

HOLLYWOOD: THE BLESSED AND CURSED

R. E. SHERWOOD

The discovery of Hollywood, like most epoch-making discoveries, was accidental. It happened that, in 1912, Jesse L. Lasky, a vaudeville magnate, joined with his brother-in-law, Samuel Goldfish, a glove salesman, in the formation of a motion picture producing company. Their first offering (and, they assured themselves, probably their last) was to be "The Squaw Man." They engaged Cecil B. DeMille as director and Dustin Farnum as star, and sent them to Flagstaff, Arizona, to make the picture. Flagstaff was selected because it sounded as though it would provide suitable backgrounds for the enactment of a vigorous Western melodrama, but when DeMille and Farnum arrived there, and took one look at the prospect from the station platform, they stepped back on the train and continued on to the Pacific Coast. A chance acquaintance happened to mention to them a hamlet called Hollywood, a sleepy suburb of Los Angeles, which is itself the largest suburb on earth, and they made that their objective. They rented a barn on Vine Street, and there produced "The Squaw Man," the first feature picture to be born beneath the California sun.

(I do not know whether there was actually any holly in Hollywood when the first adventurers arrived there, or whether that Christmassy, Dickensian name emerged from the imagination of some pioneer realtor. There is no holly in Hollywood now, nor any green thing that grows by the will of God as opposed to the artifice of man. The water which irrigates the gaudy gardens about the villas of the stars is imported from far distant sources, just as is the supply of talent, ingenuity and sex appeal which animates the cameras.)

After "The Squaw Man" came the first of the immortal Keystone comedies, produced by Mack Sennett, with Ford Sterling, Chester Conklin, Mabel Normand, Fatty Arbuckle, Marie Dressler and, eventually, Charlie Chaplin; then Adolph Zukor moved his Famous Players organization to Los Angeles to make "Tess of the Storm Country," starring little Mary Pickford, and David Wark Griffith arrived with his company of Biograph players to produce the first of the epics, "The Birth of a Nation." In the year 1915, the second gold rush to California assumed colossal proportions.

As vast prosperity came to Hollywood, so did scandal, and

OldMagazineArticles.com

with it, fame unbounded. The sensational stories, printed in the less scrupulous newspapers and magazines, of Byzantine orgies in the film colony—stories of immorality on the grand scale—conveyed to the avid public the assurance that life in Hollywood was a veritable bed of orchids to be shared with the most desirable, the most god-like representatives of the opposite sex. As a direct result of this lovely misconception, Hollywood became the goal toward which traveled the hopes and dreams of all the frustrated morons: it was recognized as the fountainhead of romance, wherein the frailest, pimpest ribbon clerk could be converted into a devastating Don Juan and the sorriest slavey into a voluptuous Cleopatra.

So the highways across the Mojave Desert were clogged with immigrants, following with pathetic confidence the path of the blistering sun, seeking the 'thing (whatever it was) that had been gained with apparent ease by such bewildering beings as Gloria Swanson, Richard Barthelmess, Clara Bow and Jackie Coogan. Some few of the hundreds of thousands of unsolicited immigrants had been provident enough to bring with them funds sufficient for their support for a week or so in California; others were positive that they had only to knock once upon the studio portals to achieve the miracle of recognition.

The enormous increase in population thus promoted in the Los Angeles district was naturally gratifying to the Chamber of Commerce boosters, but it imposed a terrific strain upon the local charitable organizations. The swarms of candidates for fame and fortune became public charges and consequently damned nuisances. The employees of the Young Men's and Young Women's Christian and Hebrew Associations, the Salvation Army, the Motion Picture Relief Fund, etc., were constantly having to listen to the same sad tale: "I've come all the way from New Bedford (or Quito, or Maida Vale, or Eisenach) and they told me at the studios 'No Casting Today' but if you can only help me out until tomorrow I *know* I'll get a break!"

The break always came, but it was usually in the form of a compound fracture of the illusions. Probably no more than one-fifth of one per cent of those who have journeyed to Hollywood

HOLLYWOOD: THE BLESSED AND CURSED

3

in quest of employment have ever managed to earn a bare living out of the movies.

It must be said for the regular inhabitants of Hollywood that they have done all they could to correct the appallingly false impression of their adopted home town. They were embarrassed and horrified by the stories of fancy vice that were being circulated by gossipy journalists. They believed (erroneously) that this sort of notoriety would hurt their business. Through the offices of the film czar, Will H. Hays, and of that impressively named organization, the Motion Picture Academy of Arts and Sciences, propaganda was spread to persuade mankind that Hollywood was neither Xanadu nor Mecca, but, in reality, a reputable community of church-going, God-fearing, temperate, and commendably sexless Puritans.



this article first appeared in

AMERICA

AS AMERICANS SEE IT

EDITED BY FRED J. RINGEL

THE LITERARY GUILD

NEW YORK

1932

OldMagazineArticles.com

