

# The Birth of an Era

The first twelve-reeler, the first two-hour feature, the first film to be seen in legitimate theatres at theatre prices was *The Birth of a Nation*

By **LILLIAN GISH**

As I look back upon the making of the picture, the chief difficulty seems to have been finding the money to go on with the ideas Mr. Griffith had in his head—or perhaps I should say in his heart, as he was from Kentucky, the son of Roaring Jake Griffith, a colonel in the Confederate Army. He firmly believed that the truth of the Civil War had never been told, and he was quite willing to dip into his heart's blood to tell, through this new medium of the silent screen (in many ways his own invention), the story he believed in above all else in the world. I am sure it seemed more real to him than the World War, which was then taking place.

As nothing like a twelve-reel film had ever been attempted before, he naturally met with opposition on all sides. When the so-called business men of the picture industry, believing him to be an impractical dreamer, refused him financial aid, he went begging to the merchants of Los Angeles for a thousand dollars here, five thousand there, another two thousand from someone else.



Lillian Gish, the unidentified extra and the celebrated wistful glance. Although the fans clamored for his name, the soldier in this famous still has always remained unknown.

I remember my mother, having saved three hundred dollars, implored Mr. Griffith to use the money for the picture, but as it was all we had in the world he refused to take it. As we had been working without salaries for weeks, he couldn't say when pay checks would start coming in again. The picture actually took nine weeks to make, but there were many days during this time when work stopped and Mr. Griffith would be out trying to raise the money to continue.

At first we were told that we were going to do a moving-picture version of the play and novel by Thomas Dixon called *The Clansman*, but anyone who has ever read either of these and has seen the picture, *The Birth of a Nation*, will know how far afield from the originals we went.

As actors, our picture schooling had been similar to that which Mr. Stanislavsky so graphically describes in Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood's fine translation of *An Actor Prepares*. There was never anything written for us and no scenario (any more than there were designs for sets; Mr. Griffith would explain to the head carpenter what he wanted and he would build them).

There was a standard call for rehearsal whenever there was rain or the sun disappeared, as at such times all cameras stopped, since it was before the days of artificial lights. During the rainy season there would be weeks of rehearsals, with Mr. Griffith outlining stories to be filmed far into the future. Some of them, including *Faust* and *Joan of Arc*, never reached the screen. We were rarely assigned parts, and the younger members of the company always rehearsed for the older members when the story was being developed, as all the "writing" was done by Griffith as he moved groups of characters around a room.

When the story was ready to go before the camera, the older players who were to play the parts on the screen came forward and acted the parts they had been watching us re-



One of the first panoramic battle shots, and still one of the greatest.

hearse for them. This method gave them the advantage of not being over-rehearsed, and also of watching the story quietly unfold before their eyes, giving them ideas that might have escaped had they not been kept fresh for the actual creation. It also taught the more inexperienced members what eventually would be expected of them.

At first I was not cast to play in *The Clansman*. My sister and I had been the last to join the company, and we naturally supposed, this being a big picture, that the main assignments would go to the older members. But one day while we were rehearsing the scene where the colored man picks up the northern girl gorilla-fashion, my hair, which was very blond, fell far below my waist, and Griffith, seeing the contrast in the two figures, assigned me to play Elsie Stoneman (who was to have been Mae Marsh). My sister, a child at the time, was to have played the girl of twelve, little sister to the Colonel.

Very often we would play episodes without knowing the complete story, or in which film Griffith was going to use them, as he shrouded his ideas in great secrecy for fear another studio would hear of them and get them on the screen first. Only Griffith knew the continuity of *The Birth of a Nation* in its final form. There was much anxiety, and many tears shed, over the assignment of parts, as we all wanted to prove our worth before it was too late, and with photography in its undeveloped state we knew we would be *passé* by the time we reached eighteen.

The cameraman for *The Birth of a Nation* was Billy Bitzer, who, together with Mr. Griffith, was inventor of the various new devices employed in the photography of the picture—devices never used before, and innovations in the art of motion-picture photography. Among us actors he was famous for his accurate eye, and he left his mark on everything his lens faced by bringing to accurate vision on the screen many things the eye itself could not discern. This was wonderful for battlefields but most trying on faces. We used to beg for our close-ups to be taken just after dawn or before sunset, as the soft yellow glow was much easier to work in than the hard, overhead sun of midday.

Henry B. Walthall, or Wally, as he was affectionately called, came from Alabama, and was everything in life that his character of the Little Colonel was on the screen: patient, dear, and lovable, but with little idea of time. Consequently all during the filming of the picture there was a man hired for the sole

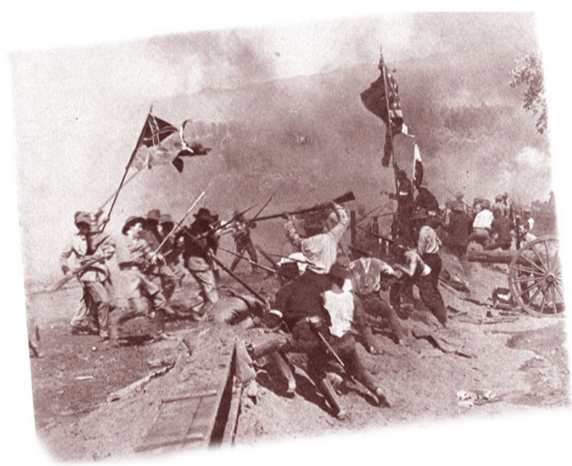
*The Birth of a Nation*

purpose of getting him into make-up and to work on time, which in those days was around seven in the morning (that meant getting up at five and working steadily, sometimes without lunch, until sundown).

Sometimes, while Griffith was making scenes we were not in, he would send us to practice walking, first with comedy, then with drama, with pathos, or with tragedy. When he was satisfied with that we would have to learn to run in these different manners. Then we would have to do it with subtlety, for when the camera would be close to us, then broader, for when the camera would be in the distance, then for such times as the camera would be far in the distance (which would necessitate acrobatics); all this with complete body control and balance, as it might have to be done on a sea wall or on a mountain top. You had to know how to dance and handle horses, or if you didn't, these had to be learned outside of studio hours.

It is very strange in those old pictures to watch the wind blowing through the rooms, when the property man had forgotten to tack down curtains, tablecloths, and such tell-tale properties.

Mr. Griffith had his reward, however, when President Wilson saw it at the White House and said, "It is like writing history with lightning, and my only regret is that it is all so terribly true." When this news flashed through the country, and it was learned that a mere motion picture had the power to stir feeling so deeply, *The Birth of a Nation's* reputation was made, and motion pictures took their place as an important part of our daily life.



*More masterpieces from the camera of Mr. Griffith's Billy Bitzer. Above, hand-to-hand conflict between Union and Confederate forces. (Below) Ku Kluxers charge on Negro forces.*

