

CARL LAEMMLE, MOVIE PIONEER STARTED STAR SYSTEM

FOUNDED UNIVERSAL PICTURES 65 YEARS AGO

Many celebrated names in motion picture history will be represented in the eight-month retrospective called Universal Pictures: 65 Years, organized by The Museum of Modern Art, to begin on June 9 and continue through January 29, 1978. The Universal cycle, marking six and a half decades of that major film company, was assembled by the Department of Film's Curator, Adrienne Mancina, and Larry Kardish, Assistant Curator. It contains the work of such directors as Erich von Stroheim, Clarence Brown, Lewis Milestone, John Ford, Tay Garnett, Tod Browning, Gregory La Cava, George Cukor, James Whale, Henry Koster, Fritz Lang, and others; it also includes films with Hoot Gibson, Laura La Plante, Lon Chaney, Harry Carey, Deanna Durbin, Marlene Dietrich, Rudolph Valentino, Cary Grant, and many others, as every known talent in film has worked at one time or another at this studio. Here William Wyler started his career; and today Alfred Hitchcock has made this lot his home base.

The studio in California was acquired a few years after Carl Laemmle founded the company now known as Universal Pictures. It was born in 1912, a chaotic period of patent disputes, unethical rivals and fierce competition, and it managed to survive, largely due to the ingenuity, determination and showmanship of Laemmle, a Bavarian immigrant, who came to America at age 17, in the year 1884. He settled in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, where he became the manager of a clothing store. Though successful, by age forty, the haberdasher wanted his independence. Impressed by Mr. Woolworth's experiment and the profitable turnover in the new five-and-dime stores, he intended to open a similar emporium, when he was distracted by the then popular nickelodeons into which customers poured hourly, making room for a new audience with each show. "It was evident that the basic idea of motion pictures and Mr. Woolworth's innovation were identical," he

(more)

later said.

On February 24, 1906, six years prior to forming Universal Pictures, Laemmle opened the White Front Theatre in Chicago, with a weekly overhead of \$200, which he earned the opening day. Naturally he acquired several more theatres in a hurry, and within nine months had opened a film exchange to purchase prints from manufacturers and lease them to nickelodeons, which, of course, included his own theatres.

Within three years Laemmle claimed his was the world's largest film exchange. He sold pictures throughout the mid-West and Canada until he ran into complications. The Motion Picture Patents Company had been formed; it consisted of the original patent holders of camera and projection equipment, which included Edison, Biograph, and Vitagraph, who wanted to control the use of their patents. It was their objective to limit production to a handful of "licensed companies" and in this way they planned to squeeze out parvenues such as Carl Laemmle, who, mesmerized by the new medium, were flourishing.

When Laemmle was unable to acquire pictures for his exchange he began to manufacture them himself. He formed the Yankee Film Company, later renamed the Independent Moving Picture Company (Imp), predecessor of today's Universal Pictures. It was located at 111 East 14th Street in New York City, and produced 11 pictures in 1909, including its very first "Hiawatha," which will be shown on the opening day of the program with several other Imp shorts: four with Mary Pickford, two directed by Thomas Ince; and others with Lon Chaney and Pearl White. The shorts were all considered "bootleg" film made by an "out-law" company at a time when nickelodeons "gobbled up" film, because they required anywhere from 30 to 60 reels a week. Programs were often changed daily. However, it was in the interest of the producing companies to encourage volume. It was believed, in any case, that the public's attention would not endure more than two reels. The feature film had yet to be born.

(more)

In a time of anti-trust actions, the "little fireball from Chicago," as Bosley Crowther called Laemmle, defied the prohibitions against making film, and "put on a hot campaign to rally the small exchanges against the [Patents] Trust...He was one of those who helped to do it in." But in the years to come it was "the little fellows," like Laemmle, who grew into major film companies, and now Universal Pictures, of which Henry H. Martin is president, is a subsidiary of a giant complex, MCA, Inc.

A firm believer in advertising and an innovator, Laemmle is responsible for creating the star system. In order to combat the Trust, he hired the Biograph girl, Florence Lawrence, and at a time when actors were anonymous he divulged her name to the curious public. Laemmle was also responsible for the distribution of an early feature-length documentary, "The African Hunt," made on location, and "Neptune's Daughter," an underwater drama with the diving champion Annette Kellerman. These films are also in the series, as is "Damon and Pythias," an early spectacle made on the Universal lot.

Partly as a result of the Trust's pursuit of outlaws, according to historian Lewis Jacobs, Laemmle and others settled in California, and in 1914 for \$165,000 he acquired 230 acres covered with oats. The lot was situated across the Cahuenga Pass from Hollywood in an isolated undeveloped area, and its opening was celebrated with a gala premiere on March 15, 1915. Buffalo Bill Cody was an honored guest (he later sold some western scenarios to the studio) and thousands of sightseers turned out to see a staged flood that unfortunately got out of control. The crowd also watched the shooting of a serial and the completion of a comedy. Alas, the gaiety was marked by a catastrophe when a stunt pilot, performing for the event, was killed in action.

Today Universal City, which receives 2,800,000 visitors annually, is the site where von Stroheim made "Blind Husbands" and "Foolish Wives." "The Phantom of the Opera" and "The Hunchback of Notre Dame" were produced there, and so many others, including "All Quiet on the Western Front," "Counsellor-At-Law," "Destry

(more)

Rides Again," "Frankenstein," "Dracula," "S.O.S. Iceberg," and "Letter from an Unknown Woman."

Notable is the fact that Carl Laemmle, after he had opened the Universal studio, hired several women directors; one of the most important was Lois Weber who directed Anna Pavlova in "The Dumb Girl of Portici." Weber was responsible for socially conscious problem pictures, the most famous of which, "Where Are My Children?," reputedly grossed some \$3 million, according to Richard Koszarski, the film historian, author of the text of the accompanying illustrated catalogue.

The retrospective is also a reminder that Carl Laemmle brought to Hollywood the acknowledged producing genius of film, Irving Thalberg, who worked first as his secretary; he also added to his roster of talent many famous Europeans like Karl Freund, Paul Fejos and Paul Leni, and their influence was clearly visible in the camera work, lighting and scenic designs that can also be found in the studio's successful horror films of the 30s and 40s. The horror cycle saved Universal from a financial crisis during the depression, just as the propaganda pictures like "The Beast of Berlin" advanced the company's fortune in the years of World War I. On many occasions Universal has relied on timely phenomena accepted by the public, whether the western serials of the 20s, the singing of teenager Deanna Durbin in the 30s, the antics of Abbott and Costello, the homespun humor of Ma and Pa Kettle or the romantic sophistication of Doris Day and Cary Grant, contemporary distractions in their respective decades, just as are today's disaster pictures.

The program will be mailed under separate cover.

Stills are available.

June 1977

Stills and additional information available from Michael Boodro, Assistant, or Lillian Gerard, Special Projects Coordinator, Public Information, The Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, New York, NY 10019. Tel: (212) 956-7296; 7501.
