

## Gertrude Homan Thanhouser: Her Story in Film

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Gertrude Homan Thanhouser was an actress, scenario writer, creative director, film editor, and studio executive at the New Rochelle-based Thanhouser studio from 1909 to 1917. She brought years of theatrical experience to the fledging Thanhouser Company led by her husband and theatrical manager Edwin Thanhouser. This is her story.

### Gertrude's Early Career on the Stage

Gertrude Homan was born in Beauvoir, Mississippi on April 25, 1880. Her family moved to Brooklyn when she was an infant where she became a child star on the New York stage starting in 1888 at age eight. She was on the stage in "Partners" at the Madison Square Theatre in New York City and played roles in *The Burglar* (which was retitled *Editha's Burglar*), *Bootles' Baby*, *Romeo and Juliet* (as Juliet, in 1892), *The Childhood of Jack Harkaway*, and many other productions. Her greatest renown was achieved with her roles as Editha and Little Lord Fauntleroy. An undated, unattributed clipping from Gertrude's scrapbook (Partners - Madison Square Theatre) gives a review of Gertrude F. Homan as Little Lord Fauntleroy in the play of the same title: "The fact that the leading role is assumed by so young a character makes the play the more interesting. Miss Gertie Homan played the part of Cedric Errol, Lord Fauntleroy, in a most pleasing manner. She won the admiration of the audience from the start. Her acting is so graceful and her style so charming. Much could be said of this little actress that could hardly be said of many older ones now playing as stars."



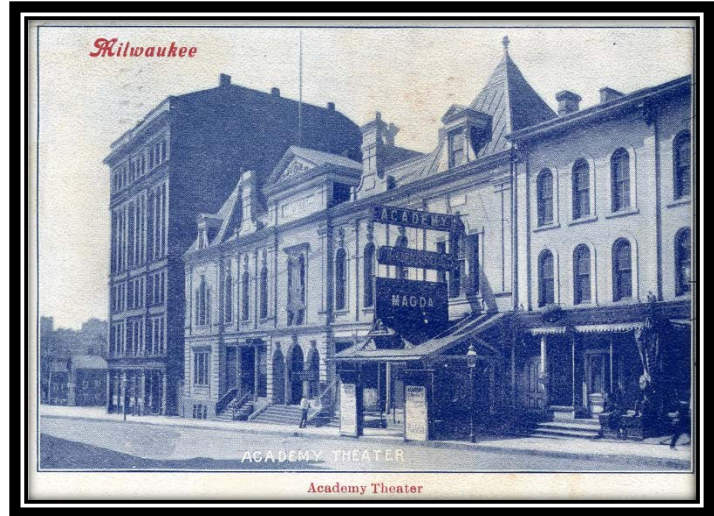
Gertrude Homan ca. 1888

### Gertrude's Marriage to Edwin Thanhouser

The reputation of Edwin Thanhouser's Milwaukee stock company at The Academy of Music Theatre had spread as far east as New York. 18-year-old "Gertie" Homan arrived in Milwaukee in early summer of 1898 and was hired by Edwin Thanhouser to join his stock company. He immediately fell

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desperately in love and courted her at every opportunity. After a series of swooning love letters from Edwin and a few crushing rejections from Gertrude, the ever-persistent Edwin eventually won her affections and they were married in Brooklyn on February 8, 1900 (Marriage Certificate). Gertrude was involved with the production of plays at The Academy, and, in 1909, the Bush Temple Theater in Chicago.



Academy of Music Theatre, Milwaukee, Wisconsin ca. 1900

This union was important to the future success of the Thanhouser film enterprise as Gertrude's years on the stage developed her skills in scenario development, production, and stagecraft; she was a perfect complement to Edwin Thanhouser's business shrewdness and public relations skills.

### Gertrude Thanhouser: Studio Executive

In the spring of 1909, Gertrude moved with her husband and two young children, Lloyd and Marie, to New York where they established the Thanhouser Company as an independent motion picture production studio. Gertrude's theatrical career of fourteen years provided her with intimate knowledge of the theater enabling her to become a powerful and creative force in this new venture.

Edwin and Gertrude enticed brother-in-law and newspaperman Lloyd Lonergan to join them in establishing the Thanhouser Company as an independent motion picture production studio. From the certificate of incorporation dated 28 October 1909 the stated purpose of the company was, "To take, make and exhibit, moving, animated, and stationary pictures and photographs, and to lease rights to exhibit the same..." The Photoplay Arts (Photoplay Arts Company) pamphlet and Leon J. Rubenstein



Lloyd Lonergan

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in *The Billboard* (14) noted that Edwin was the first to head an American motion picture studio with a theatrical background.

The company was capitalized with \$10,000 divided into 100 shares; 98 in Gertrude's name as "secretary," and one share each to Edwin, as "president," and Lloyd Lonergan, as "vice-president" (Westchester County Records). Shelley Stamp, Professor of Film & Digital Media at the University of California, Santa Cruz, speculated in the 2014 documentary *The Thanhouser Studio and the Birth of American Cinema* that Gertrude's 98% share in the company might have been a legal dodge since women were assumed to be less liable in business ventures, or perhaps this was a foreshadowing of her future contributions to the success of the company.

CERTIFICATE OF INCORPORATION		
OF THE		
THANHOUSER COMPANY.		
-000-		
We, the undersigned, all being of full age and all being citizens of the United States, and all of us residents of the State of New York, for the purpose of forming a corporation under the Business Corporations Law of the State of New York, do hereby certify and set forth:		
<b>FIRST:</b> The name of said corporation shall be <u>THANHOUSER COMPANY.</u>		
<b>SECOND:</b> The purposes for which said corporation is to be formed are as follows:		
(1) manufacture, buy and sell, lease or otherwise to deal or to traffic in photographic apparatus, paraphernalia and material, and to acquire patent rights therefor.		
(2) To take, make and exhibit, moving, animated and stationary pictures and photographs, and to lease rights to exhibit the same, and to deal in and sell same.		
<b>THIRD:</b> The amount of the capital stock of said corporation shall be Ten Thousand Dollars (\$10,000). The amount of capital with which said corporation will begin business is one thousand Dollars (\$1,000).		
<b>FOURTH:</b> The number of shares of which said capital stock shall consist shall be one hundred (100) of the par value of One hundred Dollars (\$100) each.		
<b>FIFTH:</b> The principal place of business of said		
corporation shall be located in the City of New Rochelle, in the County of Westchester, State of New York.		
<b>SIXTH:</b> The duration of said corporation shall be fifty (50) years.		
<b>SEVENTH:</b> The number of directors of said corporation shall be three.		
<b>EIGHTH:</b> The names and post-office addresses of the directors of said corporation for the first year are as follows:		
<u>NAMES.</u>	<u>ADDRESSES.</u>	
Gertrude Thanhouser,	205 West 94th Street, New York City.	
Edwin Thanhouser,	205 West 94th Street, New York City.	
Lloyd F. Lonergan,	205 West 94th Street, New York City.	
<b>NINTH:</b> The names and post-office addresses of the subscribers to this certificate and the number of shares which each agrees to take in said corporation are as follows:		
<u>NAMES.</u>	<u>ADDRESSES.</u>	<u>SHARES.</u>
Gertrude Thanhouser,	205 West 94th Street, New York City.	98
Edwin Thanhouser,	205 West 94th Street, New York City.	1
Lloyd F. Lonergan,	205 West 94th Street, New York City.	1
<b>IN WITNESS WHEREOF,</b> we have made and signed this certificate this 25th day of October, 1909.		
<i>Gertrude Thanhouser</i> <i>Edwin Thanhouser</i> <i>Lloyd F. Lonergan</i>		

Certificate of Incorporation: October 25, 1909



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At the Thanhouser Company, the distribution of responsibilities between the three founders was organized around their respective strengths: Edwin was the business leader and external face of the enterprise to the public, scenario development fell upon the shoulders of newspaperman Lloyd Lonergan, and Gertrude focusing her talents on what she knew best: production design.

### Gertrude Thanhouser: The Creative Force Behind the Scenes

Gertrude Thanhouser was not only a talented actress, but from her years on the stage and helping to manage the Academy Theater in Milwaukee and the Bush Temple Theatre in Chicago, she applied her knowledge of stagecraft to the fledgling company. Magazine articles, as well as family history, document Gertrude's central role in the formation, management, and operation of the company. In the years at New Rochelle during the film business, Gertrude reviewed scripts, wrote scenarios, edited films, and helped Edwin Thanhouser in many ways (Woods).

She appeared in the company's second release: *St. Elmo* (1910); it was the only film in which she received acting credit. Now 30 years old and the mother of two, Gertrude realized that her career before the camera was over, so she applied her theatrical skills behind the scenes. Robert Hamilton Ball, in his book *Shakespeare on Silent Film*, gives credit to Gertrude as a co-scenario writer with Lonergan for the first "Thanhouser Classic" production: *The Winter's Tale*, the company's 14th release on May 27, 1910 (69). An enthusiastic review of this film was published in the *Moving Picture World* on May 28<sup>th</sup> highlighting Gertrude's contributions:

THANHOUSER TRIUMPH: Dealing with kings and queens, of course, gives an opportunity for magnificence of mounting, costumes and the like of which Mr. Thanhouser is taking full advantage.... From the point of view of film production Thanhouser's *The Winter's Tale* is a masterpiece. And, think of it now, the man who made and produced this picture was absolutely unknown in the moving picture field three months ago.

By the summer of 1910, the Thanhouser Company had earned enthusiastic approval as one of the leading independent motion picture production companies. Frank Woods, a film critic for the *New York Dramatic Mirror*, wrote: "On the other side of the Independent fence, Thanhouser pictures, of

**Thanhouser FILM**  
"You need it in your business!"  
RELEASE OF FRIDAY, APRIL 22  
**Her Battle for Existence**  
Length, 1000 Feet No. 107 Code Ward, Battle  
**FOUND!** A Human Interest Picture that isn't like something else you've seen. **THIS IS IT** and if you miss it you ought to be spanked—in the Cash Drawer. Get the Point?  
Holy Smoke! A Thanhouser Film Doubled His Receipts!  
I exhibited St. Elmo last night (Monday). MY RECEIPTS DOUBLED THOSE OF ANY MONDAY IN TWO YEARS. JUST 100% INCREASE. How's that for a record breaker? No other comment is necessary on your excellent films. "Not Cud"  
WM. F. NIEL, Proprietor  
(Crescent Theatre,) Chattanooga, Tenn.  
March 29  
A Thanhouser Film Brought Him Nice Business  
Just a line to tell you we ran your St. Elmo film last night, and were surprised and delighted with its excellent quality. WE SHALL INSIST ON OUR EXCHANGE SENDING ALL OF THE THANHOUSER FILMS. We did a little extra advertising with St. Elmo, and did a nice little business with the picture.  
T. A. ROGERS, Mgr.  
(The Edionia Theatre,) Jackson, O.  
March 31  
A Thanhouser Film Won His Approval in Every Respect  
We can truthfully say that "St. Elmo" has met with our approval IN EVERY RESPECT and that we were very much pleased with it, as were our customers.  
R. A. GROMBACHER  
(Pacific Film Exchange) Seattle, Wash.  
March 25  
Thanhouser Films Gives Him Satisfaction  
Your pictures are giving satisfaction, and are proving SOME OF THE BEST THE INDEPENDENT FIELD HAS TO OFFER.  
C. J. SCHERER, Pres.  
(Bijou Film & Amusement Co.,) Kansas City, Mo.  
March 28  
**Thanhouser Co.**  
NEW ROCHELLE, N. Y.

The Moving Picture World  
(April 22, 1910)

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course, rank highest. Indeed, the manner in which this new company without previous experience in picture making has developed in quality shows what may be done in film manufacture when intelligence and energy are employed” (20).

Lloyd Thanhouser, Edwin and Gertrude’s son, recalled, in an August 1980 audio taped interview, that Gertrude’s contributions to scenario development, mise-en-scène, and editing helped make these glowing reviews possible:

...all the editorial work, the writing of the manuscripts, was handled by the team of my mother and Lloyd Lonergan. She became a very skillful editor of these films. I remember being in the cutting room. She’d count, ‘one, two, three, four...cut!’ And she became extremely adept at matching action when one piece stopped and another started. She was known throughout the industry in those days as one of the most competent technicians in the cutting and editing of motion pictures.



Gertrude Homan Thanhouser (ca. 1915)

Joan Thanhouser Sherman, Gertrude’s grand-daughter, recalled in a 2002 interview:

...the subject of the movies was rarely brought up. But I did talk to Nana about it. Gertrude was a very important part of the Thanhouser Film Corporation. She did a lot of the directing. She gathered all the props and furniture for the one-reelers, two-reelers, and later the longer ones. And, the costumes, and she did the makeup. And she directed the plays. She was literally the artistic director of this business that Grandpop ran as efficiently and grandly as anyone of the Rockefellers or Vanderbilts.

Professor Shelley Stamp also expressed in the 2014 Thanhouser Studio documentary that because of Gertrude’s behind the scenes activities and experience in the theatrical realm, that she was also most likely intimately involved with wardrobe selection and costuming.

### Selling the Studio and Return to Film

In April 1912, after achieving industry acclaim and releasing over 225 films, the Thanhouser’s sold their shares in the studio to Charles J. Hite of Mutual Film Corporation for \$250,000. The Thanhouser’s “retired” from the motion picture industry and at the end of 1912



Thanhouser Family in Europe (ca. 1914)

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the family embarked upon a grand tour of Europe. This extended vacation was cut short by the outbreak of the World War in August 1914. They returned to New York on a refugee ship from Genoa, Italy only to learn of the tragic death of the Thanhouser Film Corporation's president Charles Hite that same week.

Mutual's board of directors lured Edwin and Gertrude out of retirement with a generous salary (equal to the President of the United States!) to resume leadership of the company that retained their namesake. In February 1915 Gertrude resumed her role as supervisor of the scenario department; she is credited for writing several scenarios, including their first "new" release, *Their One Love*. This extant one-reel drama



*Their One Love* (May 2, 1915)

capitalized on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of the Civil War and was a shrewd competitive response to Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915). Her scenario received positive reviews: "As a whole: A gem; Story: Different..." wrote Wid Gunning in the *Evening Mail*. Gertrude was also credited as scenario writer for five other films in 1915, including a two-reel comedy-drama, *Fairy Fern Seed*, a one-reel drama, *From the River's Depths*, and three four-reel "Mutual Masterpicture" feature films, *The Price of Her Silence*, *The Patriot and the Spy*, and *Milestones of Life*. She continued to remain active in company affairs as the *Moving Picture World* reported she attended a meeting with President Woodrow Wilson on February 12, 1916.

The untimely death of Thanhouser's leading actress Florence La Badie in the Fall of 1917, the rise of feature films, and the move of the motion picture industry from the east coast to Hollywood contributed to the decline in popularity of the Thanhouser films. Not willing to follow the industry to California, Edwin Thanhouser again announced his retirement from the film industry in 1918 and, and by association, Gertrude's.

In retirement, Edwin and Gertrude traveled extensively around the world on luxury cruises. She remained active in theatrical matters co-authoring several plays with her brother-in-law Lloyd Lonergan: *A Gale from Texas* (June 14, 1920), *A Gale from the West* (June 17, 1920),



Florence La Badie (ca 1915)



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and *Just Off Broadway* (April 7, 1928), with the latter play being performed on the USS Belgenland during one of Edwin and Gertrude's around-the-world cruises.

### In Context: Gertrude Thanhouser

Two other women motion picture pioneers in early film are worthy of examination to contrast with the Gertrude's career. First, the husband and wife team of Lois Weber and Phillip Smalley were running the Rex brand for Universal starting in 1911. In Shelley Stamp's analysis, Lois Weber was the dominant member of this partnership with Smalley often deferring to his wife to make important decisions. Starting in 1917 when they broke away from Universal, Weber's role was not only as script author, director, and producer, but she was the public face and primary business manager of her company, Lois Weber Productions. Weber believed that cinema went beyond highbrow entertainment to tackling controversial social causes to achieve political change, for example drug abuse in *Hop, the Devil's Brew* (1916), poverty and wage equity in *Shoes* (1916), and contraception in *Where Are My Children?* (1916). While the Thanhouser studio produced several social issue oriented films, for example child labor abuse in *The Cry of the Children* (1912) and the battle-of-the-sexes comedy *Petticoat Camp* (1913), it is apparent that Gertrude's scenario strategy was more inclined towards a financial return than political transformation.



Lois Weber and Phillips Smalley

After leading a failed effort for the Gaumont studio to join the Motion Picture Patents Corporation (MPPC), Alice Guy Blaché, and her husband Herbert Blaché, established the Solax Studio in 1910 in Flushing, New York. She was the artistic director and directed many of its films, while her husband managed production for the new company. Solax earned the couple enough income to build a studio in Fort Lee, New Jersey in 1912 that produced melodramas such as *A Man's Man* (1912) and comedies like *A Comedy of Errors* (1912). Gertrude worked on a similar lineup of films with 47% of the studio's titles classified as melodramas and 30% comedies (Ned Thanhouser). By 1914, however, distribution issues, the shift of the industry from the one-reel format to feature films, and the shift of



Alice Guy-Blaché and Herbert Blaché

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the industry to the West Coast eventually led to Herbert and Alice Guy hiring out to direct feature films for other studios. The role of the Alice Guy Blaché at Solax in the 1912 to 1914 period align closely with Gertrude's work at the Thanhouser studio. Alice Guy and Herbert Blaché divorced in 1920; he continued to work in the motion picture industry into the 1920s while Alice Guy wrote novelizations of film scripts and lectured extensively, but she never made another film (McMahan). The Thanhouser studio was also experiencing the same industry pressures that eventually resulted in its demise in late 1917. When the Thanhouser's retired from the industry in 1918, they remained a couple with no ties to the film industry. As noted earlier, Gertrude did write several plays with her brother-in-law Lloyd Lonergan.



Edwin and Gertrude Thanhouser (ca. 1951)

### Recognizing Gertrude's Contributions to Early Film

The Thanhouser studio legacy, and Gertrude's significant contributions, are just now being recognized as one of the key forces in early US film history. Gertrude's multifaceted efforts behind the scenes made the Thanhouser studio one of the key independent US production companies during cinema's transitional era. Family history documents along with published accounts from trade journals describe Gertrude's role in the formation, management and operation of the company. The films that survive today attest to her contributions. It is evident that Gertrude's day-to-day involvement in the management of the company and her leadership over the creative aspects of scenario development and film editing contributed not only to the success of the Thanhouser film enterprise, but to the maturation of the industry during its formative years.

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