

The First Studios

by Marc Wanamaker

Up to 1900 movie-making was in the hands of inventors and technical wizards, who weren't going to lose money investing in a mere novelty. It was hard-headed entrepreneurs who turned the novelty into a nickel-rolling business. Their squabbles, legal wrangles and back-biting make up a large part of the early history of the movies.

The East Coast of the United States was the birthplace of motion-picture production, and by 1909 movie-making was dominated by a group of 13 manufacturers who had banded together as the Motion Picture Patents Company, headed by [Thomas Alva Edison](#). Because of Edison's patents on his movie camera, the Company proceeded to license only those companies using and paying royalties on it. The Patents Company 'trust' even hired agents to patrol movie-sets, laboratories and lofts in search of unpatented cameras. Shooting was disrupted by machinery stolen, and "accidents" resulting in loss of negatives, equipment, buildings and sometimes life and limb frequently occurred. This pressure contributed to the desertion from the East by many independent producers who decided to try their luck in the South, West and other sunny regions which were ideal for shooting. However, these trips were only seasonal, and the production units returned for the summer months.

Edison's first studio was the 'Black Maria,' [\[photo\]](#) built in New Jersey in 1893. The administrative offices of all the Edison enterprises remained there permanently, but by the turn of the century the main motion-picture production facility was transferred to New York City. A large, modern studio was built there in 1908 and featured indoor, overhead Aristo arc lights.

A figure of outstanding importance was Englishman William Kennedy Laurie Dickson, for it was he who dealt with Edison's early motion-picture work and must, therefore, be credited with the cinematic inventions patented under the Edison name. However, in 1895, he joined the American Mutoscope and Biograph Company, and designed and built a rotating studio similar to the 'Black Maria,' but with basic improvements. In 1908, [D.W. Griffith](#) began work at American Biograph, directing [Mary Pickford](#) and later [Lillian and Dorothy Gish](#), among many famous others. Ten years later Biograph built a modern complex in the Bronx.

Projections for the Future

The only independent producer that gave Edison a real run in his patent races was [Siegmond Lubin](#). By 1899, Lubin was advertising his productions and his own machinery in Europe. In 1908, he owned an impressive chain of theaters joining up with Edison when the wizard of Menlo Park formed the Motion Picture Patents Company. (If you can't beat 'em, join 'em!)

In 1897, J. Stuart Blackton and his partner Albert E. Smith converted their Edison projector into a camera and opened a tiny studio on the roof of the Morse Building in Manhattan. They became the American Vitagraph, Inc., and a few years later built a large motion-picture plant on Long Island. In the fall of 1911, the director Rollin S. Sturgeon left with a film unit for Santa Monica, California, and worked all winter in their new studio on Ocean Avenue. In 1914 Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky worked for American Vitagraph on *My Official Wife* as a technical adviser, and also received \$7 a day as an extra.

The Kalem Company was founded in 1907 and had a stock company that included actresses Helen Holmes and Gene Gauntier, and directors Robert Vignola, George Melford and Sidney Olcott. The latter took a

touring company to Ireland, Egypt and Palestine [where [From the Manger to the Cross](#) (1912) was filmed] in the early 1900s, and Kalem later established permanent production centres in New Jersey, California and Florida.

In 1910 the adventurous French movie producing company Pathé Freres moved into a warehouse and turned it into a studio. J.A. Berst, the manager of the American operation, originated a programme of 'American style' pictures and newreels which were sold around the world. By 1913 Pathé had completed modern studios in Jersey City, producing the legendary serial *The Perils of Pauline* (from 1914) with [Pearl White](#). Simultaneously another French film-manufacturing company, Eclair, designed and built an up-to-date film studio in Fort Lee, New Jersey. By 1912, Eclair had become part of the newly formed Universal Film Manufacturing Company and released through the new organization. Unhappily, fire destroyed most of the studio in 1914, leaving only the production plant.

[Lewis J. Selznick](#) moved to New Jersey - fast becoming the movie capital - in 1912. He had been general manager of the East Coast Universal Film Exchange, and had gained the backing of a Wall Street investment firm, along with a partnership in the Chicago mail-order house headed by Arthur Spiegel. Together they started Equitable Pictures, eventually merging with other companies to become World Pictures. Their directors included Albert Capellani, Emile Chautard and [Maurice Tourneur](#), and their principal star was Clara Kimball Young. Among their box-office attractions were traditional romances, dramas and comedies, starring Lillian Russell, Alice Brady, [Marie Dressler](#), Elaine Hammerstein and comic Lew Fields.

More foxy than foolish

[William Fox](#), who owned a number of movie houses on the East Coast, was denied films produced by Patents Company members because he resisted their control over his business. In order to have something to show in his theatres, he started his own film company and released his first feature [A Fool There Was](#) in 1915. This film made an overnight star of [Theda Bara](#) and created a whole generation of 'vamps.' The first Fox film studio had two large shooting stages resembling huge glass barns, and this remained his main property until he moved to New York City and Los Angeles in 1919. William Fox's original director was J. Gordon Edwards (grandfather of the present-day director Blake Edwards). Fox also hired [Universal's Herbert Brenon](#) [who married Theda Bara] and a young assistant working for D.W. Griffith, the soon-to-be famous actor/director [Raoul Walsh](#).

Another film pioneer was Colonel William Selig of the Chicago-based Selig Polyscope Film Company. he supplied exhibitors with the usual 'interior' dramas of the day, and also made Westerns, being the first employer of cowboy star [Tom Mix photo](#). In 1907 Colonel Selig sent his director Francis Boggs and his studio manager Thomas Persons to California, where they shot the spectacular California coast for a one-reel version of [The Count of Monte Cristo](#) - the interiors had already been shot in a Chicago studio. A few years later Colonel Selig established a West Coast studio on Allesandro Street in Edendale (now the Echo Park district of Los Angeles).

Unlicensed companies, such as the parent company for the '[Bison 101](#)' brand, the New York Motion Picture Company (NYMPC) and the Mack [Sennett](#) 'Keystone' brand - as well as the Independent Motion Picture Company (IMP), later to re-emerge as the Universal Film Manufacturing Company in 1912 - and others, went to Florida, Cuba, and even Texas, Oregon and California to escape the patents and red tape back East. In California they found, in addition to freedom and the proximity of the Mexican border, an abundance of sunshine and good weather all year round, plus diversity of scenery; all requirements for outdoor filming. Even licensed companies using Edison's patented cameras went West, as least for the winter, including D.W. Griffith of Biograph.

All the major studios established themselves in the early years of this century. When the first producers arrived in California, it was just an open area where they could buy or rent land cheaply. The Hollywood Hills were an ideal location for the popular Western, offering great panoramas of rolling farmland and dirt roads convenient for horseback chases, with lovely backdrops of Pepper and Eucalyptus trees; and everywhere the distinctive palm trees raised their heads. Los Angeles, assured of cheap water and power from the newly completed Los Angeles Aqueduct, began to develop other industries such as fruit and fish, oil and cotton, and the beginnings of a tourist trade. New York would eventually lose most of its movie production to the town built on sand, leaving the Easterners to the 'business' and production-financing, a role played to this day.

Taking to the Hills

Among the first to see the value of a California location was [Carl Laemmle](#) of the IMP Company. He organized the Universal Film Manufacturing Company and began to plan and build a permanent studio in the San Fernando Valley on the other side of the hills from Hollywood. It was officially opened in March 1915. Laemmle believed that his studio should be self-contained, and both the studio and the surrounding area were actually incorporated into a city, with a police and fire department stationed on the lot. By 1917, Universal City had a hospital, a restaurant, garages and even a zoo. Westerns were produced there featuring Hoot Gibson, Harry Carey and others. It was with films such as *Foolish Wives* (1922), [The Hunchback of Notre Dame](#) (1923) and [The Phantom of the Opera](#) (1925) that Universal came to be so well known in the movie world.

Another important early studio in Hollywood was Triangle, founded on the creative talents of [Thomas Ince](#), Mack Sennett and D.W. Griffith - who had left Biograph by 1913. Earlier this studio was the home of the Kinemacolor Company, located at the intersection of Sunset and Hollywood Boulevards. This plant became known as the 'Griffith Fine Arts' studio, and it was here that [The Birth of a Nation](#) (1915) and [Intolerance](#) (1916) were filmed.

In an old rented barn [which still stands at a different location] and adjacent stage on a lot at Selma and Vine in Hollywood stood the Jesse Lasky Feature Play Company. Founded in 1913 by Jesse Lasky, Sam Goldfish (Goldwyn) and [Cecil B. DeMille](#), they made the first full-length Western feature in Hollywood. *The Squaw Man* (1913) [[photo](#)] starred the stage actor Dustin Farnum, and was directed by DeMille who was making his debut under the tutelage of Oscar Apfel. After merging with [Adolph Zukor](#)'s Famous Players, this studio became known as the Famous Players Lasky studio and was the forerunner of Paramount Studios.

At the turn of the nineteenth century, the thousands of store-front nickelodeon 'theatres' in scores of cities and towns across the country were literally devouring one- and two-reelers with a different programme each day. Yet no-one in the business really believed that the novelty would last. The manufacturers ran small operations, usually in rented quarters, reluctant to invest more heavily in this 'temporary' business. Edison believed, as did others, that the shower of nickels and dimes would soon dry up. But for every company that failed, two others seemed to take its place, and by 1913 the unabated demand for films, including longer and more meaningful ones, convinced even the financiers that the movies were here to stay. The success of *The Birth of a Nation* made it abundantly clear feature films would be the future of the industry. This 'novelty' business was now worthy of their interest, and by 1917 they had financed permanent plants on both coasts.

The more persistent pioneer movie-makers had prevailed and the industry began to be written about as 'one of the gigantic powers of the earth.' Some of these early studios are active to this day, producing their own films and renting out their stages, location lots and technical facilities to a host of modern independent producers of motion pictures.

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