The Alaska Moving Picture Company, 1924. Silent, B&W, 1.33. 87 minutes.

Cast: William Dills ("Horseshoe" Riley), Albert Van Antwerp (Bob Dexter), Eva Gordon (Mts. Margaret Stanlaw), Baby Margie (Ruth Stanlaw as a child), Alexis B. Luce (Richard Steele), Gladys Johnston (Ruth Stanlaw), Guerney Hays (Pierre), Howard Webster (Professor Stanlaw), H. Miles (Engineer).


Additional Credits: Distributed by Pathé. Released in New York City on May 12, 1924.


While it was most likely selected for the Registry because it was the first feature to be filmed entirely within Alaska, The Chechahcos has several worthy aspects. It provides a compelling look at frontier life in Alaska, as well as valuable glimpses of pristine mountains and glaciers. Perhaps more interestingly, it is a representative example of what mainstream feature films looked like in the mid-1920s. The Chechahcos was the only title produced by the Alaska Moving Picture Corporation, founded by Austin "Cap" Lathrop and George Lewis in 1922.

Born in Michigan in 1865, Lathrop moved to Seattle, where he bought a steamship in 1895 to transport goods and passengers to the Territory of Alaska. His purchase coincided nicely with the Klondike Gold Rush, earning him enough to finance several ventures, including a mining and oil-drilling company. Lathrop was elected mayor of the small town of Cordova in 1911, and from 1920 to 1922 was a member of the House of Representatives for the Alaska Territory. By that time he had converted a clothing store into a movie theater. Lathrop would build or purchase four theaters, as well as Alaska’s first two radio stations and a newspaper. At one point he owned two banks and the Healy River Coal Corporation, making him the wealthiest man in the territory.

The Alaska Moving Picture Corporation was not exactly a vanity project, as Lathrop’s theaters could always use product, but few independent
producers could hope to compete seriously with the increasingly centralized movie industry. Where a major studio had writers, directors, cinematographers, crafts workers, and actors on call, Lathrop and his associates had to pull everything together themselves. According to film historian Scott Simon’s notes on the film, writer and director Lewis S. Moomaw worked for a small production company in Oregon. He had shot some footage in Alaska for *The Golden Trail* (1920), which featured William Dills in its cast. Born in Maine, Alexis Luce was a stage veteran, and apart from Dills gives the most polished performance in the picture. The other actors found limited acting opportunities after this movie; some appeared in *North of Nome* (1925), a lost film.

Lewis may have based parts of his script on Lathrop’s life, in particular a long opening section set aboard a steamship. Westerns provided another clear influence. Albert Van Antwerp’s stoic engineer Bob Dexter wouldn’t have seemed too out of place in a Buck Jones film, for example. The script also bears some resemblance to Rex Beach’s novel *The Spoilers*, set in an Alaskan mining town and filmed in 1914 and 1923. The film’s focus on generational conflicts and love affairs is reminiscent of Edna Ferber’s novels; coincidentally, some believe that Lathrop was a model for her Alaskan epic *Ice Palace*.

It’s easy to imagine the Alaska of 1923, when the production took place, as a provincial backwater, which makes the sophistication and skill shown in *The Chechahcos* that much more surprising. Lewis employs up-to-the-minute techniques: superimpositions, flashbacks, point-of-view shots taken from a moving camera. He juggles several story lines during the climax, cross-cutting among them in a style borrowed from D.W. Griffith. Careful planning went into the production design, and the costumes accurately reflect the characters’ psychology and social position in the story.

The camerawork and editing are especially impressive. In an early scene set in the steamship’s passenger lounge, Lewis moves from wide shots to close-up inserts, changing angles to swing through the entire set, setting up clear, quick vignettes to introduce a half-dozen or so characters. *The Chechahcos* proves that given the opportunity, just about anyone could make a film that looked as good as Hollywood product.

Turning out enough movies to fill out theater schedules was another matter. Without Hollywood’s infrastructure and pool of talent, producers like Lathrop had to start from zero with each new project. That may be why most regional filmmaking of the period was the work of amateurs. In terms of acting, design, cinematography, lighting, editing, and other production values, *The Chechahcos* matches the style and expertise of a movie like Victor Fleming’s *Mantrap* (1926), which took place in a similar setting. However, it was easier for Hollywood veterans to make California’s Big Bear Lake and Lake Arrowhead look like the Northern frontier than it was to actually shoot there.