

TIME TRAVELER CAUGHT ON FILM or JUST A CASE of POOR HEARING?

By J. Allan Danelek

In October of 2010, Irish filmmaker and Charlie Chaplin aficionado George Clarke posted a few seconds of film footage on YouTube that purports to show what appears to be a beefy woman speaking on a cell phone. So what's so unusual about that, you ask?

The footage was shot in 1928.

A cell phone? In 1928? Sounds ridiculous, I know, but Belfast resident Clarke—and a small army of YouTube followers—believe it just might be what it appears to be: a large woman in a flowing back dress and top hat carrying on an animated conversation on her cell phone—or, at least, what appears to be a cell phone. And if it is—and since cell phones were still a ways in the future—the only explanation is that the woman must be from the future. In fact, to travel back in time, she wouldn't be from our time either, but from the far-flung future when things like time travel might be a real possibility. And who wouldn't want to come back to the Roarin' Twenties and check out the greatest comedian of the era, Charlie Chaplin, himself? Loads of fun!

The footage is from the 1928 Charlie Chaplin silent movie *The Circus*. Clarke, a huge Chaplin fan, had purchased the complete DVD set of all of Chaplin's movies, including extra features and outtakes. Apparently, the figure was on one of these outtakes. (it does not appear in the final cut of the movie itself.)

So how did she manage to find herself in Charlie's movie? Back in 1928, most movies were not shot on a Hollywood soundstage but on location or, at least, outdoors. It was cheaper than building sets; the downside, of course, was that anyone could wander into the background of a scene to be inadvertently immortalized on celluloid. Hence our alleged time traveler.

So what are the chances? First, let's look at a frame from the film:



Certainly looks like someone talking on a cell phone, doesn't it? But notice how massive the woman's hands appear? And those shoes! Gotta be a size 17!



Then it occurred to me that the zebra in the foreground (and who puts a saddle on a zebra for heavens sake?) looks like it has been stretched horizontally, making me

wonder if there wasn't some degree of distortion in the film. I also wondered if the oval sign in the background wasn't actually round. Curious, and through the magic of Photoshop, I was able to compress the photo to get more reasonable proportions. The woman still looks big, but at least her hands and shoes appear to be in proportion to the rest of her body.

Of course, this doesn't answer the question of just what is it she is doing. Clearly there were no cell phone towers around in 1928, so it seems very unlikely she's really talking into a cell phone. On the other hand, if she is a time traveler caught unawares, she may not be speaking into a cell phone at all, but into some sort of futuristic and exotic communications device (sort of like the early *Star Trek* communicators Capt. Kirk used to talk to Scotty). Seems if she was a time traveler, however, she could be a little more discreet, but then as she never looks into the camera, it just may be that she didn't realize the cameras were rolling. Oh well, even time travelers can screw up once in a while.

But could it be something else? Some have speculated that it was some sort of hearing device—like an early hearing aid—that she was holding up to her ear. At first this seems unlikely, as hearing aids were generally ponderous things back then that usually involved some sort of ear horn. However, I did come across this little gem that surprised me, both for its high level of technology for the era and because it looks about the size of a modern cell phone.



This is a battery-operated hearing aid from 1925 built by Western Electric. Officially, it was known as the Model 34A "Audiphone" Carbon Hearing Aid, and from the looks of it, it does appear to be about the right size. The case is a little big as far as cell phones go—nearly 8" long and 4" wide—but it could be palmed just as it is in the picture. The problem is that if this is what the woman is using, she's using it wrong. The round part on top is not a speaker but a microphone that one points at a person while listening in on the wire-attached hearing piece. As such, it would be useless if she put it to her ear. Additionally, it appears that she is speaking into the device which, again, doesn't make sense. All she would hear would be the sound of her own voice blasting into her ear.

So what are we to conclude? There are three possibilities. A. The woman is a time traveler who is speaking into some sort of way cool communication device to her colleagues in the 27th century (when, apparently, top hats will come back into style); B. She is a daffy old lady who has no idea how to use her brand new, state-of-the-art hearing aid or; C. she is a daffy old lady who likes to pretend she is having a conversation by talking into her own hand. Whichever it may be, we can be sure of two things: she is having a great time and people sure dressed funny back then (or are they going to dress funny in the future?) I leave it for you to decide.