, in a test screen for the studio only before the score was put in. Maybe. But then, there would have only been one print of it, (one) contact print of that, and (Merian C.) Cooper was pretty legendary for when he cut something out, he destroyed it so nothing could be done with it. So, the odds that that one print of it exists...”

Michael Pellerin worked with Peter Jackson in creating the DVD editions of Jackson’s films. This interview appeared online during the publicity assault for Jackson’s 2005 remake of *King Kong*, describing the efforts that went into recreating the spider pit scene for the 1933 movie’s DVD release. Pellerin is a bit more pessimistic than necessary, but his discovery fits the facts: Steiner scored only the final edit of the film, as presented to him by Cooper. This makes sense, since time and money wouldn’t be wasted on adding music to a scene that was going to be cut.

It appears, however, that Steiner *did* see the spider pit scene at some point. Jack Polito, who befriended Steiner late in his life, alleged to these authors that upon asking Steiner about



This spider model went on to appear as a prop (as opposed to an animated role) in movies such as *You'll Find Out*, *Genius At Work*, and *Women of the Prehistoric Planet*. Its first and only animated role was in *The Black Scorpion*. This photo was taken at the King Kong 50th Anniversary Celebration in Hollywood, CA, in 1983.

the sequence, the composer told him that he was surprised that the spider and mountain scenes had been cut from the early version he was shown (“mountain scene” refers to a deleted scene of Kong racing down the mountainside in pursuit of the fleeing Driscoll and Ann).

Pellerin’s assertion that Cooper was legendary for destroying the deleted footage from his movies is just that—a legend. It has been said that Cooper and Schoedsack did destroy the extra footage from an earlier film, *Chang*, to prevent studio interference, but this was the only time they were known to have done so. Over the years the spider pit

legend and the pair’s reputation for burning film merged, until it became another element of spider pit lore. There is no evidence that Cooper burned the spider pit sequence, nor is it likely he did so. The earlier films were entirely the property and creation of Cooper and Schoedsack, even if they raised their startup money from outside sources. The *Kong* test reel was created with RKO money and resources, and the studio could keep or discard the outtakes as they chose. Unfortunately, in those days studios rarely held on to outtakes; anything left on the cutting room floor was deemed worthless and thoroughly disposed of.

It’s no small irony that while many fans believe Cooper deliberately burned the spider pit sequence, Cooper himself believed the footage perished in a studio fire; whether by design or by accident, the result was the same.

## VIII.

We’ve heard extensively from Cooper. Was there anybody else connected with the original production of *King Kong* that specifically mentioned the spider pit? Actually, there was.

Bert Willis, part of O’Brien’s animation team on *Kong*, finally gave an interview on the subject to *Cinemagic* in 1985.

His account is so curious and sensational that one wonders what to make of it:

Bert Willis, who functioned as OBie's animation cameraman, vividly recalled the sequence. "The bottom of the ravine was a miniature set about four feet wide, built in plaster, with a few tiny projection screens behind the log. I don't know *how* many days we spent on that set, animating those terrible animals! Spiders, snakes, horrible things! The Pennsylvania Board of Censors demanded that the scenes be taken out. The Board was aimed at women and children, and these things were just too horrible to show."

The octopus-insect was the most loathsome creature to deal with. Delgado built it in miniature based on O'Brien's design. According to Bert Willis, "That thing made everyone a little nervous. Obie wanted *real* snakes for the close-ups. So, a lady was brought in with a cage full of them. I must say she knew how to handle them... I remember we filmed stuntmen screaming as the snakes wrapped around their bodies. Fortunately, no one was hurt. The censors ordered those scenes removed, too.

Willis's reference to the Pennsylvania Board of Censors is interesting, given Peeples's *Films In Review* article in which Cooper claims RKO censored the scene before it was filmed. If RKO truly was nervous about the spider pit sequence's public reception, it was because of organizations like the PA Board of Censors. This organization, and others like it in New York, Kansas, Ohio and elsewhere, wielded great power in the early years of cinema. They had the power to ban outright films that failed to pass their muster, and interfered in the creative process from scripting stage to final edit.

These Censor Boards also kept detailed records of the changes they demanded. With that aim in mind, an inquiry was made in 2006 to discover if the PA Board of Censors had a hand in the deletion of the spider pit scene. If they demanded (and detailed) the censoring of this scene from an early edit of the movie (and not just at the scripting stage), at the least we would have definitive proof the scene once existed on film. Unfortunately, it was discovered that in the years after the Board was disbanded, the records were thrown out en masse, with only a small sampling retained. What remains does prove that it was well within their power to order changes in major Hollywood movies. Between 1931 and 1934 alone, 8,925 films were altered due to the Board's influence.

The tentacled worm from *The Black Scorpion*. Was it originally made for *King Kong*?



What can be said about the rest of Willis's account? His description of the set seems accurate, based on the surviving photos, but what of his depiction of the octopus-insect? Is he saying the snakes were supposed to represent the tentacles of the creature in close-up? There is no mention otherwise of snakes in the script or in the test reel. Willis's story of the snake-wrangler wrapping snakes around screaming stunt-men sounds almost too good to be true. Such effort for only one shot of the test-reel seems suspect, and such a juicy story would surely have been reported in *The Making Of King Kong*, which says nothing at all on the matter.

His description of the model is lurid, and one wishes a photograph of the creature survived. We may be able to make a rough guess of its appearance, however. Over two decades later, O'Brien worked on a movie called *The Black Scorpion* (1957). In one notable scene, two scientists investigate a crack in the earth from which the titular monsters have escaped, and they find a nightmare world of

monstrous scorpions, trapdoor spiders... and giant insects with tentacles. It has been said with much certainty that the spider in this scene (which pursues the little boy) was one of the models recycled from the *Kong* spider pit scene, and some suspect the tentacled insect was also the octopus-insect of the

pit. We can't be sure of this, of course, but logically, how likely is it O'Brien and Delgado would have recourse to make two different tentacled insect-models for two different movies? If the spider was recycled, it is probable the insect was, too. It should be noted that the models were re-skinned for *The Black Scorpion*, so their appearance in that movie does not necessarily indicate what they looked like for *Kong*.



**The trapdoor spider from *The Black Scorpion*. It is probably a spider model from the deleted *Kong* scene, reskinned for the newer film after more than two and a half decades of natural deterioration.**

Before moving on, we must examine a curious news item that appeared amidst the publicity hysteria leading up to Universal's 2005 remake. The story involved Orville Goldner, co-author of *The Making Of King Kong* and a member of O'Brien's miniature effects team.

## "KING KONG"

PARAMOUNT THEATRE

MAY 15th and 16th

FREE TICKETS TO "KING KONG"—For one month's paid in advance subscription, new or renewal, to The Daily Times-News, we will give one FREE guest ticket. —see "KING KONG," one of the greatest pictures ever to be filmed. Everyone should see it. To be shown in Burlington at the Paramount theatre, May 15 and 16. Sign your name and street address below and bring 65c to The News office or give to our carrier on your route, and receive your free ticket. This offer is good only until May 16. If you take advantage of this opportunity you save the regular price at the theatre and delivery of our paper will immediately begin.

NAME .....

STREET .....






What queer world is this? A filthy foot ape carrying off a white girl! And now the crew of the adventurer hurrying to rescue Ann finds monster reptiles from pre-historic ages—monsters believed non-existent for millions of years! Bullets making no dent on the dinosaur's horned hide, they use gas bombs.

Another pre-historic reptile—the Ecolostaurus, a strange Tridiman. Dinosaur and members of the crew fighting their way through jungle and swamps to rescue Ann. The monster overturns their raft, catches men between its teeth and shakes them as a ferrier shrikes rids. Cannons equipment, precious gas bombs and lives are lost.

What chance has pigmy man against the gigantic beast of this nightmare "Skull Island"? An injured Triceratops on one bank. Great, hungry crawling things beneath. On the other bank "King Kong" shaking the tree until the men fall to a hideous death in a precipice. Discoil and Deuhau, escaping to opposite cliffs, watch the tragedy helplessly.

Unable to move from his narrow ledge on the cliff, Deucoll slabs furiously at the great paw of "King Kong," who has discovered him. But his knife makes no more impression than the scratch of a pin on a man's head. A scream from Ann draws "King Kong's" attention to a new enemy.

A promotional comic strip. Note the third panel featuring the denizens of the pit, and a frilled triceratops.

In the article, a comic book collector named Warren Reece spoke out against the spider pit's existence. He owns the leather-bound copy of the *Kong* script given to James Creelman by Merian Cooper. As Peeples did before him, Reece points out the fact that all the scenes but the spider scene are marked SHOT, though the article doesn't spell this out as clearly as Peeples' piece did. The article does not note the objection we have already raised—that the spider pit/test reel scenes were already completed before the rest of the script was written, raising doubts about the significance of Cooper's SHOT notations—but it does go one step further in printing an extraordinary claim by Reece.

Reece, who befriended Goldner in the years before his death in 1985, alleges that Goldner told him quite clearly that the spider pit was never filmed. Reece says, "He was emphatic about it." One questions Reece's certainty immediately, because when Goldner was alive, he never made any such claim. Quite the opposite, in fact. At no point in *TMoKK* does Goldner say the scene wasn't filmed, a forum in which he had ample opportunity to do. In *Spawn of Skull Island*, Doug Turner depicted his father as still looking for the sequence long after *TMoKK* was published. In these latter years, no change of heart was ever made public by father or son, so Reece's claim, second-hand as it is, must be taken with a large grain of salt.

## IX.

The blitzkrieg of merchandise and advertising that accompanies modern movies is no recent innovation. Just as the 2005 remake of *Kong* brought us books and toys and collectibles galore, the 1933 movie did likewise, if on a slightly more modest scale. Delos W. Lovelace wrote a novelization of the Rose script released in the winter of 1932, followed by Walter F Ripperger's loose serialization in *Mystery Magazine* in early 1933. Many magazines and newspapers wrote articles about *Kong*, and there were even *Kong* comic strips to attract the children. Grauman's Chinese

32

Theater printed a program specifically for *Kong's* release, using material provided by RKO. At least some of these promotional items, including the novel and the theater program, included mention of the spider pit.

But how did a scene deleted from the finished film end up in the novel, or in the theater program? To answer that, one must realize that a film's marketing campaign is often begun during, or even before, a film's production. This is to ensure the advertising is approved and finalized by the film's completion, and frequently means any changes made to a film late in its production may not be reflected in some of its advertising. Collectors prize the posters produced when George Lucas's third *Star Wars* film was still known as *Revenge of the Jedi*.

An excellent illustration of this sort of thing can be found in the marketing for the film *ALIEN*. Like *Kong*, *ALIEN* had a controversial scene that was removed from the film's final theatrical edit. Originally, director Ridley Scott planned to reveal the fate of the crewmen

captured by the alien: they were cocooned alive in the creature's nest, slowly transforming into alien eggs. Scott finally jettisoned the scene, but it remained in the film's novelization, and artist H.R. Giger's book of *ALIEN* artwork featured photographs and production designs from the scene. As was the case with *Kong*, the cocoon scene was a part of *ALIEN* from its earliest treatment (when the script was known as *STARBEAST*), falling victim at last to an ultimately necessary editing process. In both films, the directors trimmed sizable amounts of footage from the final

Enlargement of the comic from previous page. The crab was in the scene as filmed. The triceratops never made it past early scripting stage. It was in the novelization, battling Kong and killing a stray sailor.



movie, crafting a superior work of art in the process. The only difference between the films is that *ALIEN's* cocoon sequence was never really lost; after years of fan speculation Scott finally included the scene in a Laserdisc edition of the film, and a subsequent director's cut released theatrically in 2003. *Kong* fans were not so lucky.

Until this updated version of the film was released, curious *ALIEN* fans could find all of the missing material in the

novel, written by Alan Dean Foster. *Kong* fans could do the same, with the sad realization that the missing scenes described in the novel will almost certainly never be found. Upon reading Lovelace's novel, one wonders if the author had access to the test reel, or if he wrote strictly from Rose's script. The action certainly plays a little differently in the novel, but that could be accorded to the whims of the writer.

The action is grim and thrilling: pursued by an enraged triceratops (a leftover from the abandoned asphalt scene; Cooper later changed the beast to a *Styracosaurus* before deleting the scene altogether, returning the impetus of the chase back to the *Brontosaurus*), Ann's rescue party is forced to cross a fallen log bridging a deep ravine. Driscoll crosses first, and Denham points out "the rottenest thing on this foul island," an enormous spider the size of a keg, lurking in the chasm depths. Nearby, a giant

lizard suns itself on a rock, and a "round, crawling object with tentacles like an octopus" soon engages in battle with the spider.

The novel's scenario is actually more frightening than what is described in the test reel. As filmed, the monsters prey on the sailors only after Kong hurled them into the ravine. As Lovelace writes it, the sailors cross the log knowing full well the horror beneath them. The first two sailors fall victim to a lizard and a half dozen giant spiders respectively. This is almost certainly artistic license; O'Brien's team would not have the money or time to create and animate so many spiders, each with eight articulated limbs. The written page serves up horror far more cheaply. As more men fall, spiders and lizards are joined by a "score" of octopus-insects. Interestingly, there is no mention of the giant crab, seen in a surviving production still and the famous spider pit sketch, but the vine-

From the "Eight Wonder" press booklet.

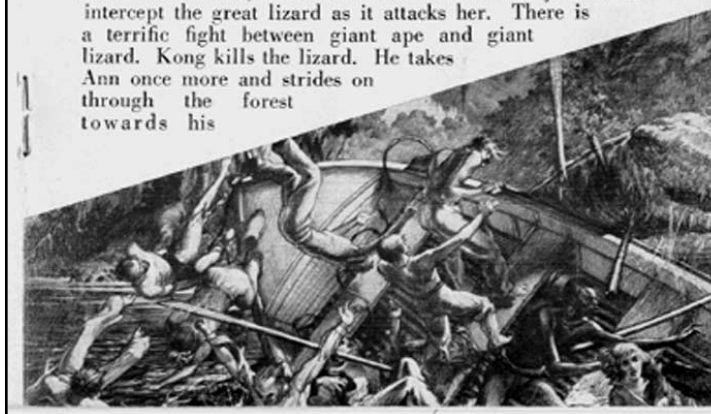
#### THE STORY OF "THE EIGHTH WONDER"

ing a log over a deep ravine. He lifts the log while they are on it, hurling it down. Most of the men fall to a great depth. The ravine is filled with reptile monsters, dwellers in mud and caves. They devour those that come within their reach. Only Driscoll and Denham survive.

Denham, last to cross, leaps back in time. Driscoll, the leader, falls on the far side, but clutches at vines to prevent falling. A hair-raising moment as a giant spider ascends the vine from below to attack Driscoll as he clings to it. The boy pulls himself up into a shallow cave, just below the edge of the ravine and cuts the vine before the spider reaches it.



**M**EANWHILE Ann, left in the tree-top awakes from a faint to find a giant lizard, the *Tryannisorus* of prehistoric times, coming towards her through the forest. She shrieks. Kong, hammering at the edge of the ravine in delight over the fate of his victims below, hears her. He rushes back just in time to intercept the great lizard as it attacks her. There is a terrific fight between giant ape and giant lizard. Kong kills the lizard. He takes Ann once more and strides on through the forest towards his



crawling spider menaces Driscoll as indicated in the final script. In a fitting end to the carnage, Kong drops the log (and the final sailor) onto the swarming monstrosities.

As written, the passage is quite different from the sequence of events described in *The Making Of King Kong*. Part of it was simply the economic realities of animation, part of it the unrestricted freedom of the writer. We'll never know how accurate Lovelace's prose was; we can only deduce that Cooper had not deleted the scene by the time Lovelace began writing. This does narrow the timeline down somewhat, but tells us nothing more.

We do know that a promotional comic strip featuring the log scene was probably the work of an artist working from description and publicity stills alone. The ad cajoles the reader into seeing *Kong* at the Paramount Theater in Burlington, offering free tickets for a one-month subscription to the newspaper. Serializing the basic action, there are four panels, featuring the sailors (described erroneously as the crew of the *Adventurer*) fighting a *Tyrannosaurus*; the *Brontosaurus* attack on the raft; the log scene, with monsters lurking at the bottom of the panel; and Driscoll in his cliffside cave fending off Kong's questing paw. This ad is obviously working from older promotional material, but the fact that it features some of the monsters of the pit is very interesting. It means they must have been working from some sort of official studio promotional material, since the scene would not have been widely known about at the time of the film's release.



**TERROR TRAP!**

Into Kong's amazing realm of unknown terrors ventures a motion picture expedition. Grim nightmares of destruction challenge their courage. Trapped over a dark ravine alive with gigantic insects . . . retreat cut off by a carnivorous dinosaur . . . and Kong shaking them from their bridge like rats . . . to certain death below!

A page from the Grauman Chinese Theater's program celebrating the release of *King Kong*. Note how close the filmed log scene matches the pre-production sketch—down to the trees in the foreground.

The panel depicting the log scene looks suspiciously like the well-known still featuring Driscoll and the sailors trapped between Kong and the Styracosaurus. Kong and the dinosaur (drawn as a Triceratops with a spiked frill) stand in the same basic pose, though the sailors are shown clutching frantically at the log, falling one by one into the clutches of a rather badly-drawn crab and what looks like a crocodile, jaws gaping. Behind them slithers a snake. One wonders what the artist based this comic on. The Triceratops's inclusion indicates the novel, since nothing else surviving today mentions the creature, but the novel doesn't mention the crab. The artist, probably not associated with RKO, obviously had no idea what the "great crawling things of the pit" looked like, and his skill is basic, at best—but how it must have confused anybody anticipating this gruesome moment to find no hint of it in the final film!

Anyone reading the theater program printed for *Kong's* March 24, 1933 premier at Grauman's Chinese Theater might also have felt confused. Illustrated by a dramatic production sketch of the log scene, one could read the following breathless ad copy beneath:

"TERROR TRAP! Into Kong's amazing realm of unknown terrors ventures a motion picture expedition. Grim nightmares of destruction challenge their courage. *Trapped over a dark ravine alive with giant insects... retreat cut off by a carnivorous dinosaur... and Kong shaking them from their bridge like rats... to certain death below!*" (*Emphasis of the author.*)

The Grauman's program was such a spectacular little document of cinematic enthusiasm that it was reprinted and included in the 2005 *King Kong* DVD for everybody to enjoy.

The reference to a ravine "alive with giant insects" is interesting, because it tells us the scene must have been a part of the film and script at the point this advertising was conceived. If it had been deleted prior to filming, the scene would never have made it to the marketing stage. We can infer that either RKO never bothered to correct its own publicity, or that the ad copy was written and approved before Cooper cut the scene out of the film. The latter is certainly possible, given that Cooper admitted cutting the scene just before *Kong* was scored. By then the advertising campaign would have been well underway; perhaps the production and marketing departments let this intriguing detail slip between them.

## X.

It's somewhat ironic that Forrest J Ackerman published the first known photographic evidence of the spider pit scene in *Famous Monsters Of Filmland*. He himself never saw the sequence, since it was deleted from the film before release—but he corresponded with someone who claimed to have seen it:

"Needless to say, I was there on opening day. And immediately sat down and wrote a raving letter to my correspondent J.R. Ayco... I suspect he/she was not the only one of my 127 fan friends that I wrote to in a state of ecstasy, but it was his/her response that has become legendary: 'Wasn't it great when Kong shook the men off the log and they fell into the ravine... and the giant spider got them?'

"What-what-what?! Excuse my ungrammatical response, but I didn't see no spider!"

“Apparently, the legendary spider scene was seen in the Philippines, and not the USA or anywhere else in the world...”  
- *The Essential Monster Movie Guide*, foreword by Forrest J. Ackerman, (Billboard Books, 1999.)

This anecdote is frustratingly short of specifics. Ackerman doesn't say whether he's quoting Ayco exactly. Is he paraphrasing a letter he received decades before, and perhaps misinterpreting it? We can assume this Ayco (Ackerman never knew the first name) wrote from the Philippines, hence Ackerman's mention of the islands. But how could he be sure it only played in the

Philippines? Moreover, if just one of Ackerman's many correspondents claimed to have seen the deleted sequence, does that claim carry any weight at all?

The question raises all sorts of fascinating points. If he was lying or misleading Ackerman, how did Ayco come to know about the scene, so soon after Kong's release in 1933? Did Filipino newspapers carry articles such as

that which we quoted from the January 15th edition of the *LA Times*? Did Ayco have access to advertising material that mentioned the scene? Or did he simply have a copy of the novel at hand? Ayco's quote seems to point to the scene as filmed/scripted, since there is no single solitary spider in the novel beyond the vine-crawler. As Lovelace wrote it, the spiders moved in swarms to attack.

Whatever the true facts in the story, Ayco's response became part of the legend of the spider pit sequence. Decades later, Peter Jackson was quoted in *Kong's* DVD documentary

saying that perhaps one day a search of Asian film archives might turn up a print containing the scene. Michael Pellerin mentioned in his *AintItCoolNews.com* interview that Jackson was toying with the idea of mounting his own Asian search.

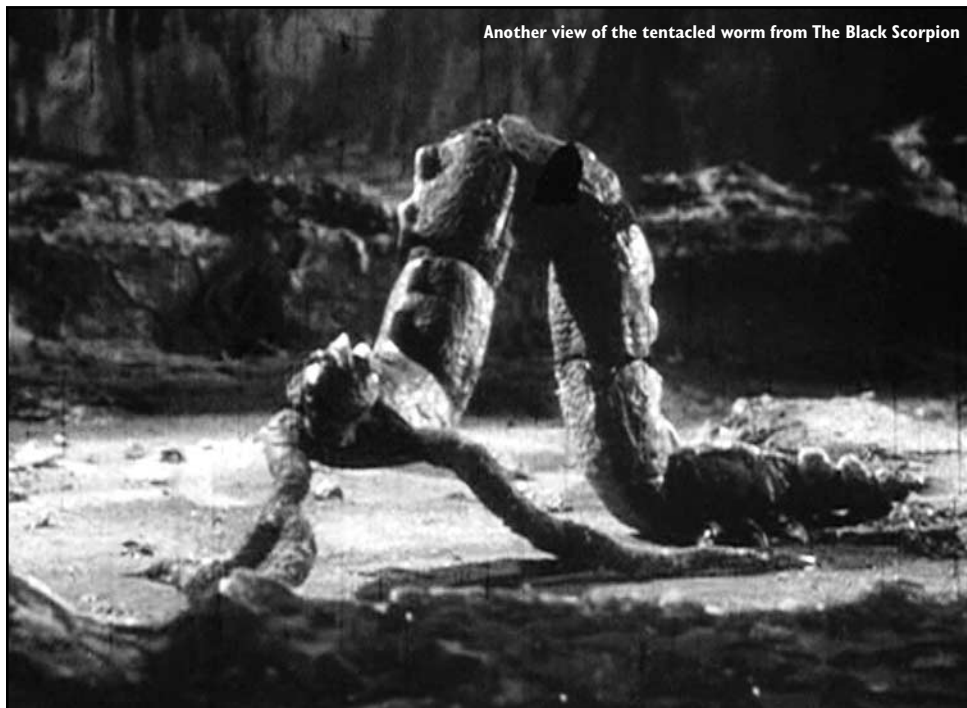
While Jackson's enthusiasm is commendable, Pellerin probably provided the solution to that quest

A pre-production sketch for an unused concept.



elsewhere in his interview. As we noted, Pellerin and Jackson discovered Steiner never scored the spider pit sequence. This virtually ensures that no audience ever saw the footage, since there is little chance that an unscored edit of the film made it over to Asia, or that a scored version containing an unscored sequence was released.

Yet this has not stopped people from claiming otherwise over the years. The most famous witness is Ray Bradbury, the grand master of fantasy and science fiction. Bradbury insisted he saw the spider pit scene in *King Kong* in 1933 in Tucson, Arizona:



“And about that legend-spawning giant-spider sequence: It’s very short. It’s only about four or five seconds, I suppose. It was in the film then—and it’s disappeared since. Some people say it never existed. Well, I don’t think I could remember something that vividly, had it not existed. When Bruce Cabot was in the little cave and Kong’s trying to reach down to get him, reptiles were coming up the other way. The spider was down below, at the bottom of the pit where the other men fell in. I can’t prove it exists—but I know I saw it. The memory is just too vivid. You can’t make that up.” - *Spawn of Skull Island*, foreword by Ray Bradbury, (Luminary Press, 2002.)

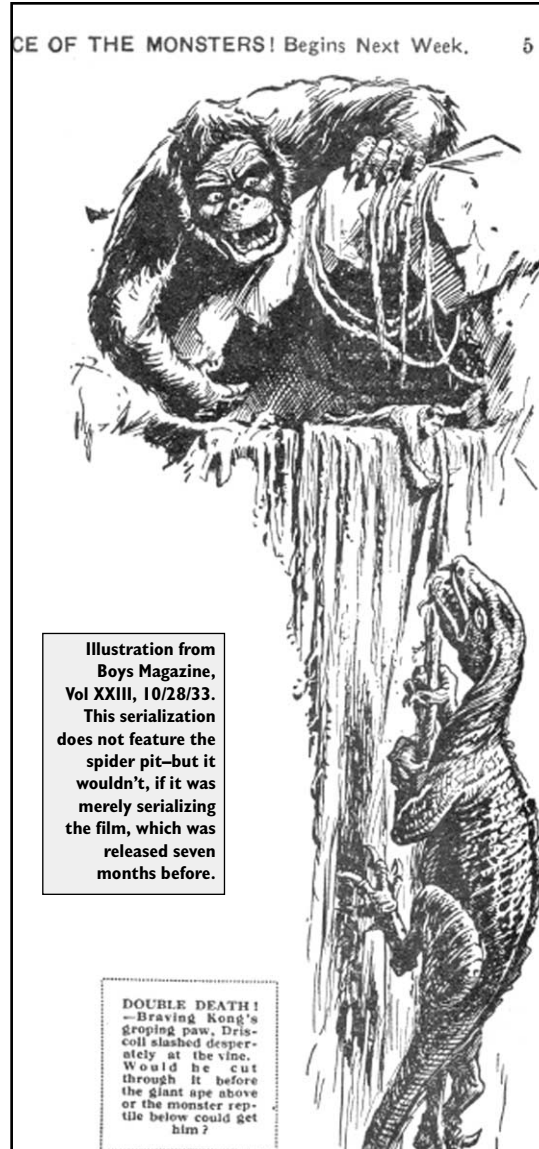
As exciting as it is to think that certain theaters somehow managed to obtain the rough cut of the film, it is doubtful that Bradbury saw *Kong* without music. Alternate versions of films have slipped into the public arena occasionally, but the odds of that happening in this one instance are very low. We must also point out that Bradbury’s own story seems to indicate that he is mistaken. The test reel is described as having a spider menacing Driscoll in his cliffside cave, not a reptile. The Rose script, written after the test reel’s production, also portrays the vine-crawler as a spider. If we take *The Making of King Kong’s* description of the test reel on faith, the creature pursuing Driscoll up the cliff was not a reptile.

Is it possible Bradbury read of the scene, and saw the photograph, years after the

fact? Could he have savored the horror of the spider pit so much that he came to incorporate the false memory of it into his recollection of the film? We may never know, but at least Bradbury can take comfort in the certainty of his memory. The rest of us will have to rely on second-hand descriptions of the scene, at best.

Ray Morton, author of *King Kong: The History Of A Movie Icon*, believes the scene was not filmed, or at least not completed. He dutifully wrote about the scene in his book, treating it as if it had been filmed and then deleted, but after publication, he came to reconsider. In an interview with the authors, he explains: “It (Turner’s book) never specifically states that the sequence was filmed. It certainly intimates that, but never specifically says. All it says is that Cooper said that he took it out because it slowed down the pace, which could be true before or after it was filmed.”

The photos of the ravine set and the models that dwelled within don’t carry any great weight with him, either. “Of course, the sequence certainly could



have been shot—there really is no way to tell for sure. But after seeing that script with the pages crossed out, I find it hard to believe that it was. Obviously, they built the sets and the models and it’s certainly possible that they shot some tests. They may even have done some of the animation. But in the end, I’m confident that they never completed it. If they had, something would have surfaced—if not footage, at least stills—especially of the live action portions.”

Morton also dismisses the rumored Filipino print. “I don’t put much stock in that story because whether the scene was filmed or not it was not included in any print anywhere in the world. That much we do know. RKO did use a lot of the pre-production art in its publicity campaigns, so I imagine that that wonderful drawing of the spider pit scene could have shown up in a lot of places. I think people mistook their memory of the picture for seeing the scene in the film. But it was never in. Of course it was in the novelization and the magazine serial, so it was probably in some of the publicity, too.”

Jim Aupperle is a special effects artist who has lent his skills at stop-motion animation to such films as *Flesh Gordon*, *Planet of the Dinosaurs*, *Beetlejuice*, and *Caveman*, among many others. He agrees that at least some animation was completed on the scene, but cautions that one can't be certain of anything else:



Another photo of the surviving spider model. Yes, it has eight legs; two are hidden-count the shadows.

“I tend to agree... about the spider footage having been filmed, at least some of the sequence anyway. Many of the surviving effects photos from *Kong* are copies of frame blow ups of tests shot on 35mm motion picture film to balance exposure within the shot and I'm assuming that the spider stills are also from test frames photographed with the animation camera. In my experience working on stop motion productions it would be highly unlikely for a sequence to progress this far without at least some animation footage being shot. This is just an opinion based on experience and I personally have no way of knowing if the sequence was ever completed and cut into an early work print during production.” (posted to *kongisking.net* message board, *Film History forum*, May 10, 2006)

As Aupperle's post demonstrates, discussion of the scene still waxes and wanes on the Web. At times the talking points

become impossibly esoteric: does the use of miniature rear-projection, inaugurated for *Kong* but not until after the test reel was completed, indicate that the vine-crawling lizard scene was added at a later date in production? At other times, discussion begins to sound like the iconic

poster from *The X-Files*: I WANT TO BELIEVE.

And that is the power the spider pit sequence holds over fans today. We want to believe that one of our most beloved movies once held a scene so horrifying that it had to be jettisoned to keep the public placated and the story on track. We've had decades to revel in *Kong's* fantasy; now we want to explore an aspect we cannot have: the nightmare lost in time, whose reality can never measure up to our fevered expectations.

## XI.

The reader is left to draw his own conclusions. But consider:

George Turner's *The Making Of King Kong* was very specific about the scenes included in the test reel. This footage was given an estimated tally of 147 shots (revised downward in *Spawn of Skull Island* to 138), a number whose exactness must have some source. There was even a detailed list of the production art presented to RKO with the test reel, of which the spider pit sketch was one. These specific details must have been sourced from somewhere. Remember also that Goldner was a part of O'Brien's special effects team, implying (though this is not sure) he was personally on hand during the filming of the spider pit sequence.

Sam Peebles's article in *Films In Review* seems to explode the myth of the spider scene, but we have shown that according to Goldner/Turner, a primary source, the sequence was filmed before a complete script was even written. It is reasonable to assume Rose wrote her script around the already-filmed test reel footage, and we have given several examples from her script supporting this idea. Most importantly, she wrote of a vine-crawling spider, not a lizard, which indicates the lizard was not a part of the original test reel sequence. (The lizard model's design points to this conclusion: it has only two legs. This surely cannot be an oversight on the filmmakers' part, given the care lavished on the other models' designs. Rather, it suggests a last-minute alternative. Two legs are easier to animate than four, after all, and the model armature itself was perhaps adapted from some other model or created *ad hoc* and on the cheap. If the spider-pit sequence was deleted at a very late stage in production, there cannot have been much time or money left over for the vine-crawler's eleventh-hour



Scene from *You'll Find Out*. Kay Kyser stands before a variety of artifacts, including an *Arsinoitherium* model head (top left), a large spider model (top center), and a small spider model (below the middle head). The spider looks extremely similar to the spider in the photos on pages 3-4, indicating it had not been reskinned by 1940. Note the light abdomens.

replacement.) Note also that Peebles did not directly quote Cooper, making his conclusions ambiguous and leaving room for doubt regarding the director's denial. Cooper, however, can certainly be interpreted as denying he filmed the scene.

Cooper wrote in private correspondence that he filmed and then cut the sequence from the final film. This agrees with Turner's timeline. Jack Polito's recollection of Max Steiner's surprise at the scene's deletion also complements Pellerin's independent discovery that Cooper cut the scene before Steiner scored *Kong*. Although some of Cooper's statements are unclear, there is certainly room to interpret that he cut the scene out of his final edit, and not at the conceptual or pre-production phase. No matter that the details surrounding the scene's deletion changed over the years—one can follow

Cooper's quoted admissions and denials and still find his statements of filming and deleting the scene reasonably consistent.

The opinions of those not directly connected to *Kong's* making can be discounted. They are interesting but irrelevant. Goldner and Willis, who did work on *Kong*, both agree with Cooper's various assertions that the spider pit sequence was completed for the test reel and deleted from the final edit. In his book, Turner even lists the sound effects Murray Spivack produced for the scene: "men landing in mud" and "insects - lizards - spiders."

Both the novel and the Grauman's Chinese Theater program mention the spider pit sequence. Some have taken this as proof the scene was filmed. After all, if the scene was abandoned before the initial test reel, how likely is it to show up in the final script, from which the novel (and presumably the source info for the ad campaign) is derived? The most logical explanation is that by the time Cooper cut the scene it was too late to change the novel or the program's ad copy. Perhaps no one noticed or cared, and this small detail was lost amidst the publicity buildup for the biggest movie event of that year.

In the end, we rely on guesswork. The footage has not turned up in the decades since *Kong's* production. Perhaps Cooper was right to surmise the deleted scenes perished in a studio fire. Perhaps the conclusions raised in these pages are wrong, however good the evidence, and the scene was never filmed—a humbug that went on to become one of the most intriguing mysteries in cinema. We speculate endlessly of the

scene because there is nothing else to be done.

We delve into the obscure details of a 75-year-old film's production to blunt the hard truth that we simply don't have the answer. All we can do is attempt to clear the air, exploring the facts, probabilities and speculation in the hopes that such organization might quell the distortions and misconceptions that confuse today's fans, born long after the facts of the matter receded into the murky mist of Skull Island.

Somewhere in our collective imagination, however, lies an island where dinosaurs tread and a giant ape holds sway over all. And in the dark corners of this fantasy realm, monstrous creatures lurk hungrily in the shadows. The denizens of the spider pit continue to fascinate us, for they will be forever imagined, unseen. Perhaps it is best this way. If the footage ever turns up, it would inevitably disappoint expectations. Like all nightmares, the power to horrify wanes under the harsh scrutiny of daylight. The spider pit sequence will continue to be talked about and searched for as long as *Kong* has an audience, but maybe we should let this nightmare remain lost. The horror and mystery of Merian C. Cooper's aborted nightmare will only grow more powerful, and as the story of *Kong* has taught us, we all need that spark of adventure and fantasy and, yes, fear, in our lives.

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