

REPORTER DISPATCH

Journal of Old Allegheny History and Lore

LOIS WEBER: DAUGHTER OF ALLEGHENY

Film director, producer and star

by Tom Wilson

Our understanding of history depends on both what is written down, as well as what that history is written upon. Motion pictures prove this point. Upon screening Cecil B. DeMille's *Birth of a Nation* in 1915, Woodrow Wilson supposedly claimed: "This is like history writ with lightning!" But just as lightning is gone in a flash, so too is motion picture film.

From 1896 until 1952, most movies were shot and released on cellulose nitrate film. Nitrate film has a chemical composition similar to gunpowder; and if not stored correctly, can rapidly decay. Most of the films from the silent era are gone. Some say more than 80% are lost forever.

Lois Weber produced, directed, wrote or starred in over 300 films in a career spanning 1908–1934. Of those, only about 20 films survive! At her peak, she was the top-earning director in Hollywood, and a century later, she is practically unknown.

Lois started her life here in Allegheny on June 13, 1879. Her full name was Florence Lois Weber. According to the Allegheny Directory, her father, George Weber, was an upholsterer and decorator in a shop at 17 East Diamond. George spent several years in missionary street work. Mother Mary Matilda Snaman Weber, was the sister of George W. Snaman, who served on the Allegheny Select Council. George and Mary also had another daughter, Ethel, in 1887. They lived for a time on Jackson Street, and later at 1717 Fremont Street. (After the Annexation, Jackson Street became Jacksonia, and Fremont Street was renamed Brighton Place.)

George Weber encouraged his daughters' love of music, and wrote stories for them. Lois grew to become proficient on piano and was a talented soprano. By 1895 she was touring the country as a professional concert pianist. But after a year, a terrible thing happened: a piano key broke during a performance. Lois claimed: "The incident broke my nerve. I could not finish and I never appeared on the concert stage again."

She continued to sing, however, and traveled to New York to study voice. She worked as a street corner evangelist



LOIS WEBER

with the evangelical Church Army Workers (similar to the Salvation Army) and sang and played the organ in rescue missions in the red light district. She wanted to reach more converts, however, and by 1904 she became a stage actress. She said: "As I was convinced the theatrical profession needed a missionary... the best way to reach them was to become one of them."

While appearing in an appropriately titled show called *Why Girls Leave Home*, she fell in love with the leading man and manager of the traveling troupe, Phillips Smalley. They were married that same year in Chicago. Lois toured with the company for a few years, but by 1906 settled in New York, while her husband continued on tour. Here, she landed a job recording songs for the American Gaumont Chronophone company.

In France, the Gaumont company had been pioneering some of the first motion pictures with sound, having semi-successfully invented a method of synchronizing phono-

continued

graphs with film projectors. Alice Guy Blaché brought this new technology to the United States in 1907, and although the primitive sound technology did not pan out, the silent film industry grew rapidly. Ms. Blaché went on to co-found The Solax Company, which made Fort Lee, New Jersey the nurturing ground of the young American film industry. Here, many pioneering film companies like Solax, Reliance Studio, the Rex Motion Picture Company, and Bosworth got their start, and by 1910 Weber and Smalley wrote, acted, directed, designed sets and costumes, edited and even developed the film for all of them. (At Rex, they had the opportunity to work with and learn from Connellsville native Edwin S. Porter, who had produced some of Edison's earliest motion pictures.) These companies banded together to form The Universal Film Manufacturing Company in 1912.

By 1913, the benefits of lower costs and a climate that accommodated year-round filming made Hollywood the new home of Universal City, and Lois Weber and Phillips Smalley moved to Hollywood. Two of the short films Weber made that year have survived: *How Men Propose*, and *Suspense*. In 1914, Weber co-directed (with Smalley) a four-reel version of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, making her the first woman director of a feature film.

Here at last was a medium that would allow Lois to reach a broader audience. She wanted to use film to help bring about social change. She said: "If pictures are to make and maintain a position alongside the novel and the spoken drama as a medium of expression of permanent value, they must be concerned with ideas which get under the skin and affect the living and the thinking of the people who view them. In other words, they must reflect without extravagance or exaggeration the things which we call human nature, and they must have some definite foundation in morality." You could take the girl out of Allegheny, but you couldn't take the Allegheny out of the girl. Her Victorian morals shine through in her work. But beyond seeming to be a mere Christian fundamentalist, she tended more toward thoughtful libertarianism, emphasizing the need for a strong and nurturing home in films that opposed censorship and the death penalty, while championing birth control.



LOIS WEBER on the set of *The Angel of Broadway* (1927) with cinematographer Arthur Miller. Courtesy British Film Institute.

Most of Weber's films tackled serious subjects. In *The Hypocrites*, (1915) she uses visual allegory to reveal the hypocritical desires for money, sex and power of the supposedly religious church-goers. A nude actress in the role of "The Naked Truth" holds a mirror up to the hypocrisy of the congregation. The controversial nudity caused the film to be banned in Ohio, and the mayor of Boston ordered all frames featuring the naked woman



HYPOCRITES 1915

to have clothing painted on! These prohibitions only made the film more popular, and it played lengthy engagements at a time when feature films were changed out at theatres every two or three days.

1916 saw more serious subjects explored: *The People vs. John Doe*, based on an actual murder case, took on capital punishment. *Hop: The Devil's Brew* looked at drug addiction. Abortion and eugenics are examined in *Where Are My Children?* and birth control is the subject of *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle*, released in 1917.

It was becoming apparent that her husband, Phillips Smalley was not actually doing much of the directing. When Lois Weber Productions opened and Smalley was named studio manager, Lois became the only woman granted membership in the Motion Picture Directors Association. At a time when Hollywood was moving toward a more vertically-integrated model of film production, Lois was operating as more of an auteur. She said: "A real director should be absolute. He alone knows the effects he wants to produce, and he alone should have authority in the arrangement, cutting, titling or anything else which it may be found necessary to do to the finished product. What other artist has his creative work interfered with by someone else?" She could also see the direction the art of filmmaking was heading: "The purely mechanical side of producing interests me. The camera is fascinating to me. I long for stereoscopic and natural color photography, but I would sacrifice the latter for the former." 3-D! Color! She was ready for the future!

But the future was no longer interested in Lois. After the Great War, the prudish, preachy melodramas favored by

Weber had become passé, and Jazz Age audiences were more interested in exuberant tales of hedonistic flappers or broad comedy. Lois Weber Productions closed in 1921. She divorced Smalley in 1922, and as studios consolidated their production methods, independent directors like her were marginalized. She worked as a script doctor at Universal through the mid-Twenties, helping the studio craft screenplays out of great novels such as *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. She occasionally took on a directing job, but only directed 10 films during the course of the 1920s.

Lois Weber remarried in 1926. Captain Harry Gantz, a pioneer aviator during the Pancho Villa Expedition, was a bit of an opportunist, and had a few real estate 'investment ideas' for Lois' fortune. They parted in 1930 and were divorced in 1935.

In 1933, Lois directed one last film, a talkie called *White Heat*. Originally titled *Cane Fire*, it was the story of racial prejudice and miscegenation, shot on location in Hawaii, which featured Virginia Cherrill, who was engaged to Cary Grant at the time. Like so many of Lois Weber's films, *White Heat* is now considered a lost film; no prints are known to survive.

Troubled by a bleeding ulcer for years, Lois died, presumably penniless, on November 13, 1939. She was cremated, but the location of her remains are unknown. She had written a memoir, *The End of the Circle*, which her sister Ethel attempted to have published for the next thirty years. Unfortunately, when Ethel died in 1970, the nurse caring for her stole Ethel's jewelry and the memoir. They were never recovered.

In 1960, for her contribution to the motion picture industry, Weber was awarded a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame at 6518 Hollywood Boulevard.

The Allegheny City Society was proud to present a brief discussion on Lois Weber's life, and a screening of three of her surviving works: Two short subjects: *How Men Propose* (1913) and *Suspense* (1913), and the feature: *The Hypocrites* (1915). The films were presented silent, via digital projection, with live musical accompaniment by Allegheny City composer Tom Roberts.

The National Film Preservation Foundation has posted Lois Weber's *Where Are My Children?* on their website. You can watch it here: <<http://www.filmpreservation.org/preserved-films/screening-room/where-are-my-children-1916>>

ALLEGHENY FILM SERIES

Next screening on April 3

by John Canning

Many thanks to the Allegheny Unitarian Universalist congregation for providing space to screen the Winter Film series. The first two programs featuring works with Allegheny City connections and were well attended. In February, two films were shown: *The Bat* and *The Bat Whispers*, both based on Mary Robert Rinehart's well known mystery story, *The Circular Staircase*. A week before the screening, twenty-some members of the ACS learned a great deal about Rinehart during a visit to Pitt's archives center in Oakland. ACS Board member, David Grinnell arranged this program with the team at Pitt who are processing Rinehart's letters, and memorabilia. One, extraordinary career for the "daughter of Arch Street."

Speaking of Allegheny's "daughters," filmgoers at the second screening on March 20 learned a great deal about Lois Weber. One of the major film directors during the silent film years, Weber was highly regarded among her peers for her acting and directing capabilities. Weber was born in Allegheny in the late nineteenth century. Her childhood

homes were on Jackson (Jacksonia) Street and on Fremont Street (Brighton Place). She lived only few houses away from the childhood home of dance legend, Martha Graham. We were equally fortunate to have Tom Roberts, who composed *The Allegheny Rag* for our gala anniversary event in 2007, play the piano for the Weber silent films.

On Tuesday the third of April the series ends with the screening of *The Valley of Decision*. This film, starring Greer Garson, Gregory Peck, and Lionel Barrymore, was released



VALLEY OF DECISION 1945

nearly 70 years ago, in 1945. Based on the 1943 novel by Marcia Davenport, most of the story takes place in Allegheny City of the 1890s. Folks who knew Davenport when she lived in Pittsburgh and sought out information for the novel have said that she likely used the Walton

mansion on Western Avenue for the Scott home in her book. The film will be shown at 7 PM on April 3 in the sanctuary of the Allegheny UU Church. All members and friends are welcome.

THE FIRE ALARM TELEGRAPH

Modern system comes to Allegheny City in 1867

by Michael Shealey

In the nineteenth century, the fire alarm telegraph was a utility used in urban areas to announce the existence and location of a fire. Fire alarm telegraph systems consisted of locked fire alarm boxes at key locations. In the event of a fire, an authorized official – usually a police officer – would unlock the box nearest the fire and tap out the box number. As an example, if an officer observed a fire near Box 57, the officer would open Box 57 and use the telegraph key to tap out five clicks in quick succession followed by a pause and then seven clicks in quick succession to identify the fire location as near box 57. The fire alarm telegraph functioned in essentially the same manner as a normal communications telegraph, the difference being that the communications telegraph sent a series of faint clicks between operators and the fire alarm telegraph connected to fire bells at fire engine companies. Prior to the adoption of the fire telegraph system in Allegheny City, fire alarms were raised by either sounding bells at individual fire engine houses or the bell on the old City Hall.

Cost was a significant factor in a system requiring boxes spaced at reasonable intervals and miles of connecting wire. In 1865 Pittsburgh and then in 1866 Allegheny began to investigate the possibility of installing the system in each city. Frustration in each city mounted as city officials delayed implementation of the system as options and cost of the systems was considered. Finally, in 1866 in Pittsburgh and 1867 in Allegheny City, fire alarm telegraph systems were established.

During the period of slow city council consideration of the fire alarm telegraph projects, an exasperated reporter for *The Pittsburgh Evening Chronicle* in September 1865 satirically suggested that the City Fathers might find a system of coordinated shouting by designated city officials to be an acceptable alternative for raising fire alarms:

The Fire Superintendent of Troy, New York, has devised a new system of fire alarms which has some excellent features. It is this. Whenever a patrolman discovers a fire in his district, after dark, he is to announce it at the top of his voice to the patrolman on the “beats” adjoining his, who, in turn, also an-

nounce the location of the conflagration. In this way the locality and extent of the fire will be communicated to every section of the city, and will be useful information not only to the fire department, but to citizens generally.

Since the abandonment of the Fire Alarm Telegraph project in our city by the Councils, on account of its cost, we have been diligently endeavoring to discover some new and cheap system by which the alarm of fire could be conveyed from one part of the city to another. Formerly it was given by means of engine house bells, but of late even they neglect, intentionally or otherwise, to give any proper notice. This is just the thing, and there is no doubt that it will be adopted if brought before our progressive City Fathers at their next meeting.

WASHINGTON COUNTY TOUR

A Civil War history road trip

by Ruth McCartan

The Allegheny City Society and the Greater Pittsburgh Civil War Roundtable are going on a history road trip on April 21 to the major cities of Washington County. First we will visit Canonsburg, the former location of Jefferson College, an institution that sent many students to help preserve the Union. Doctor Jonathan Letterman, medical director of the Army of the Potomac called this city home. Before leaving the city we will visit Sarris Candies.

Our first cemetery tour of the day will be to Hill United Presbyterian Church for a visit to a few civil war heroes buried there. We will have lunch before exploring the county seat, Washington or “Little Washington” to Pittsburghers. The LeMoyne House Civil War room will be open and the house museum curator will tell us of the involvement of the LeMoyne family in the Underground Railroad. Like Jefferson College during the war, Washington College – now Washington and Jefferson College – had students enlisting to serve their country. A few noteworthy veterans will be discussed while visiting the Veterans Memorial on the current campus. Our last stop will be the Washington Cemetery which overlooks the city here we will learn of the Medal of Honor winners buried there and stop at the Washington County Civil War Memorial.

Form your car pools now. This spring trip will be here soon. Cost is \$10.00, lunch will not be included. If you are hungry for still MORE history, join us for dinner at Century Inn in Scenery Hill, Pennsylvania. The food is great and Abraham Lincoln ate there too.

Questions will be answered by Ruth McCartan at 412-364-6132 or <theruthso3@yahoo.com> (a History Chicks Production)



AN EARLY FIREBOX

YOU ARE CORDIALLY INVITED TO THE ANNUAL MEETING OF

The Allegheny City Society

Wednesday, April 25, 2012— Dinner 6:00 pm & Program 7:00 pm

The McGovern Conference Center at Allegheny General Hospital
320 East North Avenue, North Side

The Annual meeting of the Society will be held on Wednesday, April 25. The location is the McGovern Conference Center, which is on the Second Floor at Allegheny General Hospital.

The evening will begin at 6:00 with a buffet dinner followed by a brief business meeting and an exciting program. The 2012 Rimmel Award will be presented to Gus and Stella Kalaris aka “Gus and Yai-Yai.”

It is hard to imagine that there are any North Side folks who have not stopped at the Orange-and-White Ice Ball Cart. Over the years, Gus and Yia-Yia’s has been feature in a variety of media through out Western Pennsylvania. Gus and Stella, both native North Siders, have made the area of the Allegheny Commons near the Iron Deer one of the most frequented spots on the North Side. Every year, from before the first ball is pitched at PNC Park until well into the Steeler’s

schedule, folks look forward to one of Gus’s Ice balls or a bag of peanuts or a box of hot buttered popcorn OR all three!

The program at the Annual Meeting will focus on the history of this wonderful North Side icon located on Western Avenue “since your dad was a Lad.” Come prepared to share you stories of Ice Balls, the Iron Deer and the Park. It should be a fun evening. Invite your friends who will enjoy the reminiscences of North Side history.

The cost of the evening is \$25.00 which includes dinner, program, a grand evening of North Side history, and an opportunity to experience the McGovern Center. The cost also includes a free parking pass for use in the AGH lot.

Reservations for the dinner and program may be made by mailing in the form below, by phone at (412) 364-6132, or by e-mail: < info@alleghenycity.org >.

Name

Phone

E-mail

..... Yes! I will be there for dinner and program

..... I am attending the program only

Please enclose a check for \$25.00 to cover the cost of the dinner, and mail to:
ALLEGHENY CITY SOCIETY, PO BOX 100255, PITTSBURGH, PA 15233

Mail your response to the Society by April 18

SUMMER TOURS & PROGRAMS

by John Canning

Plans are being made for several ACS programs this summer. One major project is to sponsor a series of evening concerts in the exiting new park at the former intersection of Federal and Ohio Streets.

Many of our members will be happy to see the new park that will open in June at the site across from the Children's Museum. Originally part of the Alleghenytown Square, this was the site of the early haymarket. In the late nineteenth century, John Ober, civic-minded brewer from Troy Hill presented Allegheny City with formal design of flower beds and a fountain. In the 1930s, when the Buhl Planetarium was built, the *old* Ober Park was replaced with a different design that appropriately connected the Planetarium with the Boggs and Buhl department store. Thirty years later, during the construction of the Allegheny Center Mall, the Buhl Park was replaced with a park designed in the Modernist/Brutalist style of that era. Today, a new park designed for a variety of uses by folks of all ages is nearing completion. The Children's

Museum took the lead in the creation of this new park on the ancient public square.

Another summer program in the planning stages is an event focusing on the 123rd regiment that was formed 150 years ago following a call from President Lincoln for a nationwide enlistment. Speakers about the 123rd, the 1863 enlistment campaign held in the Allegheny City Commons, and Civil War-era music will be part of this day-long program.

Several ACS members are also planning a couple of bicycle tours to traverse the hills and valleys of Allegheny and to stop at sites of historical interest (non-cyclists may wish to join the tour in the motor vehicles).

Look for specific information about these programs in future newsletters, on the Allegheny City Society website, or on the ACS Facebook page.



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