

Prelude to Motion Picture Production in Chicago

Before there was Mary Pickford or Gloria Swanson, before there was Katherine Hepburn or Marilyn Monroe, there was Annabelle Whitford. Ten years before Mary Pickford became America's sweetheart, Annabelle Whitford of Chicago had become America's first movie star. She was not the first person to be filmed for commercial presentation; that was one of Thomas Edison's lab technicians who was filmed as he sneezed. She was not the first stage performer to be filmed at Edison's studio but she was the first filmed performer to capture the imagination of the nation who would watch her image moving in Edison's little light box even though it was a mere four minute show without star billing or film credits. Annabelle Whitford would have several dates with destiny. Her butterfly dance was not Edison's first film but it was his first color movie. They hand-tinted each frame on the film to duplicate the colors Whitford used in her live stage show. She became a central figure in the first scandal involving movie personnel when she accused New York theater producer William Brady of asking chorus girls to do their dances for him sans clothing. Annabelle was also in the cast of Flo Ziegfeld's first *Follies* musical revue in 1907 that became an American tradition for the next quarter century and she was part of the cast of the ill-fated *Mr. Bluebird* the Klaw and Erlanger production that was playing in the Iroquois Theater the day it caught fire and killed over six hundred people in Chicago.

Annabelle Whitford had been born in Chicago and after her stage and film career ended she returned to Chicago. Even after her movie performances were forgotten, Whitford was often asked by historians, or lawyers involved in patent suits, to provide testimony as to who had filmed her and when as there were many claimants to the title "father of the motion picture." The men who made the equipment that made the movies were all located in the East but very

shortly afterwards, men of vision in Chicago began making their own contributions to the embryonic industry. Whitford's contribution was in front of the camera in the performance aspect of the motion picture business. From the time of her filmed performance in 1894, there have always been Chicagoans involved in the production of motion picture entertainment in front of the camera as performers but the greater accomplishments of Chicagoans have been in the boardrooms of the businesses that financed, produced, distributed or exhibited motion pictures. Several motion picture business empires grew from small Chicago companies but all too often Chicago's own entertainment production community has suffered baleful effects from the actions of the businesses originally started in Chicago.

Annabelle Whitford of Chicago



One of the first stars of the movies as a subject in Edison's peep show Kinescope in the 1890's.

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When Harry Aitken departed the Mutual Film Company in late 1915 taking the Keystone, Majestic, Reliance and Thanhouser production companies with him, new Mutual President John Freuler was left with only the movies of his own American Film Manufacturing Company and the Arrow Film Company (a New York-based producer that began operation in 1915) to distribute to Mutual's exhibitors. American which was based in Chicago had built a large production studio in Santa Barbara, California with Samuel Hutchinson as the operating President. American continued to

manufacture two reel movies as they had been for half a decade in the same formula genres: Western melodramas, comedies and crime dramas with auto chases. In 1915, American Film Manufacturing had produced 224 short movies which still would not be enough to fill the demand in Mutual's exhibitor market. John Freuler was still committed to the short movie and he believed he could reverse Mutual's declining fortunes by signing the king of the short comedies: Charlie Chaplin. Since Chaplin had started at Keystone, his first movies were still distributed by Mutual even after George Spoor had signed him to produce new movies at Essanay. With Chaplin's one year contract at Essanay nearing expiration, George Spoor who had made a small fortune off Chaplin's movies extended a generous offer of a reported half a million dollars with a profit-sharing clause. Yet John Freuler offered Chaplin twenty-five percent more than Spoor with a signing bonus of \$125,000. For an industry built on the nickel ticket, this was a signal event that the world of motion picture production had changed.

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“A theory that explains everything in general, explains very little in particular.”

Arthur Schlesinger

In 2007 Chicago celebrated the centennial anniversary of the Essanay Film Manufacturing Company founded by Gilbert Anderson and George Spoor. Some of Essanay's surviving silent movies were presented at the annual Chicago Film Festival and the newspapers recalled the story of Chicago's early years in the motion picture business usually with a headline like “When Chicago was Hollywood.” The story of Essanay and William Selig's Polyscope are

still fairly well-remembered by Chicago's more history cognizant denizens perhaps because some of the most popular film stars of the Silent Era, such as Ben Turpin, Tom Mix, Francis X. Bushman, Gloria Swanson and Charlie Chaplin, made movies while employed by these companies. Or perhaps they became aware from the Motion Picture Academy Awards which presented Oscars to the pioneers of the industry including Spoor, Selig and Anderson (an embittered Spoor refused his Oscar). In any case, the story of Chicago's involvement in the nascent motion picture industry is usually portrayed via the people who were in the movie rather than from the perspective of the businesses that made the movies. The third major Chicago-based motion picture production company, the American Film Manufacturing Company, is rarely mentioned even though the businessmen behind American Film also played a major role in the direction of the motion picture industry. The contributions of Chicago businessman like George Kleine, Edward Hill Amet, Charles Hite, John Freuler, Charles Hutchinson are rarely recalled.

Whenever the era of movie production at Essanay and Selig Polyscope is recalled, the inevitable question of what caused their demise is raised. The usual answer "the rise of Hollywood and Chicago's inclement weather" conjures the observation of Presidential historian Arthur Schlesinger that a theory that explains everything in general, explains very little in particular. Chicago's inclement weather provides a simple and cogent explanation. From November to April, it is likely to be gloomy and dark or bitterly cold in Chicago while in Southern California, it is blue skies and bright light perfect for filming motion pictures. Certainly if Southern California's weather was similar to Chicago's, the motion picture production industry would not have ultimately coalesced there. Weather was a factor in the development of the motion picture industry in Southern California but even a cursory examination of the business model followed by the Chicago motion picture production

companies would question the importance that weather played in their success or failure.

The Chicago movie companies weren't replaced by Hollywood, they were the ones who first established Hollywood. William Selig is credited with the first movie produced in California and he was the first to build a production facility there, albeit a small facility. All three Chicago-based motion picture companies owned studios in California. Most of the Broncho Billy movies were filmed in Northern California by Gilbert Anderson. Before building a studio near Fremont, Anderson's production unit spent a winter in the San Diego area. Selig's seminal serial, the *Adventures of Kathlyn*, were filmed in his California studio because they were produced in January and February of 1914 when no one in the Selig stock company much wanted to be in Chicago. Selig didn't "discover" California because he was escaping bad weather but because he was seeking new scenery. Selig himself took a film crew to Colorado in the winter so that he could film a movie following a two foot snowfall. Colonel Selig was a pioneer of location shooting. He usually had two or more production units

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