



Florence Lawrence, the Biograph Girl: America's First Movie Star

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If asked to name America's first movie star, most people would probably select Mary Pickford. The correct answer is Florence Lawrence, a Canadian who made over 250 movies between 1906 and 1938.

A stage actor in her mother's theater company since childhood, Lawrence made her first film at the age of twenty, portraying one of Daniel Boone's daughters. At the time, serious stage actors did not respect films; many actors accepted film work hoping that Bronx studio locations were far enough away from Broadway that their "defection" would go unnoticed.

Lawrence worked for the Vitagraph Company before joining the Biograph Company and becoming known as "The Biograph Girl"; actor's names were not listed in film credits. When Lawrence visited St. Louis in 1910 on a publicity tour fans rioted. The author mentions that prior to this event, fanaticism such as this was restricted to receptions for explorers and politicians.

With fame of this nature, why is Florence Lawrence's name relatively unknown? The author uncovers several factors that led to Lawrence's obscurity. Primary is Lawrence's eclipse by Mary Pickford, who was a more talented actor. Also attributed to Lawrence's decline was an on-set accident that somehow permanently disabled her career. While Lawrence easily made the transition from silent to "talkie" films, she was unable (or unwilling) to modernize her acting technique, and continued to use the histrionic silent-film style of acting, effectively working herself out of the industry. In December 1938, beset with mental and physical illnesses, Lawrence committed suicide.

Brown has written a well-researched, readable biography of Florence Lawrence and the early history of the film industry. Information was gathered from the Library of Congress and several film archives; the author includes an annotated filmography. Brown hopes to restore Florence Lawrence to her rightful place in film history.

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