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In the early years of the motion picture industry, an overwhelming number of young women, some talented and others not, left their secure, middle-class homes or factory jobs for new lives as Hollywood starlets. Those who did not find success on the silver screen soon slipped back into lives of obscurity. But some would-be actresses displayed such versatility behind the cameras that they became known primarily as writers, directors, and producers. Such were the cases of Lois Weber, Cleo Madison, and Canada's Nell Shipman.



The crew gathers round (circa 1920) as son Barry Shipman plays with a dog and mother holds on to a white cat

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**nell shipman:**

# **girl wonder from god's country**

by Judith Smith



The women who succeeded as filmmakers, rather than film stars, are rarely remembered in historical and critical accounts of film's first decades. Their movies are forgotten, and the details of their lives are scantily documented. Therefore, it is a difficult task to piece together the life and career of Nell Shipman or any of her contemporaries. As Murray Summers put it, "Unfortunately, Nell Shipman – film and stage actress, film producer and director, writer... is no longer with us. Unfortunately as well, she is no longer well known at all."

The anonymity Nell Shipman faced in her later years was chronicled by Summers in an article based on her letters to him appearing in *Filmograph*, February, 1974. Ms. Shipman, who was "one of the first writers and directors of her sex to gain some stature" in motion pictures, spent her last years flat broke, supported by the kindnesses of relatives. When she died on January 23, 1970, she left behind a manuscript of her memoirs, *The Silent Screen And My Talking Heart*, which she had futilely attempted to sell to various publishers.

Born Helen Barham in 1893, Nell Shipman grew up in Victoria, British Columbia. Her parents were English, and had come West in the 1880's "armed with tents, cook stoves, spinning wheels, bowie knives and six shooters, determined to wrest a living from the Redman," though Nell herself admitted in an article entitled "Me," published in the 1919 February *Photo Play* that the Barhams had rather gross misconceptions about life in the peaceful Canadian frontier. At age thirteen, she became smitten with theatrical ambition and left home to attend drama school. Six months later, she joined a travelling company, and by the time she was fifteen, she had tried her hand at vaudeville, musical comedy and repertory theatre.

In 1907, Nell danced, sang and played piano in the Jesse Lasky production "The Pianophiends." At sixteen, she toured Alaska, heading her own company, and in 1909, she was engaged as the female lead in Charles Taylor's touring company. Playing again in Alaska, Nell was featured in "The Girl From Alaska," a play written especially for her by Taylor.

In 1910, Nell accepted the leading role in "The Barrier," a play produced by Canadian producer and theatrical manager Ernest Shipman, who organized shows in Australia, Canada, France, the U.S., as well as the Orient. Married in 1911, the couple located in California, determined to break into the movie business.

Their son, Barry Shipman, was born in Pasadena in 1912, and that same year, Nell saw her first small success in film, winning the first and second place prizes in a scenario contest sponsored by the Tally Theatre in Los Angeles. One of these scripts was produced by the Selig Polyscope Company (probably *Outwitted By Billy*, copyrighted by Selig Polyscope in 1913). The other, title unknown, was produced by Ernest Shipman with Nell in the leading role.

In 1914, Nell scripted *Shepherd Of The Southern Cross*, one of the first films to be produced in Australia. Later that same year, she went on location at Lake Tahoe to write three 3-reelers for Jack Kerrigan. It was here that she made her directorial debut, after the director and his leading lady suddenly quit the production. Nell also assumed the vacated heroine's role.

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When Nell offered a script adapted from James Oliver Curwood's novel *God's Country And The Woman* to Vitagraph Studios in 1915, it was accepted, and she was cast in the starring role – her first film for a major studio. The picture was a commercial success and led to substantial contracts with Vitagraph, Fox and Lasky in the next two years. Nell completed a total of thirteen films between 1916-1917. During the same period, she also was a frequent lecturer on behalf of Vitagraph, and published a smattering of short stories, magazine articles, and a novel.

In recent years, Nell Shipman has been noted for her profound loyalty to her Canadian homeland, a tendency so rarely exhibited by her compatriots Mary Pickford, Marie Dressler, Mack Sennett and Norma Shearer. She always wanted to make films about Canada in Canada. In early 1919, Nell wrote of her ambitions in an article for her fans: "And now; My Dream. It's a very real one to me. It is that some day I may go up into Canada, to the waterways of the Hudson Bay territory, to the plains of the Middle West, and to the mountains and forests of the coast, and make big human outdoor pictures." Her dream was to come true in a very short time, for within the year, Ernest Shipman arranged for the two of them to go to Canada and make another film based on the works of James Oliver Curwood, *Back To God's Country*. The picture was produced by Canadian Photoplays, Ltd. of Calgary. Nell played the leading role and adapted the screenplay. Ernest had negotiated a contract with Curwood which gave his wife exclusive film rights to the author's works and which guaranteed that she would star exclusively in pictures based on his stories. This contract was for a period of two years, and Ernest co-signed the agreement.

*Back To God's Country*, taken from Curwood's short story, "Wapi, the Walrus," was shot on location in northern Alberta along the Lesser Slave Lake and in California on the Kern River, beginning in March 1919. The bitter winter weather sometimes reached 60 degrees below zero F., and conditions were so harsh that the leading man, Ronald Byram, caught pneumonia and died, following a prolonged exposure. But despite this setback, the picture was completed in three months and was released by First National the following September. Viewed by audiences in North America, England, Australia, Japan and continental Europe, *Back To God's Country* became Canada's most successful feature film, grossing a half million dollars in its first year of exhibition.

Having received a 300 percent return on its initial investment, Canadian Photoplays, Ltd., went into voluntary liquidation, although almost a year remained on the Shipman-Curwood contract. James Oliver Curwood, who had been unhappy with Nell's adaptation of *Back To God's Country* (she had made ingénue the hero, instead of the dog), formed a new company, Curwood Productions, to produce films from his many stories and novels. In 1920, Nell and Ernest divorced and "Ten Percent Ernie" was given charge of sales and publicity for Curwood's company.

While Ernest maintained his northern base, Nell returned to Hollywood and began making short films independently. Never again would she make a picture under the auspices of a Canadian production company, though she did make several other feature films in Canada for American companies, including *The Girl From God's Country* (1921), and *The Golden Yukon* (1928).



By 1921, Nell had formed Nell Shipman Productions, and was busy grinding out *Canadiana* for the ever increasing movie audiences. Her production of *The Girl From God's Country* alone was enough to win Nell her nickname "A Jill of All Trades," for not only did she produce and star in this vehicle, but wrote the script and co-directed as well. She had long since gained notoriety in Hollywood for her off-screen versatility, though she remained best known as a leading lady. As one **Photoplay** rhymester put it, "She vamps and writes and lectures too, and sometimes she's an ingénue."

Between 1922 and 1924, Nell made a number of wild animal and nature shorts, some starring Johnny Fox and Flash, the Wonder Dog, though the bankruptcies of two different producers, American and Louis Selznick, kept her financial situation precarious. Now living with Bert Van Tuyle, her co-director and former production manager on *Back To God's Country*, Nell located in Upper Priest Lake, Idaho. Her home was a modest log cabin twenty-one miles from the nearest road and fifty miles from a railway line, and her cast and crew included 15 bears, 3 deer, 2 elks, 4 coyotes, 2 wolves, 1 cougar, 2 wildcats, assorted racoons, skunks, eagles, owls, porcupines, beavers, marmots, muskrats, rabbits, dogs, and cats, plus "Old Daddy," an ex-trapper and her young son Barry.

With the terrific blizzards and inevitable isolation which winter brought, the struggles of the Shipman Production Company were further complicated by Van Tuyle's illness and need for hospitalization. Van Tuyle had frozen his foot the previous March, during a night shoot in Alberta. Though it was apparent from that point that amputation would be necessary, he stubbornly resisted medical treatment. By September, he had become a near-invalid, but no money was available for surgery.

Nell arranged to give performances in two small towns to earn the cash needed for the operation. Setting off just before Christmas, she returned in early January, following a perilous journey by snowplough and canoe over the partially frozen lake near their home. Before she could manage to return to the village with Bert, his condition worsened and he fell delirious with pain. In his confused state, he set off across the frozen wilderness alone. He reacted belligerently to Nell's attempts to aid him, and she was forced to precede him at a distance, fearing he might fall and die in the snow. Finally Van Tuyle allowed her to accompany him, and together they made their way to the Lone Star Ranch, where they sheltered overnight with some wealthy vacationers, who could not believe that the disheveled, but determined woman they entertained was truly Nell Shipman the movie star.

The following morning, Nell, Bert and a lumberjack who had come to their aid, set off across the lake through icebergs and a blanket of heavy fog which they encountered as they neared their destination. Reaching the village, they were recovered by local search parties, (organized to look for Nell since her New Year's Eve departure) and Van Tuyle was taken under the care of a local physician, who performed the amputation without benefit of anaesthesia. The entire incident received considerable press coverage, which Nell apparently felt would enhance the success of the next Shipman-Van Tuyle film project. "Oh, what glorious publicity," she wrote.

In 1925, Nell married artist Charles Ayers and pulled up stakes to move to Florida, where she participated in the production of *The Tamiami Trail*, based on one of her own sto-



A classic portrait, animals and all, of Nell Shipman in the Artic landscape

ries which had been syndicated by Florida newspapers. The following year, the Ayers were living in LaCoruna, Spain when their twins, Charles and Daphne, were born.

Nell's activity as an actress seems to have been on the wane by the early 1930's. Her most outstanding film contribution of this period came as a writer. Her story, "The Eyes of the Eagle," which concerned aviators, received the support of President Franklin Roosevelt as an Air Force motion picture project. Slated to be filmed by the U.S.A.F. with William DeMille as director, the project was moved to Paramount studios, where it was produced in 1935 under the title *Wings In The Dark*, starring Cary Grant and Myrna Loy.

*Wings In The Dark* tells the story of a flyer (Grant), who is blinded in a plane crash and invents a device which enables him to pilot again. When his girlfriend, a stunt pilot (Myrna



Loy) becomes endangered during one of her flights, he steals an airplane and rescues her, proving the feasibility of his invention. As Loy lands her aircraft, she crashes into Grant's plane on the runway, and miraculously, both emerge unharmed with Grant's sight restored, due to the jarring. **The New York Times** found **Wings In The Dark** a "pleasantly performed and skilfully filmed melodrama," but were not impressed with the script, "an addle-pated narrative. The tedious plot machinery... proves to be disastrous to the work which is managed with such technical finesse that it ought to have been among the better pictures," the **Times** concluded.

Divorced from Charles Ayers in 1934, Nell made her way to South Africa to make more wild animal pictures in partnership with Arthur Varney, a one-time assistant to D.W. Griffith. The outbreak of World War II in 1939 halted production of **The Jungle Ship**, and Nell returned to America. During the war years, she made commercials, Army enlistment films and did voice-over narrations. She was also able to complete **The Jungle Ship** and made another film, **The Golden Road**, as well.



Little Nell stands up to the villain in Hartford's **Back to God's Country** (1919)

As anti-communist paranoia divided Hollywood during the fifties, Nell became more visibly American in her outlook, and worked on behalf of the right-wing front. At this time, she was living in Washington, D.C., and maintained close contact with members of Congress, and the departments of State and Finance. She wrote the screenplay for an anti-communist picture, **The Fifth American**, but the film encountered release difficulties. Later, in 1960, she scripted **The Fires Of Batsto**, a film about the American Revolutionary War.

Nell's activity as a writer may have left her a more enduring reputation than did her films. Her literary projects were ongoing after 1915, the year she published **Under The Crescent** (also titled **The Purple Iris**), a novel from which she also created a six part scenario, one of the first serials filmed at Uncle Carl Laemmle's Universal Studios. Other novels included **Get The Woman** (1930), **Abandoned Trails** (1932), **Tomorrow For Sale** (1941), **The Fifth American** (1962) and **Neeka Of The North**, date unavailable. Nell also published one children's story, **Kurley Kew And The Tree Princess**, in 1930, and was a frequent contributor to popular magazines of the day.

As a screenwriter, Nell lost two potentially important deals by chance, which would have undoubtedly added stature to her career. "M'sieu Sweetheart," a six part story she wrote for **McCall's** magazine, was chosen by Twentieth Century Fox as a comeback property for Clara Bow, but the deal was scrapped before production ever began. "Hot Oil," written in collaboration with G.P. Putnam, in 1934, was slated for a movie adaptation starring Will Rogers, when the humorist died unexpectedly in a plane crash.

Even in her old age, Nell remained creative, and in the last year of her life still bubbled with ideas for novels and film projects. She wrote of these to Summers, and particularly, of her desire to go to Washington, D.C. again, and make a documentary. In her seventies, she seemingly was quite willing to pick up and move across the country and once more open up offices as an independent producer. "Even at this ripe old age," she wrote, "I do not live in the past or pluck at memories' worn harp strings. (I) am most awfully keen for the now." She lived in a house with sixteen cats near Palm Springs, California. Since she had usually been her own boss, Nell was ineligible for social security benefits, and her main support came from her son Barry, who had become a top film producer for the United States Air Force. She was proud of Barry and revelled in delight each time he confounded the governmental hierarchy, "the Establishment," as she called them.

Nell Shipman, a diverse woman, who flippantly described herself in 1919, as being interested in " 'Feminism,' 'Socialism,' and other 'isms,' " was one of the very few women of her generation to maintain her place as a producer and director for more than thirty years. Her enthusiasm for film never diminished, from her earliest days as a scenarist in Hollywood through her last years of semi-retirement. She was also well aware, it seems, of the unique value of those early experiences. In 1925, she wrote: "It warms our hearts and inspires our minds to know there is a generation of young and lively students who care about our beginnings and the ring circles of our growth, and are ready themselves to contribute to the ever-present goal for film perfection." □

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