

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"It's a Long Way to Filmland"
*Starlets, Screen Hopefuls,
 and Extras in Early Hollywood*

Shelley Stamp

Here they come, extra girls, hordes and hordes of them flocking to the studios. Each one believes she is chosen. I pity them all.

ACTRESS IRENE WALLACE, *Green Book*, 1914

Just a word of warning here to the aspiring young girls all over the country who may believe that a trip to Los Angeles will put them in the pictures. The warning is: don't come.

Everybody's Magazine, October 1915

Beginning in the mid-1910s, trade papers, fan magazines, and general-interest publications reported, with mounting alarm, the long lines of young women waiting outside studio gates in Los Angeles hoping to find work as motion picture "extras." In its celebrated diagnosis of the "movie-struck girl" *Woman's Home Companion* noted "at eight o'clock every morning you may see a pathetic breadline of waiting actresses anxious for 'extra' work at a few dollars a day, hoping each time that the director will give them the opportunity to make a hit, and ultimately reach stardom."¹ Essanay, Lasky, and Reliance-Majestic all reported some thirty or forty applicants each day.² "Hundreds apply weekly at a film studio for employment," one 1916 witness recalled.³ Another testified that "tens of thousands of film aspirants" flocked to the new filmmaking capital each year, "ranging from the fourteen-year-old school girl in love with a certain film hero to the grandmother of fifty-odd who has suddenly discovered her histrionic talent."⁴ The tendency to describe all starstruck hopefuls as female, and to present them as silly creatures caught under the sway of overwrought emotion, was characteristic of most reports. Only three kinds of young women sought motion picture work, claimed another 1914 observer: "foolish chits" in love with mainline idols they have seen on the screen; "vain movie-struck girls who want only to see themselves on screen"; and, in much smaller numbers, a few young women with

serious talents interested in working hard and earning a living. Most who made the trek were "shallow, without balance or serious interest, their main purpose in life being to be admired and flattered."⁵ *Picture Progress* found among those eager to "break into motion pictures" a high school girl insisting that "all my friends say that I look like Mary Pickford" and a worn-out twenty-year-old, "her shoulders . . . stooped and her finger tips . . . roughened from the coarse thread of the sweatshop," who crawled motion picture work because "it must be such an easy life!"⁶ So prevalent was the phenomenon that Mae Marsh declared, "[S]ometimes I am given to the thought that every young girl in the United States wants to go into motion pictures."⁷

Young women lampooned in these accounts, said to arrive at studio gates bedecked in Mary Pickford curls or Theda Bara ear loops, pressing themselves on directors in the hopes of becoming an "onjewnew,"⁸ were pursuing a particularly gendered version of the American dream, one that was driven by the unique transformations of transitional era filmmaking. As the film industry's new center of production, Los Angeles became the object of fascination in travel and lifestyle magazines during the early 1910s, as, more figuratively, the movie screen became a site of fantasy for young female fans encouraged to imagine their own image projected there. Colored by celebrity profiles that trumpeted the rise of early stars from very humble origins, fan magazines offered their readers advice on every aspect of the business—how to dress, how to style their hair, how to pose, along with more practical tips on how to find work as extras on studio lots. Yet, in the end, derisive and alarmist reports of fans and would-be actresses flocking to Los Angeles determined to find a place for themselves onscreen obscured the multifaceted nature of women's contributions to cinema during the early years of Hollywood and disarmed the considerable impact that hundreds of unmarried, casually employed, recently transplanted young women posed to both the filmmaking industry and the greater Los Angeles community.

THE LURE OF EARLY HOLLYWOOD

The extra "problem" was propelled by significant changes in the film industry beginning around 1913, chiefly the expansion of film production and the resulting rationalization of filmmaking techniques, the centralization of motion picture concerns around Los Angeles, and the growing cult of celebrity attached to movie stars. In an effort to streamline production methods and lower costs several production companies were decreasing their stock companies in the mid-1910s and relying with greater frequency on extras, or "jobbers," who could be paid by the day rather than receiving a fixed salary.⁹ This marked a change from the early years of the transitional period when many outfits began hiring stock companies to fill the escalating demand for films and the new emphasis on fictional subjects. As Murray Ross demonstrated

in his 1941 history of movie work, early studios needed an enormous range of "types" for varied projects, yet there was no way each company could provide regular or steady employment for such a large labor pool, let alone place performers on permanent salary. Without any protective organization these workers were left prey to various more-or-less-legitimate schemes promoting acting schools, placement agencies, and the like. Nor did the studios maintain any systemized procedure for hiring extras when needed, necessitating that those looking for work make the rounds of various outfits daily.¹⁰

Also around 1913 production companies, many of which had been scattered throughout the country, began to set up permanent facilities in and around Los Angeles, creating for the first time a geographical center for the industry. With early studios in Edendale, Pasadena, Santa Monica, and the San Fernando Valley, the Los Angeles area became a single, year-round destination for those in search of movie work, although the term *Hollywood* did not emerge until later in the teens to unify these disparate facilities.¹¹ "The pictures . . . have added and are adding uncounted thousands to the population of Los Angeles," western lifestyle magazine *Sunset* reported in 1915.¹² Indeed, the city's Chamber of Commerce estimated that spring that close to fifteen thousand residents earned their living in the film industry, drawing some five million dollars in wages annually.¹³ Universal alone employed twelve hundred to two thousand actors, and even a smaller outfit like Inceville had over 250 performers on its payroll.¹⁴ "Los Angeles has, of a sudden, become the motion picture center of the world," *Sunset* declared.¹⁵ Even those working as extras, although largely anonymous onscreen and invisible in studio labor pools, became a notable element of the city's culture, regularly gathering during their off-hours to socialize near the corner of Hollywood Boulevard and Cahuenga—a phenomenon noted with interest by the *Los Angeles Times*.¹⁶ Although *Everybody's Magazine* affirmed that "Los Angeles takes very kindly to the picture folk," another sentiment is audible in the slang terms Angelenos adopted to describe their new neighbors.¹⁷ Studios were called "camps" and their inhabitants dubbed "the movie colony." Leading historian Gordon De Marco to surmise that city residents considered this first rush of motion picture recruits a fleeting phenomenon at best, one with little lasting connection to the city itself.¹⁸

With Los Angeles now becoming identified as the locus of film production nationally, it became an object of fascination for those interested in seeing how and where films were made, in seeing that mythic space behind the screen. "Millions of persons in other states and other countries cannot sit before the screens every day without feeling the lure of the sunshine that mellows the picture," *Sunset* pronounced.¹⁹ Spectacular motion picture studios built to accommodate the industry's newly streamlined, mass film production techniques—Inceville, Universal City, and the Lasky Studios—were profiled in widely circulated publications like *Everybody's Scientific American*,

and *Ladies' Home Journal* in features that stressed the vast tracts of land occupied by the companies, their extraordinary facilities, and the enormous workforce they employed.²⁰

These vicarious tours of "Motion-Picture Land" simultaneously demystified and reified the moviemaking process, for those looking behind the screen to see the "real" world of filmmaking beyond found only another layer of fantasy. "In the studios—behind the 'movie' screen—what a mystery-land lies there!" *Photoplay* proclaimed in one of many celebrations of Los Angeles studios published in early fan magazines.²¹ A desire to see past the screen, to learn the workings of an industry unfamiliar to most Americans at the time, was given a particularly feminine cast by writer Rufus Steele in his 1915 profile of Universal City for *Ladies' Home Journal*. His guide to the company's massive new San Fernando Valley complex was framed by a vignette featuring two young women whispering to one another at the cinema. "Were you ever filled with a desire to go straight through the screen and see just what is behind it?" one says to the other. "I mean did you never want to go through the screen, just as Alice went through the looking-glass? What we see is nothing but the shadow. Don't you realize that somewhere all these interesting and exciting things are actually taking place?"²² Entraptured fans here possessed a curiosity to match the "shadows" they saw onscreen with the reality in Southern California studios. In a fascinating application of the *Alice in Wonderland* story—surely an "Ur" narrative of female curiosity—the young women would travel through the screen/mirror to see not reality but a whole new realm of make-believe. An actual location, the moviemaking capital was now frequently depicted as a fantastic space.

Alongside vicarious studio tours offered to readers of mass-circulation magazines, Los Angeles-based filmmaking outfits also began catering to a new breed of motion picture tourists eager to see the industry's inner-workings firsthand. Already dubbed "Mecca of the motion picture" in 1915, Los Angeles became an object of sacred pilgrimage for the devoted.²³ Perhaps the most adept at studio tourism was Universal, which mounted an enormous publicity campaign to mark the official opening of its Universal City facilities in March of 1915, offering special trolley expeditions from downtown Los Angeles and even arranging a tie-in with the Panama-Pacific Exposition in San Francisco so that visitors who had traveled to that city by rail would be entitled to a free trip to Los Angeles and Universal City.²⁴ The picture-making complex was simultaneously promoted as "just another municipality," complete with post office, fire station, police force, and elected officials, and as a spectacle on par with anything on display at the Pan-Pacific Exposition: a "wonder city of the world," a "fairytale land where the craziest things in the world happen," and "a place to think about and talk about all the rest of your days!"²⁵ Enormously popular, the studio tours drew between five hundred and one thousand visitors per day, including, of course, many would-be star-

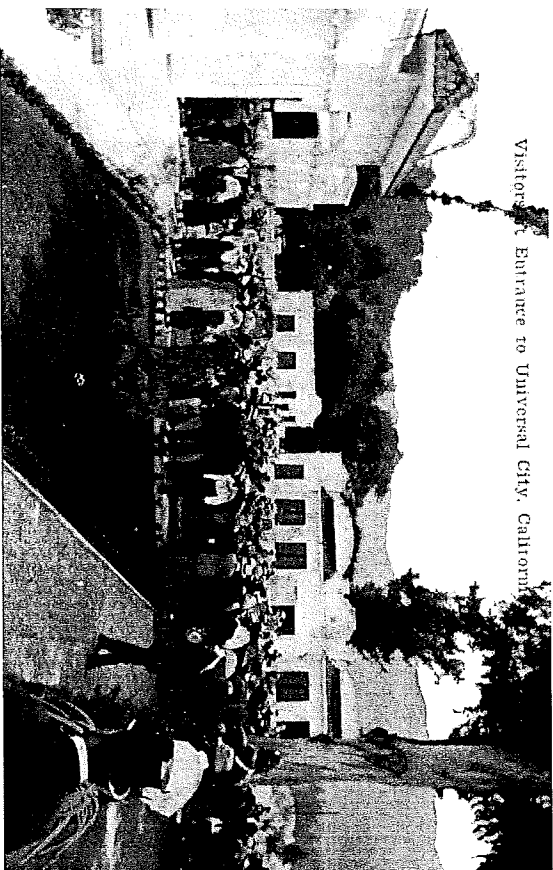


Figure 14.1. Souvenir postcard showing tourists gathered outside Universal City, 1915.

lets (figure 14.1). Indeed, actress Mary Maclaren recollected being lured to Universal City by just such a promotion. Traveling out to California where she would be performing at the Pan-Pacific Expo, Maclaren remembers, "I bought a magazine, *The Movie Magazine*, and in it was this article about Universal Studios. Well, from then on I could think of nothing but Universal."²⁶

It was not only accounts of filmmaking feats that drew the curious to California but also news of the glamorous lives led by film personalities; for Los Angeles quickly garnered a reputation as the movie stars' playground. Unlike itinerant musical and stage performers of a generation earlier, motion picture players did not have to travel far beyond the newly centralized filmmaking facilities in Los Angeles and thus could establish permanent residences there, many of them lavish structures in keeping with the performers' burgeoning wealth and celebrity status—a phenomenon celebrated as early as 1915 with an elaborate *Photoplay* article on stars' homes.²⁷ As Richard deCordova demonstrated, the movie star system developing in 1913 and 1914 encouraged a new fascination with performers' offscreen lives—their marriages, divorcees, children, and lovers; their homes, closets, bedrooms, and kitchens; indeed, their innermost thoughts, secrets, and desires. The star system, he said, led fans "toward that which is behind or beyond the image, hidden from sight."²⁸ Fan magazines wasted no time in romanticizing Los Angeles culture for readers eager for details of life outside studio

gates. Film stars were to be found dining in fashionable cafes, walking down urban thoroughfares, and, of course, attending the movies. Reporting from the perspective of "we lucky Angelenos," *Motion Picture Classic* writer Frizzi Remont declared, "I don't want to make all you fans jealous, but I really do think we dwellers in the film capital of the world are just a little better off than you are."²⁹

Celebrations of opulent living in the filmmaking community were part of a broader glamorization of Los Angeles fostered by an aggressive promotion of the city at the turn of the century. Indeed, swelling ranks of film personnel were part of a larger trend in westward migration, so much so that the city's population had increased fivefold since then, to include some 550,000 residents by 1914, and by 1916 had become the largest city, geographically, in the United States.³⁰ Southern California lifestyles had been romanticized for easterners for at least a decade prior to the expansion of film production there. The region's temperate climate, its emphasis on outdoor living, its varied foods, and its spectacular landscape were all touted. But perhaps most intriguingly, profiles also often stressed unique features of life there: "Southern California to the newcomer presents a new phase of existence, a different idea, which suggests deviation from the usual ways of seeing things," *Out West* magazine told its readers.³¹ Here the possibility of self-transformation, already a powerful ingredient in star discourse, was linked still further with everyday life in California.

With Hollywood, both as a filmmaking center and an alluring offscreen community, painted in breathtaking terms, is it any wonder that eager movie hopefuls flocked there? A particularly powerful ingredient in this phenomenon were stories celebrating the "discovery" of young women pulled from the ranks of studio extras and elevated to the heights of stardom. Movie aficionados could read such narratives everywhere: *Motion Picture Classic* began a regular column devoted to "How They Got In" narratives in 1916, and top-drawer national publications started featuring testimonials from picture personalities like Mary Fuller, who reported on "My Adventures as a Motion Picture Heroine" for *Collier's* readers in 1911, and Mary Pickford, who followed suit with a *Ladies' Home Journal* piece describing "What It Means to Be a 'Movie' Actress."³² Books like Mae Timee's 1916 volume *Life Stories of the Movie Stars* also detailed the rise of a new generation of celebrities from the humblest of origins.³³

Accounts of director Lois Weber's "discovery" of actress Mary Maclaren in 1915 provide just one example of this type of narrative. As a young woman Maclaren reportedly "got the fever" and became "eager to stand with the other girls in the crowds that waited to be called as 'extras.'"³⁴ According to a tale spun in promotional literature, Weber spotted Maclaren in a long line of hopefuls gathered at Universal gates. "It was one of those trifles which so often affect the whole course of life," *Green Book* pronounced. Weber "looked

directly into the eyes of a girl whose face attracted and held her attention. There were other girls there, a bevy of them; but she saw only the one girl. In her face was 'something' magnetic. 'Are you looking for work?' the woman director asked the girl.³⁵ *Universal Weekly* proudly proclaimed, "Mary MacLaren is Lois Weber's discovery and it is entirely due to her chance meeting with the totally inexperienced girl that a new screen star has risen in the photoplay firmament. The story reads like a fairy tale, and in itself would make an extremely interesting photoplay if Lois Weber should ever be at a loss for a striking plot."³⁶ Another piece compared MacLaren's "fairy tale" rise to fame with that of Cinderella, casting Weber in the role of fairy godmother who "brought happiness to Cinderella through the wave of her magic wand."³⁷ "From Extra to Stardom," *Motion Picture Magazine* blared in its profile of the actress.³⁸ Stories of this kind presented the journey from obscurity to stardom as a model of class mobility and financial independence—especially for women—an imaginary trajectory that could be mapped onto the physical journey to Southern California.

Standing alongside such almost certainly embellished accounts of "how I got in," a host of novels, short fiction, and serialized stories also dramatized the road to stardom, providing first-person accounts to their female readers. "Peg O' the Movies," a serial that ran in *The Ladies' World* during late 1913 and early 1914, chronicled the heroine's pursuit of a motion picture career even over her fiancé's stubborn objections.³⁹ (Of course she becomes a star!) "My Experiences as a Film Favorite" offered *Photoplay* readers an "interesting and intimate inside story" of the exploits of one pseudonymous Polly Dean, recounting her journey to a California film studio and her (inevitable) rise to fame.⁴⁰ Novels such as 1915's *My Strange Life*, the story of a seventeen-year-old girl who leaves home in search of film work, were illustrated with photographs of leading players of the day—Mary Pickford, Grace Cunard, Clara Kimball Young—a strategy that tempted fans⁴⁰ to trace these stories back onto the lives of actual celebrities.⁴¹ More important still was the way these fictional narratives encouraged female readers to identify with the drama of rising stardom, to envision themselves in the same "role." Together with celebrity profiles, first-person narration in serialized stories fostered a mode of identification that allowed readers to project themselves into these potent fantasies of self-transformation.

So prevalent were these narratives that *McClure's* concluded the "modern malady" *flimmitis*, that compulsive desire to appear onscreen, almost always materialized following "an announcement that some little lady with a winning smile, but unheralded and unsung, yea, even untrained and inexperienced in legitimate drama, has signed a contract for more or less thousands per week with the Glistening Glory Moving Picture Company."⁴² Accordingly, fans besieged stars for advice on their own prospects. Mae Marsh reported that

a significant portion of her fan mail, beginning in the midteens, was given over to the subject. Young women wrote her concerned about whether they were the correct physical type for film work, whether motion picture morals were "safe for the average girl," and how long they would have to work as an extra before receiving a starring role.⁴³ As early as 1912 *Photoplay's* newly instituted "Answers to Inquiries" column asked readers to refrain from submitting questions related to their own prospects in film so besieged was the magazine by such requests.⁴⁴

A host of advice columns in movie magazines and popular newspapers, along with booklets, correspondence lessons, and motion picture "schools," all catered to the burgeoning interest in film work with the promise of practical guidance. Louella Parsons began a series of syndicated newspaper articles for the Hearst circuit on "How to Become a Movie Actress" in 1915; for instance, trading on what she dubbed her "wide experiences in the world of the photoplay" as scenario writer, executive, and "intimate friend of practically all the great stars." Introducing the series, the *Chicago Herald* invited readers to indulge their own fantasies of stardom: "Do you dream of becoming a moving picture actress and actually plan to be one? Then think of this: Every day that dream is coming true. Not a day passes but some girl who has shared your fondest fancies is made exquisitely happy. Her long-cherished hopes are realized. She breaks into the movies!"⁴⁵ Frances Agnew's 1913 guide to *Motion Picture Acting* wove together interviews with those already famous, like Clara Kimball Young and Muriel Ostriche, with tips on the acting craft, encouraging fans to map their own imagined screen destiny onto those profiled in the book.⁴⁶

Yet, with qualifications necessary for such positions kept extremely vague and lack of experience encouraged, much of the "advice" proved to be near universally applicable. One needed only elusive characteristics like "personality," "vitality," and "natural talent" to qualify for motion picture work, and in many cases those *without* prior experience were encouraged over more seasoned counterparts. "There is not a film studio in this country that would reject a woman whose natural gifts lend to artistic achievement, no matter if she has been on the stage or has even studied its techniques."⁴⁷ D. W. Griffith, screen hopefuls were told, "prefers to engage women who have, as he puts it, 'nothing to unlearn.'"⁴⁸ Articles on such topics as "Dressing for the Movies" and "Have You a Camera Face?" offered aspiring starlets little more than encouragement to study their own reflections in the mirror.⁴⁹

Should one desire more than simple self-scrutiny, expert lessons were also available from outfits with impressive-sounding names like the International Photoplay Studio and Dramatic School.⁵⁰ "Don't trust to luck," an ad for one school warned. "The stakes are too big."⁵¹ If advertisements such as these stressed the necessity of training for screen acting, seeming to debunk myths

of overnight "discovery," they simultaneously pledged that such preparation would be effortless and readily attainable. "Any clever girl can easily master the art of moving picture acting," one ad promised.⁵²

Not surprisingly, reports surfaced early on that many such "schools" were tending little in the way of concrete help at quite steep prices. Screen hopefuls at one such enterprise were paraded in front of a camera, noisily cranked by an operator, unaware that it contained no film, furnishing "a bitter lesson to those who ached to become famous on the screen," *Moving Picture World* concluded.⁵³ Another company charged the considerable sum of five hundred dollars to make two-reel films of screen aspirants, assuring each one that her picture could later be sold to a distribution company, which, of course, it could not.⁵⁴ In one more popular ruse applicants paid a fee to have their particulars listed in a directory that they were told would be circulated to studios, when in fact few filmmaking outfits in the 1910s hired talent from such listings.⁵⁵ This latter scheme was exposed in a *Motion Picture Magazine* article highlighting "takes and frauds" in the film industry, indicating that fans were being warned early on that their enthusiasm might be exploited—a distinct irony given that fans often read about such scams in publications that were themselves the chief advertising venue for their proponents.

Although an opportunist industry of motion picture schools, advice columns, and how-to manuals fueled the aspirations of movie hopefuls drawn to Los Angeles in the early 1910s, portraits of star-crazed young women that emerge in contemporary coverage of this phenomenon ironically circumscribed women's participation in the emergent film industry rather than espousing the many opportunities available to them there, as such reporting often pretended to do. By imagining that women's primary interest in motion pictures lay in a desire to see themselves onscreen, these caricatures resigned women to a wholly passive role of being discovered, noticed, and looked at. Elsewhere I have argued that accounts of such "movie-struck girls" pathologized and infantilized female film viewers at a time (paradoxically) when they were most courted as paying customers; in this context it becomes clear that characterizations of this sort also limited images of women's movie work during a crucial period of expansion in early Hollywood.⁵⁶

THE EXTRA PROBLEM

Stories focused on long lines of women waiting outside studios to be hired as extras created an impression that women were shut out of the industry during these years, literally kept outside the gates behind which moviemaking took place, and that appearing onscreen was the sum total of their engagement with the cinema—images that belied the state of the field in the mid-1910s, when many women held positions as top-ranked directors and screenwriters. By Anthony Slide's count at least twenty production compa-

nies were controlled by women in the 1910s.⁵⁷ The tale of Mary MacLaren waiting woefully outside Universal, for instance, obscures the particular wealth of female talent housed within, for at the time the studio was home to perhaps the greatest concentration of female directors and screenwriters in the business, among them Cleo Madison, Ruth Stonehouse, Ida May Park, Lule Warrenton, Dorothy Davenport Reid, and Lois Weber.⁵⁸ Announcing "Woman's Conquest of Filmland" in 1915, Robert Grau celebrated the unique opportunities that motion picture work held for women. "In no line of endeavor has woman made so emphatic an impress than in the amazing film industry," he declared. "The fair sex is represented as in no other calling to which women have harkened in the early years of the twentieth century."⁵⁹

If reports of women lined up outside studio gates waiting to be discovered masked the breadth and scope of women's participation in early Hollywood, they also tended to conceal the actual labor involved in working as an extra. Paid by the day, rather than the hour, extras could count on long shifts if they found work. "Often after staying around all day we didn't start to work until late in the afternoon and had to work most of the night," one young woman reported, comparing her working hours to those of a night watchman. Calling the conditions under which they toiled "wholly vicious," *Motion Picture Magazine* also feared that extras could not "do their best when weighed down with poverty and the knowledge that next day, or the day after, they will again be hunting for work."⁶⁰ Extras often had to supply their own clothing and makeup, and working under mercury lamps for long hours irritated the eyes of those shooting indoors. Far-flung studios in Santa Monica, Pasadena, and the San Fernando Valley also posed travel obstacles for screen aspirants. One woman remembered having to walk two miles from the end of the streetcar line to reach the studio.⁶¹ "The reason that they are called 'extra' girls is because of the extra amount of work that one has to do. The only thing that isn't extra is the pay," one writer quipped.⁶²

Ironically, such poor working conditions actually quelled possible complaints according to Danae Clark, who emphasizes that "a constant pool of unemployed and underemployed workers (mostly extras) made it possible for studios to reduce labor dissension. The promise of moving up in the star system hierarchy kept hopefuls in line, while the fear of plummeting to the bottom was used to keep employed actors from challenging their employers and complaining about exploitive labor practices."⁶³ Press reports that stressed the vanity and naiveté of screen aspirants also ignored the fact that for many this was not a frivolous proposition; in fact, a significant number of women seeking work as extras were supporting other family members back home.⁶⁴ One such figure was Zasu Pitts, who recalls leaving her home in Santa Cruz, some 350 miles north of Los Angeles, at age nineteen in order to provide for her widowed mother and two siblings. "Mother decided to send me

to some friends in Hollywood who had written that young girls without any experience were being paid the enormous sum of three dollars a day by the moving picture studios," she remembered. "So off I went in Mother's best coat, dreading the ordeal that lay ahead of me."⁶⁵

Tales of extras being "discovered" by famous directors also muted women's labor, of course, for they emphasized passive acts of waiting and being looked at over the skill and effort required to succeed in the industry. Some performers, like Mary Maclaren, sought to reclaim the talent and training hidden under myths of instant discovery by actively countering publicity accounts of their rise to stardom. In an article titled "How I Happened," published in 1917, just a year after she became famous, Maclaren rejected the ingenué guise that had been cast for her, emphasizing instead her own experience in the drive for professional success—her long years of training and agency in the drive for professional success—her long years of training and experience—and insisting that her acting abilities be valued over the talents of others merely to recognize her skills. Working hard at Universal under Lois Weber's tutelage, Maclaren remembered, "[I] soon realized that I had 'found myself' at last."⁶⁶ Other actresses made a similar point to emphasize the great effort that stood behind their own accomplishments. Mae Marsh argued forcefully against the "myth of the 'overnight' star," stressing that those and others like her "had attained stardom only after years of rigorous training, self denial and hard work."⁶⁷ Mary Fuller's advice to screen aspirants: "work, work, work."⁶⁸

Another factor ignored in derisive caricatures of silly, self-absorbed Hollywood hopefuls was the sizable appeal that motion picture work might have held for young women with few other avenues open to them for profitable, independent, and rewarding professions. Indeed, as early as 1908 *The Film Index* pronounced that "women's chances of making a living have been increased by the rise of the cinematograph machines."⁶⁹ Thus, there is good reason to presume that many ambitious women traveled to Los Angeles with the aim of living rather unconventional lives—outside of marriage, free from their families, economically self-sufficient, and creatively employed—lives that must have held tremendous appeal to those eager for models of behavior different from the Victorian standards by which their mothers had been raised. Two such young women, who migrated separately to Los Angeles in 1915, ended up pooling their financial and artistic resources, setting up house together, and establishing their own production company.⁷⁰ Unmarried and self-supporting, these "girl picture magnates" lived together in an alternative domestic model and pursued creative careers free from the need to follow the dictates of others in a male-controlled industry. The feasibility of such a plan for most American young women notwithstanding, one can imagine its idealistic appeal to those ready for life outside the bounds of conventional femininity.

Demaining portraits of vain, deluded would-be starlets, then, served to

obscure the multifaceted nature of women's contributions to filmmaking in the teens, not just as lowly, easily dispensable "extras" but as directors, writers, influential performers, critics, and commentators. And they obscured the economic and social advantages that movie work offered to young women. By infantilizing the "girls" who fell prey to delusions of stardom, these stories served yet another purpose: they disarmed the considerable threat that hundreds of unmarried, casually employed, recently transplanted young women posed to the filmmaking industry, to the Los Angeles community, and to ladylike codes of behavior.

Given its unpredictability and low wages, extra work prompted concern from many quarters. "Stability of employment makes for stability of character. Irregularity of work breeds irregularity in everything else," *Motion Picture Magazine* warned. Even when day work was available it did not pay well, a fact that led the magazine to conclude that "practically all" of those seeking work as extras went hungry. "It is easy to be honest with a well-filled stomach and a well-lined purse. It is hard to hold one's ideals of virtue when actual starvation is at your door and the rent collector is beckoning you to move out."⁷¹ That young women migrated to Los Angeles on their own to pursue such work was cause for further alarm. Aspiring stage performers of a generation earlier might have found work with local stock companies and would not have had to leave their families. Now, "the girl who would be a film star" needed to relocate to New York or Los Angeles, often far from home, in order to seek work.⁷²

"All those idle, mischief-filled hours" spent waiting for filming to begin also raised eyebrows, as the "freedom of the studio life" and the "lack of restraint one observes when a company is out on 'location'" became the object of unspoken apprehension.⁷³ Sexual and moral transgression appear the only likely outcome of motion picture work, with its extended hours, distant locales, and easy camaraderie. Trepidation about women's participation in the morally suspect world of filmmaking also surfaces in reports about the sexual exploitation of extras beginning as early as 1913. In one particularly scandalous case, widely discussed in the filmmaking community, a young screen hopeful was said to have been discovered wandering New York streets, "stupefied with liquor," after having been "betrayed" by the director of a famous company; an incident that, reportedly, kept her confined in an asylum for the better part of a week. *Variety*, which recounted the incident with pronounced unease, determined that similarly exploitive conditions existed for young women at three-quarters of the major production houses.⁷⁴ Euphemisms like "friend of the director," "protégée of the manager," and "favorite of the leading man" emerged to cloak the industry's sexual economy.⁷⁵ Actress Irene Wallace, providing an insider's exposé of the phenomenon, claimed that "the public cannot comprehend how many women are selling their ability and labor and brains at so many dollars a week, with their souls

thrown in." Wallace's turn of phrase, introducing the specter of prostitution, is noteworthy given that she was best known at the time for her role in the 1913 white slave picture *Traffic in Souls*. Girls who fancied themselves in love with matinee idols were the most vulnerable, she reported: "What more could an unscrupulous man ask?"⁷⁶

By 1914 *Variety* reported that the practice of "loving up" attractive applicants was customary at many studios; indeed, it was so prevalent that the Screen Club considered adding a clause to its bylaws that would guarantee expulsion for any director caught abusing his authority.⁷⁷ After several young women provided sworn statements detailing "liberties" that studio managers and directors had taken with them, Los Angeles officials began a formal inquiry in 1915, an investigation that prompted stern condemnations of the Hollywood filmmaking community from local clergy.⁷⁸

Although frequently portrayed as innocent victims, women sometimes willfully participated in Hollywood's sexual bartering, precisely for the chance it gave them to break free from the limited options awaiting them at home. As one screen hopeful put it in 1914, acquiescing to the system guaranteed her a good likelihood of success. Without it, she said, "I will have to keep on working for thirty-five dollars a week from now until doomsday, unless I get married. If I got married I would never be satisfied to become a mere dish-washing wife. Now what would you do?"⁷⁹ Reporting on Hollywood culture in 1921 Theodore Dreiser surmised that most women who pursued the motion picture work knew "very well beforehand . . . the character of the conditions to be met." Those who came to Los Angeles had demonstrated by that very act, he argued, that they were "already mentally liberated from most of the binding taboos which govern in the social realms from which they emanate."⁸⁰ Even more than stories of innocents "betrayed" and exploited, reports of women's voluntary engagement in the industry's sexual marketplace highlight how fundamentally these unmarried, casually employed female "jobbers" threatened both the film industry and older codes of ladylike conduct.

Given concerns raised by the influx of movie hopefuls, it is not surprising to find that very quickly directives were issued warning women about the dangers of traveling westward in search of work. Stressing the difference between the physical journey to Los Angeles and the more mythic rise to stardom, *Motion Picture Supplement* cautioned its readers, "Yes, Maude Jones, it's a long, long way to Filmland!"⁸¹ Many believed that a strong dose of reality would cure even the most starstruck hopeful. "If the movie-struck girl could foresee just a bit of the hard road to success as a film player," one writer surmised, "she would hesitate a long time before leaving home."⁸² Following the same logic, *Photoplay* published a series of exposes on extra work, including one 1914 report on "breaking into the game," penned by "a girl who didn't break in."⁸³ Mary Pickford cautioned *Ladies' Home Journal* readers in

1915 that prospects were not good. Most studios had stock companies and long waiting lists, she explained, "so it is difficult for a girl without exceptional qualifications to find a place."⁸⁴ L. M. Goodstadt, casting director at Lasky, declared that "the best advice I can offer is for the pretty aspirant to stay home unless she has enough money to provide for her wants for at least a year."⁸⁵ *Everybody's Magazine* provided "just a word of warning here to the aspiring young girls all over the country who may believe that a trip to Los Angeles will put them in pictures. The warning is: don't come. The Los Angeles Welfare Committee is kept pretty busy right now taking care of young girls who failed to get work and are stranded."⁸⁶

With high-profile involvement on the part of the city's Welfare Committee and prominent warnings in mass-circulation magazines, the phenomenon of young women flooding to Los Angeles became the focus of national attention. Indeed, many in Hollywood became increasingly concerned that an industry so reliant on female patronage should be seen to be endangering its very constituency. More tangible efforts, beyond mere warnings, were required. Perhaps the best, and most enduring, example of this effort was the Hollywood Studio Club, founded in 1916 to provide low-cost housing for women seeking work in the film industry. After female extras began gathering in the basement of the Hollywood Public Library to rehearse and socialize, a librarian concerned about the conditions under which many of them lived in boardinghouses and cheap hotels approached the YWCA about finding more suitable accommodations. Funds were then quickly raised to rent a house where some dozen women could live and many others could socialize. Meals were provided, and residents had access to a library, an outdoor gymnasium, acting lessons, Red Cross classes, and talks by notables from the filmmaking community, including director Lois Weber, who spoke to residents in late 1917. Along with Weber the Studio Club attracted such prominent backers as Mary Pickford, Nazimova, and the wives of studio executives Jesse Lasky and William DeMille.⁸⁷ With its notable patronage and generous amenities the Studio Club quickly became "a center of social life among the younger girls about the studios," according to the *Los Angeles Times* (figure 14.2).⁸⁸ Yet, as Heidi Kenaga argues in her excellent research on the club's activities in the 1920s, residences like the Studio Club, together with later agencies like Central Casting, furnished mechanisms of surveillance and regulation that aimed to curtail the sexually and economically threatening aspects of the film industry's transient, casual female workforce.⁸⁹

Although statistics gathered by Central Casting in the 1920s revealed that men vastly outnumbered women among the ranks of those actually hired for extra work, the image of deluded "movie-struck girls" persisted as the primary face of Hollywood's unskilled talent pool for decades.⁹⁰ If anything,



Figure 14.2: Women socializing inside the Hollywood Studio Club, c. 1917.

warnings to screen hopefuls became even more alarmist after the celebrity scandals of 1921 and 1922 drew national attention to Hollywood's "decadent" inhabitants, as Kenaga and Victoria Surrevant have demonstrated in their recent work.⁹¹ So extreme was the mounting tenor of this discourse that Adela Rogers St. John famously dubbed Hollywood "the port of missing girls" in a series of 1927 *Photoplay* articles.⁹²

Although concern over offscreen behavior in and around Hollywood is usually thought to begin with the 1920s star scandals and the resulting efforts to regulate actors' behavior, hiring practices, and film content, in fact, it is clear that such concern arose much earlier, well before scandalous headlines and economic downturn rocked Hollywood in the early 1920s. A confluence of changes unique to the transitional era, including the emergence of the star system, the rise of Los Angeles as a film production center, and the expansion of mass-production filmmaking techniques dependent on a vast labor pool, provided singular circumstances for the fantasy of instant stardom in a defined locale. One might go as far as to say that it was not until films provided narratives of a certain duration and complexity that female fans could envision themselves occupying roles within them. In ef-

fect, the trajectory of narrative-building the industry underwent in the transitional period provided the framework of fantasy actual viewers needed to transport themselves to the site of moviemaking. Young women's journeys to Los Angeles thus mirrored the "distance" film narrative had traveled by the rise of the feature film in the mid-1910s.⁹³ At the same time, press caricatures that mocked such aspirations show us just how radically women's marked presence altered early Hollywood, whether it was their flourishing creative influence, obscured in such accounts, or the pointed challenge their offscreen behavior posed to an industry newly self-conscious about its impact on American life.

By the early 1920s much of this had changed. Women who had held influential positions in early Hollywood lost considerable power with the consolidation of the major studios and the rise of exclusionary professional guilds. Those aspiring to movie work were now encouraged to seek employment as stenographers, rather than actresses, and certainly not as directors or screenwriters.⁹⁴ In Hollywood of the Will Hays era women were frequently held up as examples of moral respectability inside the tarnished filmmaking community, a portrayal that muted concerns about female sexual and economic independence prominent in earlier "movie-struck girl" controversies. "Refinement without undue prudishness—that is what the movies are waiting for the women to bring them," one observer claimed.⁹⁵ But when the phenomenon of Hollywood hopefuls was freshest, and most alarming, to the nation, in the mid-1910s, it served to illuminate the very possibilities of women's presence there.

NOTES

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