

Who  
Was the  
First Canadian  
Movie  
Star?

Biograph is the abbreviated name commonly used for the American Mutoscope and Biograph Company. It developed into one of the most active forces in the early years of American cinema and its studios at 11 East 14th Street in New York City were the spawning ground for such formative talents as

Griffith's stock company of players at Biograph included three Canadian leading ladies: Florence Lawrence, Florence LaBadie and Mary Pickford.

Griffith and Mack Sennett. An itinerant actor and fledgling playwright, Griffith joined Biograph in early 1908, first as a writer and then as an actor. Later that same year, he directed his first film, *The Adventures of Dollie*. Over the next 18 months (from June 1908 to December 1909), Griffith personally directed all of the Biograph pictures, an incredible 200

## D.W. Griffith, the Keystone Kops and the Canadian Connection

By Wyndham Wise

In his fulsome introduction in *Maclean's* (September 2003) to an excerpt from Kay Armatage's revisionist biography of the Victoria-born Nell Shipman, *The Girl from God's Country: Nell Shipman and the Silent Cinema*, critic Brian D. Johnson claimed Shipman to be "Canada's first movie star." Johnson was not entirely accurate, however. Shipman was only a bit player in the history of Hollywood, never more than a starlet. Ten years prior to her appearance in *Back to God's Country*, which was released in 1919, no less than three actresses could lay claim to the title of the first Canadian movie star, and, remarkably, they all appeared in films by D.W. Griffith, the legendary father of cinema, at the Biograph studios between 1908 and 1912.



Mack Sennett's Keystone Kops

Florence Lawrence



shorts, averaging one 10-minute film every two-and-a-half days. Thereafter, as Biograph's general director until the end of 1913, he supervised the company's entire output and directed

all or most of its major productions. In total, he personally directed some 460 films for Biograph before moving on to features and *Birth of a Nation* in 1915. During his time with the company, Griffith developed a stock company of players that at one time or another included all the major female stars of the silent screen: Dorothy and Lillian Gish, Blanche Sweet, Mabel Normand, Mae Marsh, and his Canadian contingent, Florence Lawrence, Mary Pickford and Florence LaBadie.

Florence Lawrence (b. Florence Annie Bridgwood in Hamilton, Ont., 1886; d. 1938) was, according to Ephraim Katz's authoritative *The Film Encyclopedia*, "the most popular actress at the Biograph studios and one of the great stars of the early American screen." At the time of her tragic death at the age of 52, Mary Pickford wrote: "She was by far the best actress in the early days of Biograph." On stage and touring with her mother since the age of three, Lawrence

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**"She was by far the best actress in the early days of Biograph."**

— Mary Pickford on Florence Lawrence

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joined the Vitagraph Company at 21 when the touring company disbanded in 1907. There she appeared in 38 films, including an early screen version of Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet*, but it was with Griffith that she made her lasting mark, and her rise was meteoric. Her first film for the master was *Betrayed by a Handprint* in July 1908. Griffith liked her so much that she appeared in over 90 of his films before she left Biograph for Carl Laemmle's Independent Motion

Picture Company of America at the end of 1909.

Since it was the Biograph's policy not to promote actors lest they demand more money, Lawrence was simply known as "The Biograph Girl." At the Independent Motion Picture Company she became known as "The IMP Girl," and thanks to one of Laemmle's outrageous publicity stunts—he claimed she was killed in a traffic accident, then, after gaining media attention, placed ads in the newspapers with a photo of Lawrence declaring she was alive and well and making *The Broken Oath*, a new movie for his company—she became the first star to be known to the public by her real name. However, due to a horrific accident on-set in which she was badly burnt over much of her body, Lawrence's career was effectively over by 1914. In the 1930s she was put on the MGM payroll as an act of charity, drawing a small salary and being used occasionally as an extra. She eventually committed suicide by eating ant paste on Christmas Day, 1938, alone and forgotten.

Mary Pickford (b. Gladys Smith in Toronto, 1893; d. 1979) was born into poverty in the Victorian slums of Toronto and, like Lawrence, appeared on stage at a very early age. By the



D.W. Griffith

time she was five she was known as "Baby Gladys," touring for several years and working on Broadway before joining Biograph in 1909 at the age of 16. Her first film for Griffith was *Two Memories* where she appeared with Lawrence.



Mack Sennett

When Lawrence jumped ship, Pickford came into her own, appearing in 67 films for Griffith from 1909 and 1911, and became known as “The Girl with the Golden Hair” or simply “Little Mary.” When Lawrence moved on from IMP at the end of 1910, Laemmle hired Pickford away from Biograph, but she returned briefly in 1912 to make another 20 films for Griffith. She then signed on with Adolph Zukor’s Famous Players Company (which later became Paramount), where as “America’s Sweetheart,” she became the most popular and financially successful woman in screen history.

With her charm and child-woman beauty, Pickford had international appeal. At its height, her popularity rivalled Charlie Chaplin’s Little Tramp. In 1919, she and Griffith were reunited when the two joined forces with Chaplin and Douglas Fairbanks, her future husband, to form United Artists Corporation, Hollywood’s first artist-run studio. Pickford won an Oscar® for *Coquette* (1929), retired from the screen in 1933, divorced Fairbanks three years later and then, in 1953, she and Chaplin (the last two surviving members of the partnership) sold United Artists. Later in life she became alcoholic and, unhappy with the overall quality of her work, threaten to burn all her films before she died; however, she had a change of heart and donated them to the American Film Institute instead. Six months prior to her

death in 1979, she applied for and got her Canadian citizenship reinstated. A historical plaque marks her birthplace on University Avenue in Toronto.

Florence LaBadie (b. Montreal, 1893; d. 1917), quite possibly the most beautiful and talented—and least known—of the Canadian women at Biograph, was working as a fashion

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### Florence LaBadie’s fame and beauty was so great that she attracted the attention of Woodrow Wilson.

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model when she was introduced to Griffith by Pickford. LaBadie appeared in only nine of his films, all in 1911, the first being *The Spanish Gypsy* in March of that year. She soon moved on to Thanouser, a smaller studio located in New Rochelle, New York, where she became its leading lady. At this point in the motion picture industry, the three highest-paid and best-known actresses in the world were all Canadian-born. LaBadie’s fame and beauty was so great that she attracted the attention of Woodrow Wilson, then the governor of New Jersey (later the president of the United States), who was rumoured to have been her lover. She was under contract to Pathé when she suddenly died at the age 23, six months following an unfortunate car accident. At the time of her death, there was some confusion about her true place of birth. LaBadie was brought up in Montreal by a



Florence LaBadie

French-Canadian couple—her father was a prominent Quebec banker—and was educated at the Convent of Notre Dame and attended schools in New York. Marie Russ, a patient at the Home for Incurables in New York City, came forth to claim Florence as the child she gave up for adoption. However, the

validity of this claim has never been proven. [Editor’s note: The Thanouser Web site lists LaBadie’s birth year as 1888. Katz lists her as an American born in 1893.]

It was not only Canadian beauties who achieved cinematic



Mary Pickford

immortality at Biograph. A number of Canadian-born actors also made films with the great director. One of the earliest male stars of the American silent screen, Wilfred Lucas (b. Niagara Falls, Ont., 1871; d. 1940), appeared in his first Griffith film, *The Marked Time-Table* in June of 1910. Virile and dignified, he played a variety of leading roles including the title character in Griffith's first two-reel film, *Enoch Arden*, parts one and two (1911). In total, he appeared in 45 Griffith films between 1910 and 1912. During that time he also developed as a writer and director. Dell Henderson (b. George Delbert Henderson in St. Thomas, Ont., 1883; d. 1956), a stage actor for several years, joined Biograph in 1910 as a leading man, making his first appearance in Griffith's *The Last Deal*. He appeared in 69 Griffith films before moving behind the camera and directing many Biograph films. He left the company at the end of 1913. There was Jack Pickford (b. Jack Smith in Toronto, 1896; d. 1933) who followed his more famous sister's footsteps, first on stage and then into film, starting with Biograph in 1909; he made 38 films for Griffith. But the most famous Canadian man to work at Biograph was the great and

gregarious Mack Sennett, the Quebec-born actor/director/producer who would become known as "The King of Comedy."

Sennett (b. Mikall Sinnott in Danville, Que., 1880; d. 1960), the son of Irish immigrants, was an itinerant vaudeville actor when he presented himself to the Biograph Company in 1908. Between July of that year until the end of 1910, Sennett appeared in virtually all of Griffith's films. Displaying a natural talent for comedy, he directed his first short, *Comrades*, in 1911, and proceeded to churn out comic shorts at a rate comparable to the master himself. In early 1912, he left Biograph to set up his own studio in Hollywood with the financial backing of his New York bookies. He took Lucas with him and one of Biograph's greatest assets, the very popular Mabel Normand, for whom Sennett had a lifelong affection (although they never married). Dell Henderson would later join them when Biograph suspended production at the end of 1913 (the company was formally dissolved in 1915).

With this solid base of talent, Sennett's Keystone Studios soon built a reputation as the silent screen's foremost comedy mill, launching the careers of such comic geniuses as Charlie Chaplin, Harold Lloyd, Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle and, of course, Mabel Normand, the best comic actress of

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her time. His studio mainly produced two-reelers (Chaplin made 35 for him in 1914), but from time to time he also made features. He kept up his gruelling pace, directing 90 films in 1913 alone, most of which he also wrote and produced. Henderson and Lucas thrived under Sennett, becoming two of his key directors, and soon they were joined by a handful of other talented Canucks (see sidebar).

Another Canadian, Marie Dressler (b. Cobourg, Ont., 1869; d. 1934), the glorious comic actress was a popular light-opera singer and star on the vaudeville stage before moving into silent pictures. She made her screen debut in Sennett's 1914 version of *Tillie's Punctured Romance* with Chaplin. With the advent of sound, this homely woman of enormous girth, who was blessed with perfect comic timing,



Marie Dressler with Jean Harlow in *Dinner at Eight*.



La belle Marie Prevost

## KANUCK KOPS and Bathing Beauties

became one of Hollywood's most popular actresses—MGM boss Louis B. Mayer declared her one of his greatest stars—delivering several commanding performances in the early 1930s. She starred with Greta Garbo in *Anna Christie* (1930), Jean Harlow in *Dinner at Eight* (1933) and won an Oscar® in 1930 for her tragicomic performance in *Min and Bill* opposite Wallace Berry. It was Dressler who, in her autobiography *The Life Story of an Ugly Duckling*, coined the phrase, “You’re only as good as your last film.”

So, who was the first Canadian movie star? The tragic Florence Lawrence? The rich and famous Mary Pickford? That great comic genius Mack Sennett? The beautiful Florence LaBadie? Or even the majestic Marie Dressler? Hard to say, but it sure as heck wasn't Nell Shipman.

Sources: *D.W. Griffith and the Biograph Company*, by Cooper C. Graham, Steven Higgins, Elaine Mancini and João Luiz Vieira, The Scarecrow Press, 1985; *The Film Encyclopedia*, 3rd Edition, edited by Ephraim Katz, revised by Fred Klein and Ronald Dean Nolen, HarperCollins Publishers, 1998; *Stardust and Shadows: Canadians in Early Hollywood*, by Charles Foster, Dundurn Press, 2000.

Del Lord (b. Grimsby, Ont., 1894; d. 1970) ran away to join the circus at an early age and landed in Los Angeles in 1912. He joined Keystone and was one of the original Kops. He gained a reputation for perfect comic timing and the most accurate actor with the custard-pie-in-the-face routine. He graduated to producing and directing at Keystone and later directed many of the Three Stooges shorts for Columbia Pictures. Wallace MacDonald (b. Sydney, N.S., 1891; d. 1978), who was a mainstay in Hollywood for almost 45 years, first as an actor, then as a director of hundreds of B-movies, began his career in 1914 as one of the Kops and made seven shorts with Chaplin. Harry Edwards (b. London, Ont., 1888; d. 1952) entered films in 1912 as a prop boy and gradually worked his way up the ladder at Keystone. He developed into one of the best comedy directors of the silent period, working with Harry Langdon, Ben Turpin, Carole Lombard and many others. Marie Prevost (b. Sarnia, Ont., 1898; d. 1937) was educated in a convent school in Montreal and later at a Los Angeles high school. By the time she was 18 years old she had become one of Keystone's bathing beauties. She stayed with Sennett until 1921 when she went to Universal, where she was promoted to leading lady status and starred in three films by Ernst Lubitsch: *The Marriage Circle* and *Three Women* in 1924 and *Kiss Me Again* in 1925. She made the transition to talkies, but developed a problem with her weight and her career faltered. In a desperate attempt to shed pounds, Prevost went on a crash diet and starved herself to death at the age of 38.

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United Artists: Douglas Fairbanks, Mary Pickford, Charlie Chaplin and D.W. Griffith