

Women's History

by Barbara Zeitz
Batavia/Geneva/St. Charles Branch, AAUW
March 2005

Celluloid Ladies

When Hollywood's film industry started (early 1900s), movies were a little silly thing that was going to go away, so women found opportunity. Lois Weber was one of the most important of silent film directors. In 1915 she was the highest paid director at Universal turning out films dealing with controversial topics as birth control, poverty and anti-Semitism. But the business grew, men moved in, and women were moved out. Weber died broke in 1939.

At the age of eight, deserted by her alcoholic father, Mary Pickford became the family breadwinner. She said she was, "the father of my family." In 1909, a shrewd veteran at 16, when ushered onto her first movie set and offered \$5 a day, she asked for \$10--and got it. Within a decade she would say, "I can't afford to work for only \$10,000 a week. Pickford became the most powerful woman in Hollywood. In 1919 she, Charlie Chaplin, Hollywood director D.W. Griffith, and Douglas Fairbanks, Sr., formed United Artists. She won an Academy Award in 1929, retired from acting in 1933, and three years later, was vice-president of United Artists. Unaware of her significance in movie history, she died a recluse in 1979. Recent revisionist appreciation credits her films as being technically accomplished.

Starting as a script typist at Paramount Studios, Dorothy Arzner worked her way up to film editor and in 1927 Paramount let Arzner direct. In the 1930s female stars were everywhere - but there was only one female director, Arzner. She was an innovative director, one of the first to use theme music in films and the first to use overhead microphones. While filming the first sound movie at Paramount, she hung a mike from a fishing pole over the actors' heads. Her "boom mike" advanced sound recording for talkies. Her techniques became film standards. Between 1927-1943, she directed 20 features, launched the careers of Katharine Hepburn, Joan Crawford, and Lucille Ball. "When men do put women in pictures, they make them so darn sappy and weeping all over the place," Arzner lamented. "There should be more of us directing."

Dawn Steele began in merchandising at Paramount in 1978, moved to production and produced *Flashdance* in 1983. As head of production in 1985 she produced *Top Gun*, *The Accused*, & *Fatal Attraction*. While in the hospital giving birth to her daughter, she was removed from her job. As President of Columbia Pictures in 1987, Steele was the first woman to head a major Hollywood studio. During her two-year tenure, Columbia merged with Tri-Star, released *When Harry Met Sally*, and put into production, *Postcards from the Edge*, *Awakenings*, and the restoring of *Lawrence of Arabia*. Famous in the media for her brash manner, but refusing to be bitter, she recounted her life in her bestseller, breezy,

candid memoir, *They Can Kill You But They Can't Eat You*. It was described by Liz Smith as, "a practical primer for ambitious women." Steele died of a brain tumor at age 51.

Sources

Scholastic Encyclopedia of Women in the United States, Sheila Keenan; *100 Most Important Women of the 20th Century*, Ed. Myrna Blyth; *Unforgettable Women of the Century*, Ed. Eric Levin; "First Female Film Pioneers," Lynne Elber, Daily Herald 5/30/00, *Great Jewish Women* by Elinor Slater & Robert Slater.