WHEN JANET GAYNOR BEGAN HER CAREER AS STAR AND SORENSON AS DIRECTOR

Several noted figures of the screen world appear above at the start of their career. This was the first picture B. Sorenson (seen kneeling at the camera, holding the hand of the little girl) directed. At the extreme left is Lieutenant Williams, a celebrated naval flyer, Janet Gaynor, appearing in her first picture, "Mother" Crawford, Pierce Gendron, playwright, Olive Borden, also in her first picture, and others.

Filming the Stars

Noted Sooner Photographer Tells How It Is Done

By B. Sorenson, '33, Famous Players-Lasky Cameraman

In the guise of an experienced stage and motion picture actor I talked my way through the casting office to become an actor for Lon Chaney, who was then making "The Hunchback of Notre Dame."

My first appearance in a motion picture studio gave me the feeling that every movement I made was under the closest scrutiny. Actually, however, not a person about the place was conscious of my presence. If anyone had been I would have been treated with the usual contempt reserved for extras. In studios everywhere extras, or hams, are the scum of the earth.

Almost my first experience on the lot was to commit the unpardonable sin of an extra, to be late on location. The slip that was given to me assigned me to stage B, and rather than to ask and display a lack of information I walked from one end of the lot to the other looking for the place. When I arrived at stage B I found that I had been holding up the entire company. Even yet I blush to remember the endearing terms the director, Mr. Worsley, called me.

The assistant director shoved me in beside Mr. Chaney telling me the thing that I was supposed to do. Lights, lights, lights everywhere, so many lights that I was completely blinded by them.

"Hit that little shrimp with your baby spot, Jo," yelled the cameraman. Now who could blame me for jumping knowing that at any instant I was to be hit with a spot light. That little move on my part did not add a whole lot to my already fast diminishing prestige as the world's most promising actor.

"Hit all of 'em, Jo," again yelled the cameraman. If I had been blind before the lights there wasn't any chance for me ever to see now.

"Ready, action, camera." The all powerful had spoken, the Director.

And here I was on the way to fame and fortune unable to make a move. The old eyes would not stay open and my knees might just as well have been on some one else for all the good they were doing me. My mouth I am sure hung open in fright and all the so-called will power that we are supposed to possess had evidently left me in my hour of need. It goes without saying that a substitute was called to do the part and that I was gently but firmly ushered from stage B. Mr. Chaney was the life saver for me. I was asked to have lunch with him as he wanted to talk to me. And what a talking it was. Following his advice the screen lost an actor. Mr. Chaney suggested that I become a cameraman if my determination was going to hold out. Now I know why he made that suggestion. All cameramen are either cameramen or ditch diggers, because there is nothing that requires any less talent than a cinematographer.

OVERTY ROW, where all the horse operas are made, not to overlook the quickies, the four day wonders, the spasms, dog operas and all pictures that are made for the theaters where you do not have to stand in line, then became my living quarters. Here I was able to get a job as an assistant cameraman, the hardest job in the entire company. You carry the camera (weighing seventy pounds), all the cases and the rest of the equipment for the entire company. The only hard part is finding time to run to the bank the minute you get your check, for if you are the last one
to arrive your work may have been for nothing, and believe me it is one mad rush on Wednesday in Hollywood. A stranger might think something had gone wrong or that all these people were going to a fire. So if ever you go to Hollywood stay off poverty row on Wednesday. It doesn't take long for a person to get wise to themselves doing quickies, so before long I succeeded in making Alberta Vaughn think that she could not make another picture without me.

On the first shooting day we were making running inserts from an automobile, that is, the camera was tied in the front seat of the car, focused on the rear seat. Traveling about sixty miles an hour to produce the effect that we wanted on the screen, the car hit a small bump in the road, making it bounce quite high. Fortunately the camera was tied, but not poor Alberta. The bump was sufficiently hard to lift her completely from the seat. That didn't matter so much, the only difficulty being that we could not stop the car and wait for her to join us. Fortunately she was not hurt but it cost me my job temporarily.

Miss Vaughn refused to work without me so I was called back at a small boost in salary and quite a large swelling of the head. Between spasms (all two reel pictures are known as spasms) the Evelyn Brent company borrowed me, and on the first picture I was again at fault. Working in the mountains one of the men found a large honey tree. Every one was willing to leave it alone but me. Anyway the honey bees were not willing to be deprived of all their work without a little fun in return, and speaking for the whole troupe they had their little joke. Miss Brent still carries a few marks from that picture. For days we were unable to work.

I must have been an awful sap, for my next move was to organize a company of my own, having Janet Gaynor as my leading lady, with Olive Borden as the second woman. The only thing wrong was that we had to go into bankruptcy after the second picture. If ever you have the good fortune to meet Janet, the first thing that she will do will be to show you that picture.

We were working in Santa Barbara at the time of the earthquake and from the resulting publicity she was called to the Fox company for an interview and test. After the test she was signed to a five year contract. Later Olive was also signed by the same company. Both girls were marvelous in that trying ordeal, devoting many, many hours of hard work in actual relief work.

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Oklahoma City high school graduate who won an international reputation as cameraman for Famous Players-Lasky at Hollywood. Sorenson has had a varied experience as actor with Lon Chaney, another Oklahoman, who advised him to become a photographer, as cinematographer and as director. He filmed "The Wedding March," directed by Erich von Stroheim, which will be released soon. Sorenson, still under contract with Famous Players-Lasky, returned to the university this fall to begin a medical course.

The sun was so hot that we did most of the shooting early in the morning when it was still comparatively cool, 112 in the shade of a tent. By midday the heat was so intense that the emulsion melted on the negatives. Possibly you remember the picture, "Greed," with Zasu Pitts, Chester Conklin and many others.

The work was much harder when we arrived home because we were several days behind our schedule (all pictures are made on a working schedule, that is, the company allows so many days in which to make the picture, and if you fall behind, the time has to be made up), so we worked night and day for several weeks trying to make up the lost time.

One instance, I recall in particular. We started one Sunday morning at 8 and we worked until the following Wednesday without leaving the stage. All our meals were brought to us. After an eight hour rest we were called back and again worked until Friday.

I am sure that you remember Miss Pickford's "Sparrows." Do you recall the terrible swamp and crocodiles in the picture? As the supervising cinematographer it was necessary for me to wear rubber boots and stand among the reptiles. Take my word for it they were honest to goodness crocodiles with a grudge against the human race. To keep them in an ugly mood all the men carried clubs and would strike them on the nose every once in a while just to remind them that they were ham actors and not guests of the Pickford company. My assistant was a slow thinking, slow moving fellow (it was necessary that I have a man like this the better to make it look as if I knew what it was all about) that did only just what he was told, in a slow, dragging manner.

Suffice it to say that he had been warned to stay clear of the crocodiles. One particularly hot, sultry day Carney was taking advantage of both the weather and the lull in shooting, snoozing in the shade of the camera parallel. Standing knee deep in mud and water progress at the fastest was slow. Big Ben, the most ill tempered of all the crocodiles had just been aroused from the most pleasant dream by a heavy rap on the nose and to get even was the uppermost thought in his head.

At the same time I was carrying Miss Pickford from the bank to the place where she was to work. Moving past us Ben made a pass with his tail at Carney. Not to be out done by any
crocodile Carney left both his rubber boots standing in the mud, seized Miss Pickford and me and pulled us under with him. Several men on the bank came to our rescue.

The pictures of the incident are most amusing.

Hilé making “The Sea Beast” with John Barrymore, we were going to use an electrically controlled whale, large enough to accommodate the five men necessary to control it. Being an adventurous sort of person, Mr. Barrymore suggested I go with him to make the initial voyage in it. The only thing wrong with the whale when we got going was that it stopped and started to sink. No matter how hard we tried to persuade it that the proper thing to do was work, it was sinking fast. To this day neither of us, nor the other three men have the least regard for whales of any kind.

The most interesting picture I worked on was “The Merry Widow” with Mae Murray, John Gilbert and many other famous people. Nothing much happened on this picture only that by the time we finished it not one person was on speaking terms with any one else on the crew. For three weeks we never left the stage at the studio, finishing so late at night and starting so early the next morning that there was not sufficient time to go back and forth. The actual working hours consumed on the picture were something like six months, even though the thing was finished in the scheduled time of eleven weeks.

Do you remember the picture called “The Plastic Age”? Both Clara Bow and Gilbert Roland were unknown then. It was this picture that pushed Clara to the front. A few months later Gilbert was still looking for a job (at liberty is the Hollywood term for being out of work). We certainly had loads of fun on that one, location was in a small school town which the residents turned over to us. I’m just a little afraid we took advantage of them. In a nice polite manner we were asked to leave and we all regretted that more than anything else.

On “The Yankee Clipper” with Bill Boyd, we had to have a shot taken from the mast in a very heavy sea. of Bill trying to repair a broken head 110 feet from the deck. On a calm day 110 feet is high but in a heavy sea it is more than high. First the ship rolls a little forward, then with a terrible heave and groan it will roll the other way. The noise by itself is enough to scare any one, but to be away up in that mast looking down, sometimes on the ship and more often on a mountain of sea, because when the ship rolls, you hang about the length of the mast over the water! It’s almost as bad as being told to jump from the wings of an airplane at a 4,500 foot altitude with a camera strapped to your body and with just the least bit of silk to hold you up. That jump was actually made when the famous flier, Leslie Arnold, was making the picture describing the flight around the world that the government aviators made a few years ago.

On “The Wedding March” with Erich von Stroheim featuring Fay Wray, von Stroheim, George Fawcett, George Nichols, Matthew Betz, Zasu Pitts and Maude George there was one sequence that called for all the cast to be under the influence of liquor. Starting one morning at 9 o’clock all the actors were caused to become intoxicated, and it was not until three the next morning that we were able to get the proper atmosphere for the scenes which show the Austrian court life before the war.

The only bad accident that we had on “The Wedding March” was the day we were shooting the sequence in which Fay was to be hurt. The horse was supposed to fall on Miss Wray. Instead he fell on Mr. Von and myself, putting us both in the hospital.

There is one gathering in Hollywood which is the envy of every one who does not belong. It is the recitals given by Ramon Navarro. Gloria Swanson, Mr. and Mrs. Douglas Fairbanks, both the Talmadge sisters, Joan Crawford, Greta Garbo, Gary Cooper, Richard Dix, Harry Carr, both the Costello girls, Conrad Nagel, are all regular visitors. Speaking modestly, I acted as Mr. Navarro’s pianist.

While making “Sky Scrapers” with Sue Carrol, Bill Boyd, Alberta Vaughn, and Allen Hale, Bill and I had another narrow escape. Standing on a steel beam that was to be lowered by a crane from the twenty-first floor to the ground we were swung away from the building in preparation for the long descent. Now don’t ever let any one sell you a ride on a descending steel girder. Down about the fifteenth floor the beam started to ease its way out of the chain that was holding it, my end being the down side and it looked as if I would beat Bill to the ground. Bill succeeded in reaching the tie chain and by inserting his foot between the girder and the chain he was able to stop its slipping thereby saving us both from being coal shovelers, postponing it for a while anyway.

If you saw the picture “Underworld” I need not tell you what an exciting time we had in making it. The gun sequences were very nerve racking, especially when we had to substitute the cameras for the actors and be shot at, we hoping that each bullet would miss. Real shells were used in order to create the proper atmosphere. There is hardly any more faking in the things you see on the screen. The general public has become so accustom to see the real thing that a trick shot is easily detected by them.

(To Be Concluded)