Lost Silent Film Comes Home: Billy B. Van's Van-ar-chy Returns to Newport After More Than a Century

Rare 1919 comedy offers a glimpse of early filmmaking—and everyday life—in the Lake Sunapee region


Van-Ar-Chy

NEWPORT, NH, UNITED STATES, September 24, 2026 / EINPresswire.com/ -- More than a century after it was filmed in and around Newport and Sunapee, a long-lost silent comedy starring vaudeville entertainer and local filmmaker Billy B. Van is coming home.

"Van-ar-chy", a 1919 comedy believed lost for decades, will return to the screen on Sunday, November 1, 2026, at 2:00 p.m. at the historic Newport Opera House. Presented by the Newport Historical Society and the Sunapee Historical Society, the program will offer audiences a rare chance to see the Lake Sunapee region as it appeared more than a century ago—and to rediscover a nearly forgotten chapter in early American filmmaking.

The film's journey back to New Hampshire began earlier this year in Sendai, Japan. Kohei Okita, a film student researching early cinema connected to the word "anarchy," purchased several antique film reels without knowing their contents. When he examined the footage, he discovered a silent comedy starring an actor unfamiliar to him: Billy B. Van.

An online search led Okita to billybvan.com, a website created by film archivist John Tariot to document Van's filmmaking career and search for his missing films. The reels were subsequently identified as "Van-ar-chy", one of the comedies Van made in New Hampshire during his brief but ambitious venture into motion-picture production.

Its survival is significant on two fronts. "Van-ar-chy" preserves the work of a little-known early

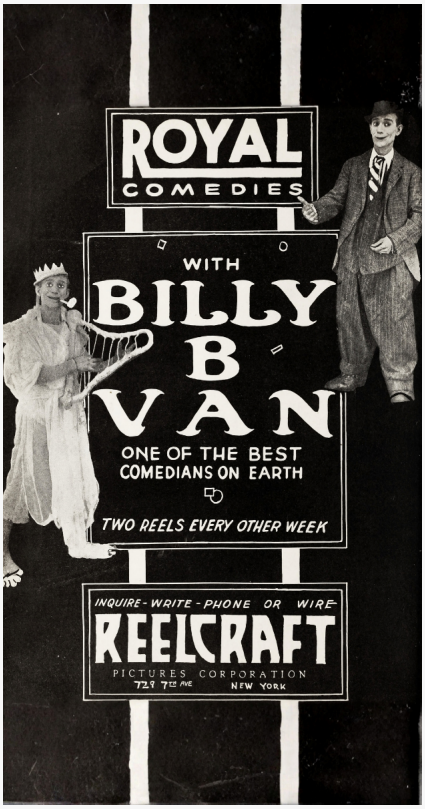
American film company at a time when much of silent cinema has been lost. But it is also a piece of local history captured in motion: its scenes preserve glimpses of the streets, landscapes, buildings, and people of Newport and Sunapee in 1919.

“What's remarkable about 'Van-ar-chy' is that it gives us two kinds of history at once,” says Tariot. “It adds another surviving film to a period of American movie history from which so much has disappeared, but it also gives Newport and Sunapee something much more immediate: moving images of these communities and their residents more than a century ago. We aren't just seeing where Billy B. Van made movies. We're seeing the world in which he made them.”

Long before Hollywood became synonymous with American filmmaking, Broadway and vaudeville comedian Billy B. Van (1870–1950) established the Equity Motion Picture Company in the Lake Sunapee region. From a studio at Georges Mills, Van and his company made silent comedies using nearby communities as both locations and, at times, sources of local performers and extras.

For present-day audiences, that gives "Van-ar-chy" an unusual second life. Along with Van’s slapstick comedy, viewers will see recognizable Lake Sunapee scenery and scenes filmed in Newport, including local residents who appeared before the camera more than 100 years ago. Some of those people have yet to be identified.

The discovery of "Van-ar-chy" marks the second Billy B. Van film to be rediscovered since Tariot began his search for the comedian’s missing films. In 2017, The role-reversal comedy "Where Are Your Husbands?" was found entirely by chance in the collections of the Library of Congress.



Royal Comedies



Billy B. Van Poster

On November 1, audiences will have the rare opportunity to see both rediscovered films

together, returning Van’s work to the region where much of it was made.

The program, "Van-ar-chy Comes Home: Billy B. Van’s Lost Silent Comedies", will feature digitally restored presentations of "Van-ar-chy" and "Where Are Your Husbands?", with piano accompaniment by Bob Merrill. Merrill, who created accompaniment for both films, will perform his score for "Van-ar-chy" live at the Newport Opera House. A historical introduction will place the films in the story of Van’s unusual New Hampshire filmmaking venture and the rapidly developing motion-picture industry of the 1910s.

EVENT DETAILS
"Van-ar-chy Comes Home: Billy B. Van’s Lost Silent Comedies"
Sunday, November 1, 2026, at 2:00 p.m. Newport Opera House, Newport, N.H.
Cash Bar

Featuring "Van-ar-chy" (1919) and "Where Are Your Husbands?", two Billy B. Van comedies rediscovered more than a century after they were made.
Piano accompaniment: Bob Merrill, including live accompaniment for "Van-ar-chy"
Tickets: $15 Available through the Newport Opera House box office newportoperahouse.com (603) 863-2412. Proceeds benefit the Newport Historical Society and the Sunapee Historical Society.

For Tariot, the discovery also offers reason to keep looking.
“Two films have now turned up in places no one expected to find them,” he says. “There are still Billy B. Van films missing, and there may be more sitting unidentified in archives or private collections somewhere. The search goes on.”

About the Historical Societies
The Newport Historical Society and the Sunapee Historical Society preserve and share the history of their respective communities and the people, places, and events that have shaped the Lake Sunapee region.

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