

# Thanhouser: A Microcosm of the Transitional Era in Silent Films

*Why the Studio Never Made it to Hollywood*

Ned Thanhouser

Southwest/Texas Popular and American Culture Associations

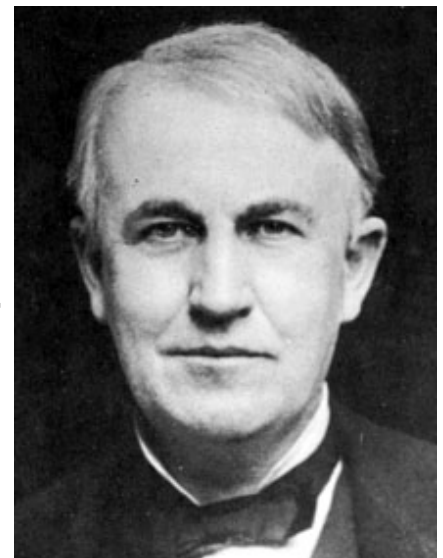
February 26, 2009



# The Transitional Era in American Silent Film

- Period from 1908 to 1917
  - End of the “primitive” era
  - Start of “classical” Hollywood era
- “Single Reel Era” – 1908 to 1913
  - One-reel standard (1,000’ of 35mm film)
  - Edison dominates with Motion Picture Patent’s Corp (MPPC, aka “The Trust”)
- Transition to “Features”\* – 1914 to 1917
  - Emergence of the “Star System”

\* Feature = Four reels or more per title



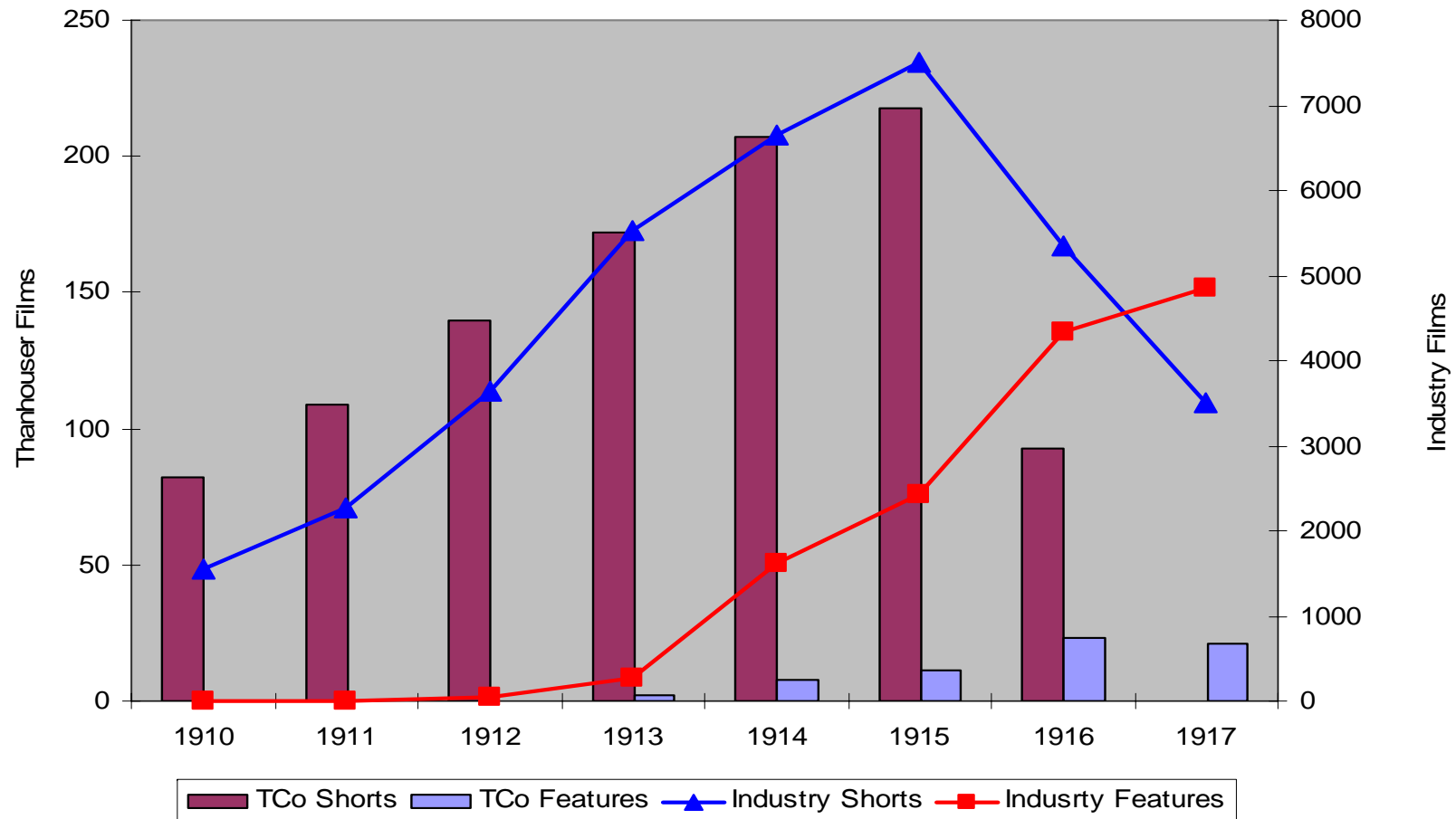
Thomas A. Edison



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# Thanhouser vs. The Industry

## (1910 to 1917)



\* Feature = Four reels or more per title

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# Thanhouser Back Story

## Theatrical Experience



Edwin Thanhouser  
ca. 1897



Gertrude Homan  
ca. 1896



Academy Theater Program  
January 7, 1900

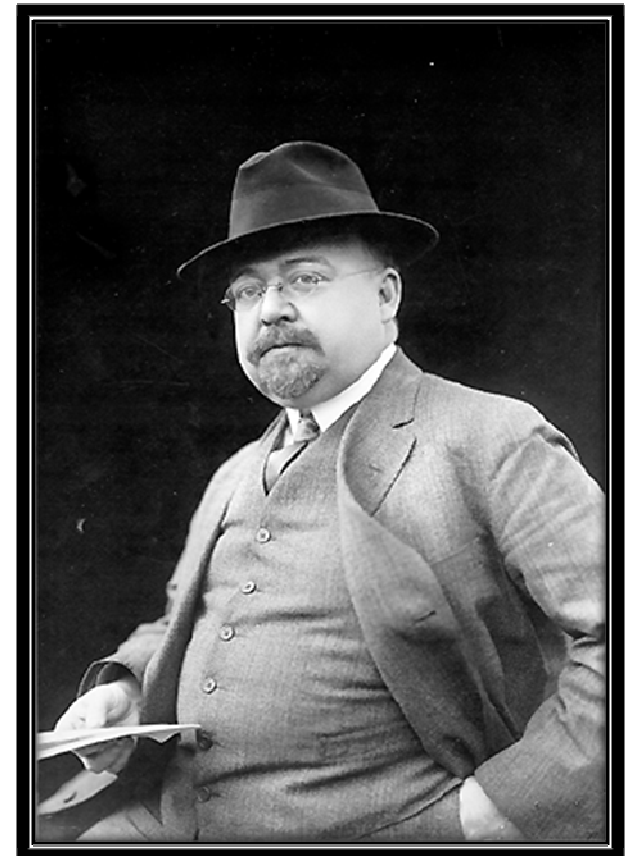
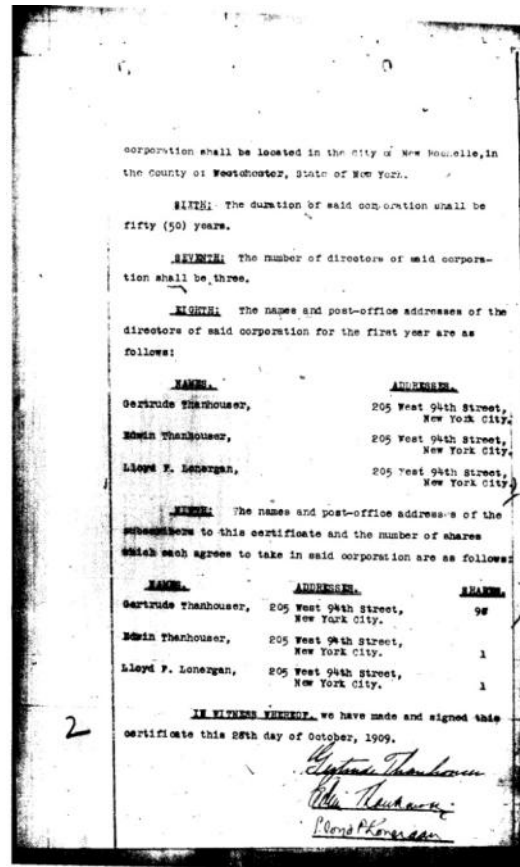
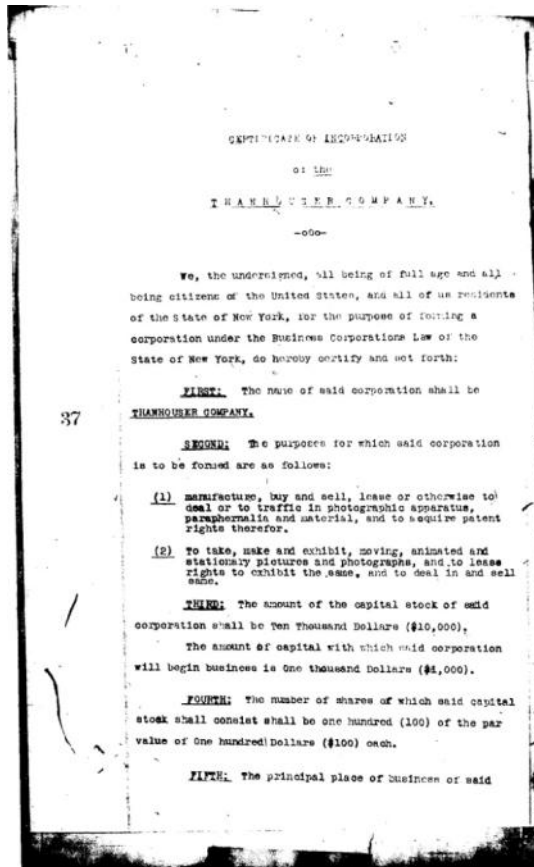


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# Into the Motion Picture Business

## First American Studio with Theatrical Background



Certificate of Incorporation – October 25, 1909

Lloyd Lonergan



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# Thanhouser Company Factory

New Rochelle, NY



Converted Abandoned Skating Rink at Warren and Grove Streets – ca. 1910



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# The First Thanhouser Release

## *The Actor's Children*

*“So I set about seeing  
how I could make  
pictures without  
infringing upon patent  
rights...”*

EDWIN THANHOUSER, *The Moving Picture  
World*, MARCH 12, 1910



*The Actor's Children*, March 15, 1910



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# Breaking the Mold

## Multiple Reel Films

- “Natural Length Films”
  - *Romeo and Juliet*, (2 reels),  
Sept. 1, 1911
  - *She* (2 reels),  
Dec. 26, 1911
  - *Nicholas Nickleby* (2 reels),  
March 19, 1912
  - *The Merchant of Venice* (2 reels),  
July 26, 1912
  - *The Star of Bethlehem* (3 reels),  
Dec. 24, 1912



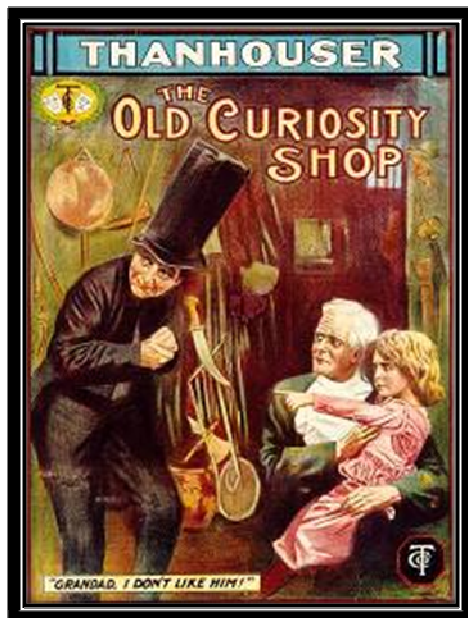
*Romeo and Juliet* – Sept. 1911





# Thanhouser and the Single Reel Era (1910 to 1912)

- Establishing a reputation of quality  
 "...Thanhouser pictures, of course, rank highest."  
*-The New York Dramatic Mirror, ca. summer 1910*
- Promoting the "Brand" above all else

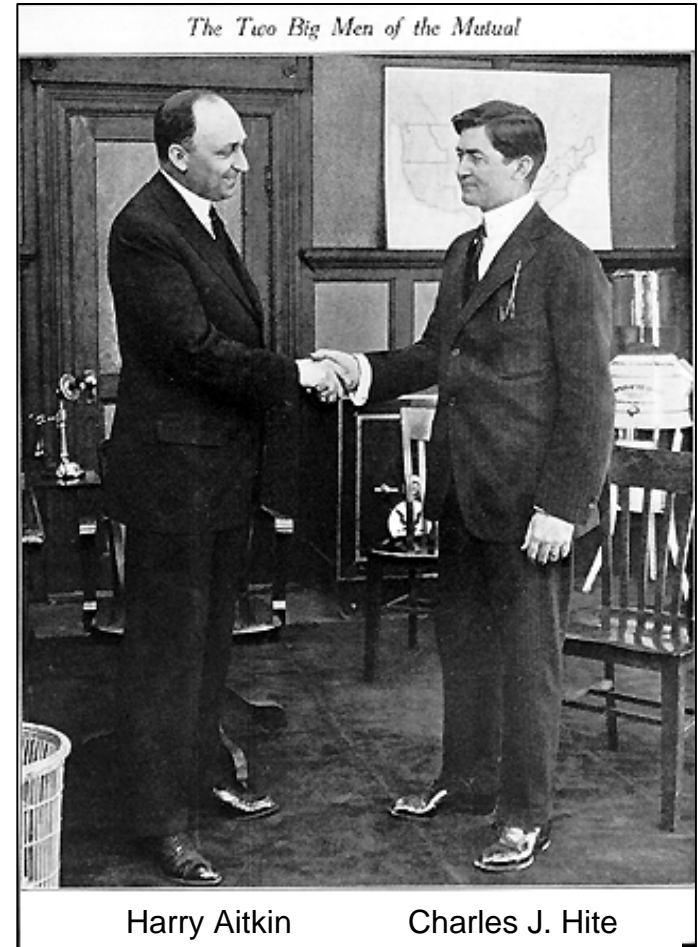


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# Under the Mutual Banner

1912 – A Year of Change

- Thanhouser Sold to Mutual in April for \$250,000
- Renamed: “Thanhouser Film Corporation”
- Edwin and Gertrude “retire” in November
- 1912 Feature Scorecard
  - Industry: 1%, Thanhouser: 0%



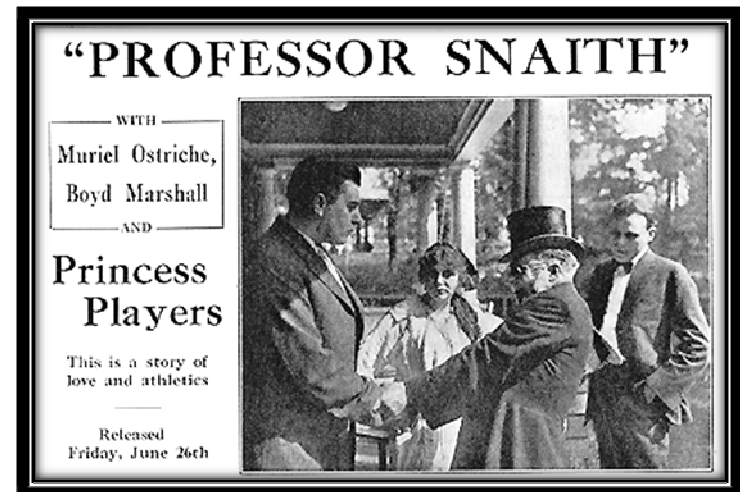
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# Expanding Thanhouser Output

## Princess Brand

- New Division
  - Aug. 23, 1913 Intro
- Three per Week
  - Mutual Distribution
- Features New “Stars”
  - Muriel Ostriche
  - Boyd Marshall



# The 518<sup>th</sup> Thanhouser Release

## *An Elusive Diamond*

- One Reel Crime Drama
  - Mignon Anderson
- Camera & Editing
  - Foreground and Background Action
  - Close Up Shots
  - Analytical Shots
  - Scene-to-Scene Transition



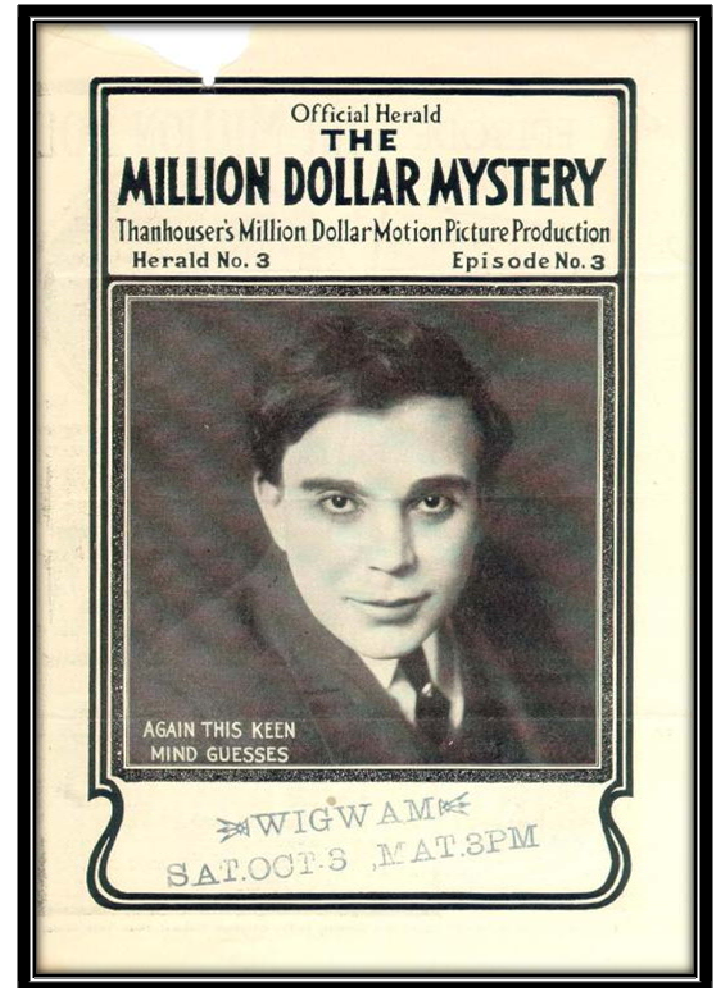
*An Elusive Diamond* - January 23, 1914



# The Million Dollar Mystery

## Thanhouser's Successful Serial

- 23 Weekly Episodes
  - June 1914 to Feb. 1915
- Featuring
  - James Cruze
  - Marguerite Snow
  - Florence LaBadie
- Solution to the Mystery
  - \$10,000 Prize
  - Earned over \$2M





# Embracing the Star System (1913 to 1914)



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# Tragedy Strikes Thanhouser

August 21, 1914

- Charles J. Hite Dies
  - Auto Accident
- Management by Committee
  - Lack of direction
  - Loss of talent
- 1914 Feature Scorecard
  - Industry: 20%, Thanhouser: 4%



Charles J. Hite



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# Edwin and Gertrude Return

## 1915

- Escape Europe and World War
  - Land NYC August 24, 1914
- Mutual Rehires Thanhouser
  - Three Year Contract - Feb. 1915
  - Inherited Failing Zudora Serial
- Exit Princess, Enter Falstaff
  - April 16, 1915
  - Focus on One-reel Comedies



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# More Industry Transitions

## 1916

- The Shift to Features
  - Mutual Introduces “Masterpicture”
  - Thanhouser Produces 23 Titles
- Mutual Ejects Thanhouser (June)
  - Forms Alliance with Pathé
  - “...one-fourth the number of reels with four times the quality.”
- 1916 Feature Scorecard
  - Industry: 45%, Thanhouser: 20%

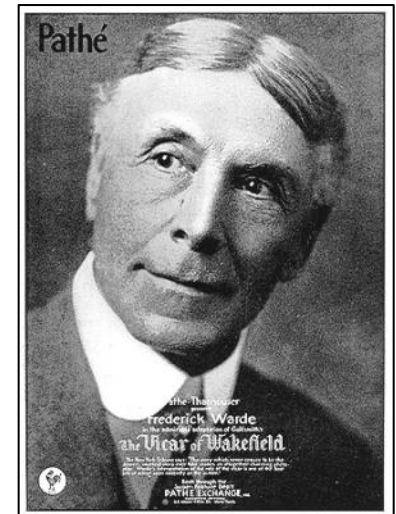


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# Exit Thanhouser

## 1917

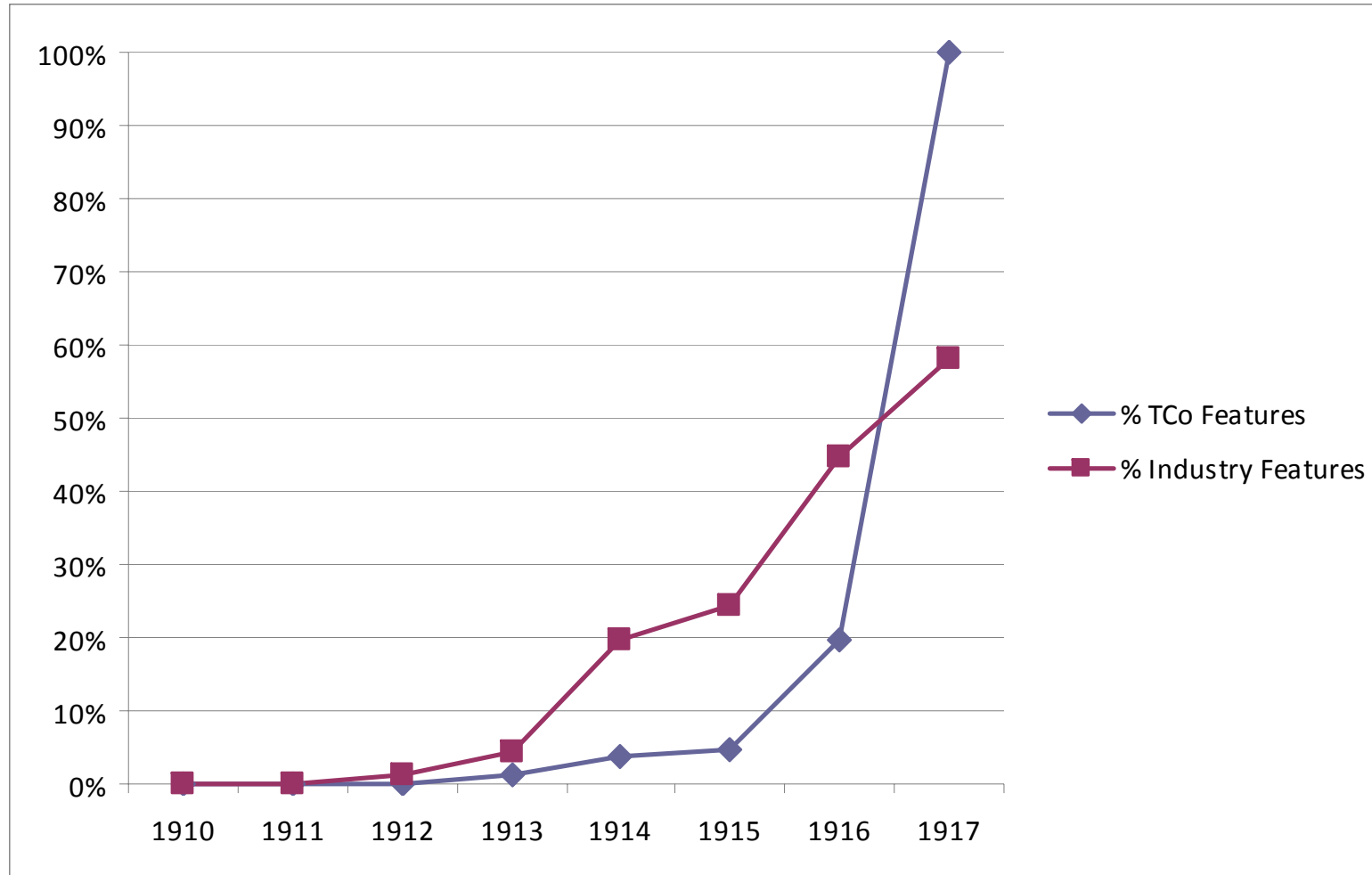
- Thanhouser's Alliance with Pathé
  - 100% Features, 29 Releases
  - More Star Power
    - Frederick Warde, Jeanne Eagels
  - All Five Reels, Save One:
    - *Vicar of Wakefield* (Eight Reels)
- Tragedy Strikes Again
  - Florence LaBadie Dies Oct. 1917
  - Industry Move to CA, Recession



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# Thanhouser Feature Scorecard

Features vs. Total Output 1910 to 1917



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# Thanhouser Legacy

[www.thanhouser.org](http://www.thanhouser.org)



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