

This is exactly what film historian Wheeler did when he first got his first VHS copy of "Eleven P.M." decades ago and examined it with a fellow scholar.

"We must have watched that movie a hundred times. ... The best we could figure is that it was filmed on Gratiot near downtown," Wheeler said. "Some of the actual locations are lost to me now, but the idea of having any documentation of that area makes the film even more special."

Many of these films were once considered lost. A now-legendary discovery of black films in a warehouse in Tyler, Texas, in the mid-'80s resurrected many of the titles, including "The Blood of Jesus." In 1991, that movie became the first so-called race film to be added to the U.S. National Film Registry.

Wilhelm notes that the continued efforts of individuals like Wheeler - along with institutions like Yale University, the Museum of Modern Art, the Library of Congress and the Martin Scorsese-led Film Foundation - have discovered and preserved movies that would otherwise be lost. "The fact that any of these movies have survived is miraculous," he said.

The "Pioneers of African-American Cinema" series schedule

"The Flying Ace" (1926, director Richard E. Norman): Aviators are rivals on the ground in the air in this Hollywood-style adventure filmed in Jacksonville, Fla. (7 p.m. Fri.)

"Dirty Gertie From Harlem, U.S.A." (1946, director Spencer Williams): This loose adaptation of W. Somerset Maugham's "Miss Sadie Thompson" pits a nightclub entertainer against a reformer at a Caribbean resort. (9:30 p.m. Fri.)

"Eleven P.M." (1928,

director Richard Maurice): A Detroit-filmed blend of melodrama and surrealism features director Maurice as a poor violinist whose family is preyed upon by a hoodlum he once helped. (3 p.m. Sat.)

"Hell-Bound Train" (1930, directors James and Eloyce Gist): Created by African-American evangelists, this a 50-minute non-narrative film depicts drinking, dancing, gambling and other Jazz Age sins presided over by the figure of the devil. (3 p.m. Sat., showing on the same program with "Eleven P.M.")

"Body and Soul" (1925, director Oscar Micheaux): Paul Robeson stars as twin brothers, one hard-working and the other a predatory minister in a tinted print with musical score by Paul Miller, a.k.a. DJ Spooky. (7 p.m. Sat.)

"Ten Nights in a Bar Room" (1926, director Roy Calnek): Based on a popular 19th-Century temperance novel, the film features Charles Sidney Gilpin as a man whose alcoholism wrecks his life and those around him. (9:30 p.m. Sat.)

"The Blood of Jesus" (1941, director Spencer Williams): Williams' religious parable overcame its low budget with inventive images about a murdered woman's journey to the afterlife. (2 p.m. Sun.)

"Within Our Gates" (1920, director Oscar Micheaux): A young woman's plan to open an elementary school for the black community is thwarted by religious, social and political forces in this earliest surviving feature by an African-American director. (4:30 p.m. Sun.)

"The Girl from Chicago" (1932, director Oscar Micheaux): Dramatic scenes and musical numbers punctuate this early sound film from Micheaux about a federal agent who falls in love while on assignment in Mississippi. (3 p.m. Feb. 18)

"The Bronze Buckaroo" (1939, director Richard C. Kahn): The best of several films in which dashing, Detroit-born Herb Jeffries plays a black version of a Gene Autry-style singing cowboy, this time enlisted to locate a girl kidnapped by unscrupulous ranchers. (3 p.m. April 22)

The "Pioneers of African-American Cinema" series

Fri.-Sun., Feb. 18 and April 22

Detroit Film Theatre at the Detroit Institute of Arts

5200 Woodward Ave., Detroit

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