

Making a Living

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I'm not sure what it says about me, that of all the aspects of Charlie's life and work, I decided to focus on money and business.

Working with Paul Duncan on the forthcoming Chaplin Archives book, I was allocated three chapters covering

- his early years of childhood poverty in Victorian England
- his successes on the British stage
- his rapid rise in popularity and fame when he made the transition to cinema.

Working for a year with Mack Sennett at Keystone Studios, before moving to Essanay. My final chapter also covered his signing with Mutual.

Each move was closely linked to both money and an increase in personal and artistic freedom.

The press coverage of the Mutual signing and the contract contents was covered throughout the world. And firmly established the link between Charlie and money. When speaking to friends about this project, his phenomenal salary was one of the most popular facts they knew.

Although much of the factual information presented here may be familiar to you, the accompanying original documents and press coverage from the Chaplin archives reveal

insights into Charlie's business acumen and the fascination both the press and public had about his income.

When I make reference to "adjusted for inflation that would now be worth" I used the on-line inflation calculator <http://www.usinflationcalculator.com/>

The happenstance that Charlie's first film appearance at Keystone was in a film entitled *Making a Living* seems too good to be true!

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By 1915, when Charlie appeared in Essanay's *The Tramp* his character was firmly established. Forever linking Charlie with a down-at-heel, out-of-luck chancer.

Charlie's tale does read like the ultimate one of rags to riches, triumph over tragedy.

On this, **Charlie would write:** "There is no virtue in rising from poverty, only the pity and waste of energy it involves. Poverty should not be laughed off bravely as something undignified to mention, or that in treating it lightly ones rises above it. Poverty is a degrading business that should be outlawed and abolished in every nation. I am not proud of having risen from it. I write of it as a criticism of the times in which, as a boy, I lived."

But the 1915 Charlie had risen out of poverty and was securing both a strong artistic and commercial future for himself.

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This is the man behind the tramp costume in 1915 – the man ensuring that his future was more secure than his past.

Charlie began performing professional in 1898 as part of the *Eight Lancashire Lads* clog dancing troupe.

Chaplin's roommate with the troupe was Jack Cunard, who revealed how Chaplin could clogs for nothing.

Jack Cunard: We went up Petticoat Lane. The clogs were sold there for a penny each. I said, "Show me how you get your money back." He never said a word. Later, he showed me four half-pennies. Then he told me. Dancing clogs [have] a curious jingle. Chaplin had discovered that it was two half-pennies inserted under the metal plate on the heel that made the jingle. The dealers did not know.

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In June 1903 (aged 14) he landed his first stage acting role in *Jim, The Romance of a Cockayne*, swiftly followed by his role of Billy in *Sherlock Holmes* (reviewed here). His salary was two pounds 10 shilling a week.

Whilst on tour Wardrobe mistress **Edith Scales recalls** that "Charlie was a hard headed business man."

To make extra money he bought a 5 shilling camera and during his free time used to take pictures. He printed them up and sold them for threepence and sixpence each.

She added "He was not afraid to work hard, and he looked upon no honest way of making money as beneath his dignity"

The *Sherlock Holmes* tour ended in March 1906, and in May he joined *Casey's Court Circus* at £3 per week. In July his brother Syd signed with Karno for £3 a week.

Charlie's tour with Casey ended in July 1907 and he continued to look for work including trying out a solo act until the following January when he was given a trial with Fred Karno troupe.

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In February 1908 Charlie was offered a contract for £3:10s per week for the first year; increased to £4 in the second year.

He was contracted as 'Comedian and Pantomimist' and I love the line **that says he is** "to rehearse and perform to the best of his skill and ability".

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In September 1910 Charlie signed a three year contract with Fred Karno as 'comedian' commencing the following March, with a yearly salary increase from £6 to £8 to £10 per week. There was a handwritten addition to the contract in the archives **stating that if** "the artiste is required to perform in the US the salary would increase to £10, £12 and £15 per week."

He toured the US from October 1910 – June 1912. Then again from October.

By the time he is being wooed by Kessell and Bauman to join Keystone in Autumn 1913, he would have been in the second year of that contract earning £15 per week.

On September 20 1913, Chaplin signed to join Keystone. He would earn \$150 a week for the first three months and \$175 for the remaining nine, Charlie said that this was "more money than I had ever been offered in my life."

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A few weeks later, on October 8 Charlie acquired his first shares, buying 200 \$1 dollar shares in the Vancouver Island Oil Company Limited.

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His first Keystone film, as mentioned earlier was *Making a Living*, released on February 2nd.

His first on-screen appearance in the tramp costume was for *Kid Auto Races* released five days later on February 7th.

Charlie had always been careful with his money. Biographies are peppered with anecdotes of those who knew him stating his reluctance to spend unnecessarily.

But given his childhood, is this very surprising?

When he first arrived in Hollywood in December 1913 he rented a room in a hotel he had known when on tour with Karno.

In the Summer of 1914, Sennett gave Charlie a temporary membership card to the Los Angeles Athletic Club. For \$12 a week (considerably less than he had been paying at the hotel) he rented a room at the club, and full use of its facilities including gym, swimming pool, cocktail bar and dining room.

Charlie “All told I lived in a sumptuous style for \$75 a week, out of which I kept my end up in rounds of drinks and occasional dinners.”

Colleagues remember it slightly differently.

Actor Chester Conklin “Charlie was willing to let you buy him a drink... but I guess he had not spent much time in London pubs where he would have learned that it was up to him to knock for the next round.”

Matt Sennett “Charlie was considered an odd-ball by my team. They considered him cheap. He wasn't cheap. He simply didn't enjoy drinking or gambling.”

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Soon after moving to the Athletic club, Charlie wrote to Syd.

He writes of an offer “Mr. Marcus Loew, the big theatre man over here, has made me a proposition which is a certainty and wants me to form a comedy company and give me either a salary per week or 50% stock. This is a sure thing.”

Charlie refused to break his contract, and continued with Keystone.

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A few weeks later, from August 29 to September 11, Charlie was directing and starring in *Dough and Dynamite*, which he co-wrote with Sennett.

It took 9 days to film, costing \$1,800. \$800 more than usual budget for a Keystone comedy at this time. It grossed more than \$130,000 in its first year. Adjusted for inflation that would now be almost \$3,100,000.

Despite this success, due to going over budget Chaplin lost his \$25 bonus.

Sennett recalled “*Dough and Dynamite* was a hit at the box office and Charlie's first personal triumph as a comedian. His name was important after this picture.”

It was released on 26 October

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The following day Charlie filmed the framing device for *His Prehistoric Past* with Syd, who had now joined him at Keystone.

Sennett had signed him up for a year at a salary of \$200 a week, which was \$25 more than Charlie was getting.

With Syd in town, and only a month left on his contract with Keystone, Charlie suggested that they form their own company. Perhaps recalling For Sterling's failed attempt to go it alone after leaving Keystone, **Syd thought it** "was too much of a chance".

On November 28th Charlie met G. M. "Broncho Billy" Anderson, who with George K. Spoor owned Essanay. **Anderson** telegraphed Spoor saying "I'm going down to Los Angeles to sign a comedian. I may have to pay him \$1,000 a week." He got a wire back; "What, are you crazy? Paying anybody \$1,000 a week! Don't do it!" He went anyway.

Meanwhile, Sennett with Bauman and Kessell offered Charlie \$400, Sennett raised it to \$750.

Sennett said "Charlie didn't argue but he declined. It was obvious that he had an offer far better than that." **He continued** "I offered Charlie half my kingdom. I owned one third of Keystone and I offered to split my share with Charlie if he would stay with us. When he turned that down I had no more chips to raise the bet with."

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On December 14, Charlie signed a one-year contract with Essanay for \$1,250 (now worth \$29,340) a week, with a \$10,000 bonus (half upon signature and half when the contract expired) to produce, perform in, direct, and write films from January 1, 1915. Charlie also included a clause that would give him control of his pictures and image for the first time.

It says in the third clause "No other film or picture shall be released under said [Charlie Brand] until the same shall have first been shown to and approved by [Charlie]."

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He began his new job at Essanay in January 1915.

His New Job was the only film Chaplin made at Essanay's Chicago studios. He soon moved to their studios in Niles, California and in April he moved again setting up studios at 147 North Hill Street, Los Angeles.

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Whilst filming *Work* in May Chaplin received an intriguing call from the *Los Angeles Examiner*. Who asked whether he would be taking up the offer of \$25,000 for two weeks work to appear fifteen minutes each evening at the New York Hippodrome.

This was the first Charlie had heard of this, and contacted Anderson asking whether he could take the offer up.

Chaplin suggested that he could shoot on the train, and edit in New York, since his contract did not specify where he would work, and he was not exclusive.

Anderson didn't want Chaplin to go and it was agreed that if Charlie gave Essanay another two-reeler comedy they would give him a \$25,000 bonus.

Newspaper coverage of Chaplin receiving \$25,000 not to take up the gig.

Chaplin wrote that the New York Company that made the original offer went bankrupt two weeks later. "Such was my luck."

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What is significant is the extent Chaplin was now taking to control his image and the merchandising opportunities that went with this.

A couple of examples...

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On April 3, Charlie had signed an agreement with the New York based Mark Hampton Co to allow them to produce the only authorised Chaplin Statues for a period of five years (with an option for a further five). Charlie would get one cent for every statue sold.

In May Mark Hampton sued the Art Novelty Co. for producing unauthorised Charlie statuettes. After reading the complaint Judge Hough ordered US Marshal McCarthy to seize a large number of statuettes from Art Novelty to be held pending a decision. He also ordered them to hand over \$5,000 to the plaintiff.

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Also in in May 1915 Essanay granted the *Chicago Herald* the franchise rights to produce a strip cartoon featuring Charlie. The cartoonist and originator of *Charley Charlie's Comic Capers* was Stewart W Carothers.

This was against their contract with Charlie.

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From August, it became clear that Essanay had been selling licenses to use Charlie's image on many products all over America and the UK. This was outside the boundaries of their contract and Charlie had not received any royalties. Charlie tried to assert his rights through Messrs. Biers, Block and Pershing.

Here are some examples of correspondence between Charlie and Pershing trying to stamp down on unauthorised merchandise and securing contracts.

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Essanay meanwhile were pursuing the prosecution of imitators, and also of brokers and exhibitors who showed pirated copies.

On September 28, George Levy, operating as the Charlie Film Company, was arrested in connection with making dupe negatives and renting them to the value of \$500,000 (now worth just over \$11.7 million). He was just one of many such brokers. He was said to have netted \$50,000 (now almost \$1.2 million) from *The Champion* alone.

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Around this time, Charlie's popularity was firmly established and *Pictures and the Picturegoer* **had a go at estimating his world-wide audience.**

The total daily number of performances given on the screen by the famous Essanay fun-maker is approximately as follows: America 15,000; Great Britain 4,500; rest of the world 11,700. Total 31,200. Reckoning the average attendance at each of the 31,200 performances at the very modest total of 400 we find that the great man gladdens the hearts of no fewer than 12,480,000 people daily!

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In October 1915, Sydney's Keystone contract ended, and he began to take control of his brother's business affairs. And as Charlie's contract with Essanay would end in January, he busied himself meeting possible suitors in New York and Chicago.

And so began a series of speculations and denials in the press.

Essanay's offer to Charlie was \$10,000 a week for one year, a bonus of \$100,000 for signing and 50% of all profits Essanay received from Charlie films, that 50% however to cover the \$500,000 yearly guarantee. Charlie would receive the surplus if any, over that amount. Charlie asked for 60%.

Contract negotiations broke down.

When Chaplin travelled with Anderson from LA to New York via Chicago, he found out that Anderson was selling his shares in Essanay, which may have prompted Chaplin to lose interest in Essanay.

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And on February 26th Charlie signed with the Mutual Film Corporation.

He would receive a salary of \$670,000 for his first year's work.

(Just over \$14.5 million now)

Mutual's President, John R. Freuler said "We can afford to pay Mr Chaplin this large sum annually because the public wants Chaplin and will pay for him, I consider this contract a very pleasing bargain for everybody concerned - including the Corporation, Mr Chaplin and the fun-loving American public."

Charlie's response: "A great many people are inclined to make wide eyes at what is called my salary. Honestly, it is a matter I do not spend much time thinking about. Money and business are very serious matters and I have to keep my mind off of them. What this contract means is simply that I am in business with the worry left out and with the dividends guaranteed. It means that I am left free to be just as funny as I dare, to do the best work that is in me and to spend my energies on the thing that the people want."

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The signing generated some spirited lampooning in the press.

Being chased

No Mrs Charles Chaplin

How many years he'd have to go to the cinema to spend a year's salary (18,356). How much he would make a day (\$1,835).

How much he earns compared to the president.

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A stipulation in the contract that Charlie could not leave country caused controversial headlines for the next few months.

On March 21, the *Evening News* in London criticised Charlie's contract and labelled him "The Man Who is Too Busy To Fight."

A few weeks later, the *Evening Times* ran an anti-Chaplin cartoon.

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But there were soon contrary articles appearing and by May 1916 support from soldiers and army, and government officials revealed the full extent of Chaplin's contribution both to the morale and finances of the war effort.

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Chaplin's famous million dollar contract was signed on 17 June 1917 when he left Mutual to join First National. (Surprisingly, he was still living at the Los Angeles Athletic Club!)

But perhaps more importantly than the money was the crucial agreement that Chaplin would retain the rights to everything. Giving him for the first time complete artistic control and freedom.

In an interview in the Exhibitors' Trade Journal in April of that year **Sydney Chaplin** outlined their vision for the future:

Hereafter the Chaplin pictures will take from two to three times longer to produce than they do now. The settings and stage properties will be the finest. It is quality not quantity that we are after. After we have made a scene and it isn't up to the new Chaplin quality, it will be

made over. And then if the whole reel doesn't satisfy Charlie, it will not be released, no matter what money is offered, but thrown into the discard where it belongs.

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Thus ensuring that he would go on to create a body of work that is still being marvelled and celebrated 100 years later.

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