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## **Women in the Film Industry-A Promise of Inclusion**

by Bess Austin

### Part I. Women in Film-Welcome or Unwelcome?

Since the early days of the original "flickers", the role of women in film was viewed as a separate and often unconventional group of misfits. The idea of working in moving pictures beckoned people from around the country as a rapidly growing taste for this particular form of entertainment caught fire with the public. But for talented women, whether a performer, writer, artist or producer, their rise was a slow and tedious climb up the mountain of acceptance into this new world of film.

During the Silent film era, women were just beginning to move into positions of power in the budding world of moving pictures. This new opportunity seemed to run in tandem with the suffragists and their demands to be given the vote. For the first time, it was becoming acceptable when a woman dreamed of holding a job, obtaining a degree or creating a business outside of the home. Women were being noticed for their intelligence, creativity and forward thinking in what had once been considered strictly a 'Man's World'.

One of the first female directors was Alice Blache', a Frenchwoman who, along with George Magie, formed a production company in New York. By 1910, her short films such as "The Cabbage Fairy" told some of the earliest fictional tales in movies. Blache's success proved that women could master the technical aspects of film making as well as the creative side.

Movies, with their magical ability to mesmerize an audience, opened doors for women to become artists, film editors, costumers, producers, camera operators and more. Female continuity and screenwriters, proliferated through Hollywoodland as they worked on a spate of memorable silent films with Dorothy Yost, Frances Marion, Agnes Johnston and Sonya Levien being among them. It was believed that roughly half of all screenwriters were women.

Despite the novelty of motion pictures, however, film funding was the great challenge to production in those early years even as it is today. Women who desired to produce, financed films through dowries, divorce settlements, family inheritance and even their own careers. Today's industry owes a great deal to these female pioneers who proved themselves to be daring and financially astute as they took on the role of executive producers. Their numbers spanned every racial and cultural member of society, each striving to produce short and feature films that would draw in an eager viewing public.

Madeline Brandeis was one of the first women to produce true educational shorts, Distributed by Pathe' in the late 1920's, Brandeis coyly described her filmmaking as a "pastime." Many women producers sought to defray criticism for straying outside the boundaries of home and family to

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which none were immune despite familial, financial or cultural status. Regardless of the strictures of society, the list of these businesswomen is impressive.

Maria P. Williams, an African-American filmmaker, both produced and performed in "The Flames of Wrath" in addition to being assistant manager for a Chicago theatre. Marion E. Wong built the Mandarin Film Company and produced "The Curse of Quon Gwon" in an effort to introduce Chinese culture to the West. Under the umbrella of Beatriz Michelena Films, Mexican-American actress Beatriz Michelena, who was reputed to perform her own stunts, made "Just Squaw" and others. Jewish producer Marem Leveton, performing under the pseudonym of Alla Nazimova, worked in lighting and costume design before forming her Nazimova Productions. Despite financial losses on her films, "A Doll's House" was considered technically ahead of its time.

Women flocked to film in the hope fulfilling their dreams of independence, inventiveness and artistry. Lotte Reiniger, a German director, developed a new technique of utilizing silhouettes that became a steppingstone in the creation of animated films. Norma Talmadge, Nell Shipman and Mabel Normand, the comedic darling of Mack Sennett, all produced and starred in their own movies. Mary Pickford, the silent film star, produced films and later joined husband, Douglas Fairbanks, Sr. and other actors to create United Artists. Pickford possessed such a head for business that her male partners deferred to her on opinions of contractual arrangements, stocks and film funding.

Women in motion pictures quickly learned how to network and discovered the value of utilizing their feminine contacts to better themselves. Actress Frances Marion gambled her career prospects to assist Marie Dressler, a comedic actress, in getting roles. Beatrice de Mille, of the famed De Mille film family, as well as other influential industry members gave parties where only females were allowed. These were often tagged derisively as "cat parties" but they did serve to open doors for the attendees through introductions and exchanges that might otherwise have remained closed.

Into the early 1920's, opportunities for women continued to blossom throughout the motion picture community. Appreciation for their talent and artistry had grown and they viewed the future with real hope. Barriers had been broken but in the post-war world, consolidation of major studios to include distribution and theatre chains plus the introduction of sound created a change in structure of the filmmaking. Roles that women had carved out in an industry they had looked upon as welcoming were beginning to disappear.