

Gertrude Homan Thanhouser

April 23, 1882 – May 29, 1951

While Thanhouser Company may not be one of the best known of the early film companies, what is certain is that its founder and public figurehead was Edwin Thanhouser (Slide, 1978). Missing from this account, however, is the critical role played by his wife, Gertrude Homan Thanhouser. She was a major contributor to the success of the Thanhouser film enterprise where she worked as actress, scenario writer, film editor, and studio executive.

In the spring of 1909, Gertrude moved with her husband, actor turned theatre manager Edwin Thanhouser, to New York where they established Thanhouser Company as an independent motion picture production studio. The company was capitalized with \$10,000 divided into 100 shares; 98 in Gertrude's name as secretary, and one share each to Edwin, president, and Lloyd Lonergan, Gertrude's brother-in-law and vice-president (Phillips, 1909). Edwin was reported as the first to head an American movie studio with a theatrical background (Bowers, 1995) and Gertrude's acting career of fourteen years gave her the stagecraft to be a powerful and creative force in this new venture. Magazine articles and family history document Gertrude's key role in the formation, management and operation of the company.

Gertrude was featured in Thanhouser's second film release, *St. Elmo*, March 22, 1910. Reviews were critical of the acting, "...the story...is told by the sub-titles in the film, and not so much by the acting" (*Morning Telegraph*, 1910); it was the only film in which she received acting credit. She received co-scenario writing credit with her brother-in-law, Lloyd Lonergan, for the screen adaptation of Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*. Reviews for this film were positive: "Undoubtedly Mr. Thanhouser's long knowledge of stagecraft stood him good stead in posing this picture" (*Moving Picture World*, 1910). By the summer of 1910, Thanhouser

Gertrude Homan Thanhouser

Company had earned enthusiastic approval as one of the leading independent film production companies: "...Thanhouser pictures, of 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" (Woods, 1910). Family history reveals that behind the scenes, Gertrude's contributions to scenario development, *mise en scène* and editing helped make these reviews possible (Thanhouser, 1980).

In the spring of 1912, three after years establishing Thanhouser Company as a producer of high quality films, Gertrude, Edwin and Lloyd Lonergan sold their shares in the company to Charles J. Hite of Mutual Film Corporation for \$250,000 (*New Rochelle Pioneer*, 1912). They remained on the board of directors for Mutual Film Corporation. In the fall of 1912, Gertrude and Edwin took their two children on a "grand tour" of Europe where they studied the European film industry with the intention of returning to America to resume their careers in motion pictures (Judson, 1914). When World War I erupted in August 1914, the family made a hasty escape back to America on a refugee ship (Behnke, 1914).

Charles J. Hite expanded the reputation of the "Thanhouser" brand as an innovative leader in the industry with the twenty-three episode serial *The Million Dollar Mystery* and two new brands: "Princess Films" and "Falstaff" comedies (Bowers, 1995). Within weeks of Gertrude and Edwin landing in New York in September 1914, Hite was tragically killed in an automobile accident leaving the Thanhouser Film Corporation leaderless and adrift. In February 1915, the Mutual Film Corporation board of directors in an extraordinary move, lured Edwin out of retirement with a three year contract and a salary of \$75,000 per year; Edwin and Gertrude returned in February 1915 to lead the company that bore their name (Photoplay, 1915).

Gertrude Homan Thanhouser

Gertrude immediately resumed her role as supervisor of the scenario department (*Morning Telegraph*, 1915) and was credited for writing the scenario for their first “new” release, *Their One Love*. This one-reel drama capitalized on the 50th anniversary of the end of the Civil War and was a shrewd competitive response to Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation*. Her scenario received positive reviews: “As a whole: A gem; Story: Different...” (Gunning, 1915). Gertrude was also credited as scenario writer for four other films in 1915, including a two-reel comedy-drama, a one-reel drama, and two four-reel “Mutual Masterpiece” feature films (Bowers, 1995). She remained active in company affairs including attending a meeting with President Woodrow Wilson on February 12, 1916 (*Moving Picture World*, 1916).

In the summer of 1916 the untimely death of Thanhouser leading actress Florence LaBadie and the rise of films with big name stars such as Mary Pickford and Charlie Chaplin contributed to the decline in popularity of Thanhouser films. Ejected from Mutual’s distribution schedule forced Edwin to scale back operations and speculatively produce feature films for sale to Pathé Exchange, Inc.; Gertrude now spent little time at the factory (Bowers, 1995). In 1918, the founders and former owners retired from the film industry leaving the Thanhouser Film Corporation with a positive bank balance, unlike many others of the era. (*Motography* 1918).

The full extent of Gertrude Thanhouser’s contributions to the success of the Thanhouser film enterprise and the early film industry will never be known for certain. Much of the public records cite Edwin and only give credit to Gertrude when her role was documented by company releases. It is evident, however, that Gertrude’s day-to-day involvement in the management of the company, leadership over the creative aspects of scenario development and film editing were significant contributions to the success of Thanhouser film enterprise.

- Ned Thanhouser, Portland Oregon, August 2005

Gertrude Homan Thanhouser

Bibliography:

Behnke, Arno. *The Sailing of a Refuge Ship*. New York: G. Schirmer, 1914. Ned Thanhouser, private collection.

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Slide, Anthony. *Aspects of American Film History Prior to 1920*. New York and London. The Scarecrow Press, 1978.

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Thanhouser, Lloyd F. "The Thanhouser Family." Unpublished manuscript. Houston, Texas January 1970. Ned Thanhouser, private collection.

Thanhouser, Lloyd F., in conversation, Madison, NH. Rec. 17 August 1981. Audiotape. Ned Thanhouser, private collection.

Thanhouser, Lloyd F., in conversation, Madison, NH. Rec. 2 August 1980. Audiotape. Ned Thanhouser, private collection.

Filmography:

A. Gertrude Homan Thanhouser as Scenario Writer:

Gertrude Homan Thanhouser

The Winter's Tale (Co-sc.: Lloyd F. Lonergan), 1910; *Their One Love*, 1915; *Fairy Fern Seed*, 1915; *The Patriot and the Spy*, 1915 (Co-sc: Lloyd F. Lonergan); *From the River's Depths*, 1915; *The Price of Her Silence*, 1915 (Co-sc.: Lloyd F. Lonergan)

B. Gertrude Homan Thanhouser as Actress:

St. Elmo, 1910

Archival - Film Print Sources (extant)

The Winter's Tale, Prod.: Edwin Thanhouser (Thanhouser Company, US 1910) Cast: Anna Rosemond, Martin Faust, Frank H. Crane, Amelia Barleon, Alfred Hanlon; si, b&w, 35mm. 1 reel of 1 (incomplete) 800 ft. Archive: LOC. English intertitles.

Their One Love, Prod. Edwin Thanhouser (Thanhouser Film Corporation, US 1915) Cast: Cast: Madeline and Marion Fairbanks, Robert Wilson, Charles Emerson; si, b&w, 35mm. 1 reel of 1 (incomplete) 931 ft. Archive: BFI/NFTVA. English intertitles.

The Patriot and the Spy, Prod. Edwin Thanhouser (Thanhouser Film Corporation, US 1915) Cast: James Cruze, Marguerite Snow, Alphonse Ethier, Kenneth Clarendon, Samuel Niblack, Al Reitz, Frank L. Geregthy; si, b&w, 35mm. 2 reels of 4 (inc.) 1286 ft. Archive: LOC – Dawson Collection. English intertitles.