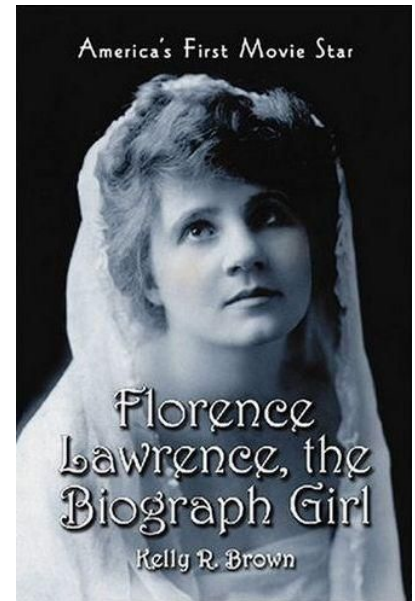


“A Star is Born”

The movie industry of the early 1900s, during the silent film era, was not the star-centered commercial enterprise it is today. Most actors, in fact, labored in obscurity. And film-makers liked it that way. The film studios then were out to produce a cheap, standardized product and part of the strategy was to keep actors anonymous and low paid. Indeed, most actors of that day focused on the Vaudeville stage, and many, in fact, thought it downright horrid to work in the “flickers.”

But during the early 1900s, the seeds of change were being sown, as a few actors tried some self-promotion in the trade press, and film exchange owners were also beginning to see that audience familiarity with actors was good for business. Still, one of the most popular actresses of that day was Florence Lawrence of the Biograph Studios. But Lawrence was not known to movie fans by her real name. A Canadian in her twenties, Lawrence had already made 38 films for the Vitagraph Co. before coming to Biograph. But even at Biograph, though her face was well known, she was simply known to the public as “The Biograph Girl.” Then came a film producer named Carl Laemmle.



Laemmle, born into a Jewish family in 1860s Germany, had come to the U.S. when he was 17. He opened a Chicago nickelodeon some years later, and moved into film distribution in the Midwest. By 1909, after fighting with inventor and film-maker businessman Thomas Edison over film distribution rights, he established his own film production company, the Independent Motion Picture Company of America, also known as IMP. “Biograph Girl” Florence Lawrence, meanwhile, had a falling out with her employer, and Laemmle hired her to his company. Laemmle then went about creating some first-of-a kind publicity to introduce her.



Biograph Girl Dead !

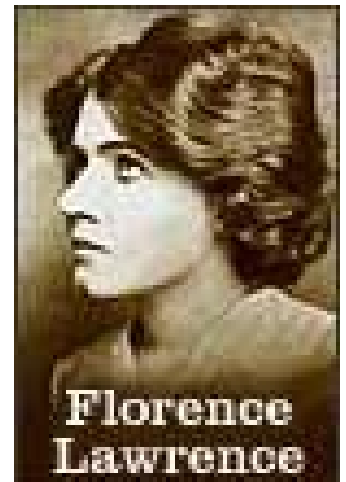
Although there are some variations on the story, plus a degree of myth-making added over the years, the gist of what happened appears to be roughly along the lines that follow. In February 1910, Laemmle planted a fictitious news story that the actress had been killed in a street-car accident. Newspapers and magazines were the only real “media” then, and key to spreading a story of the kind Laemmle had created. After Laemmle gained press attention for his false story, he then placed ads in newspapers and the movie trade press that the story about Lawrence’s death was, in fact, a lie. In the March 12, 1910 edition of *Moving Picture World*, a full-page announcement appeared explaining that Biograph — angry over losing its “Biograph girl,” Lawrence, to Laemmle — had created the false story. This announcement also included a small photo of Lawrence and explained, by the way, that she was making a new movie for Laemmle’s IMP called, *The Broken Oath*, and that “very shortly, some of the best work of her career” would be released (in the ad, the film’s title was

misspelled as “The Broken Bath”).



Laemmle then arranged for — and publicized — a personal appearance for his soon-to-be-star, along with her leading man, King Babbott, and the film’s director, in St. Louis, Missouri. They made two appearances at St. Louis theaters — the Gem and the Grand Opera House. According to Karen Ward Mahar writing in *Women Filmmakers in Early Hollywood*: “*The St. Louis Times* announced their arrival by train, planned a welcome party, and offered a clip-out coupon to female fans who would receive a photograph of Lawrence upon presenting it to the actress.” It was the first staged media appearance by a film star. At the event Lawrence “was mobbed by a huge crowd of fans, who tore the buttons off her coat,” according to historian Robin Cross. Lawrence that day in St. Louis drew more people to her coming out event than had the President of the United States, William Howard Taft, who had visited the city a week earlier. Thus, with this event and its generated press, “a star was born,” created by the studio head Carl Laemmle, who would later help found Universal Studios. Before long, Florence Lawrence became a well-known film personality and a household name. Laemmle — with the help of a growing print media at the time — had created the early outlines of the Hollywood “star system,” though it wasn’t called that at first. No longer would movie actors and actresses labor in obscurity, or go unnoticed or unnamed. Again, Karen Ward Mahar writing in *Women Filmmakers in Early Hollywood*, notes:

...A mere two months after Lawrence’s live appearance in St. Louis, *Moving Picture World’s* “Man About Town” [magazine column] professed astonishment at “the interest the public has taken in the personality of many of the picture players.” Letters allegedly poured into the offices of film manufacturers and exchanges, from both men and woman, asking for autographed photos of their favorite leading actors. One actress [Florence Turner] claimed to have received three thousand offers of marriage just three months after the Lawrence incident. By the end of 1910, *Moving Picture World’s* “Picture Personalities” column profiled Florence Turner of Vitagraph, Mary Pickford of Biograph, and [Pearl White](#) of the Powers film manufacturing company. Even if it did not invent the film star, the Lawrence incident signaled to the industry that the star had arrived.



Source: <http://www.pophistorydig.com/?p=689>