



# La Mesa Historical Society LOOKOUT AVENUE



Volume 21, Number 2

Autumn 2000

## Film Making Comes to Town

### La Mesa In The Movies

1911-1912

La Mesa's small part in movie-making history began in August of 1911 when 28-year-old director Alan Dwan brought his actors, cameramen and crew to town and set up his production headquarters in building on the north side of La Mesa Boulevard, across from Third Street. He used vacant lots to the west of the building as an outdoor stage. The Chicago-based American Film Manufacturing Company, or "Flying A", had come from Lakeside where it had been making one-reel silent westerns and where, in 1911, the movie "Three Million Dollars" was made. In 1911, La Mesa had a population of about 700 people, which meant a larger selection of movie extras for Flying A.

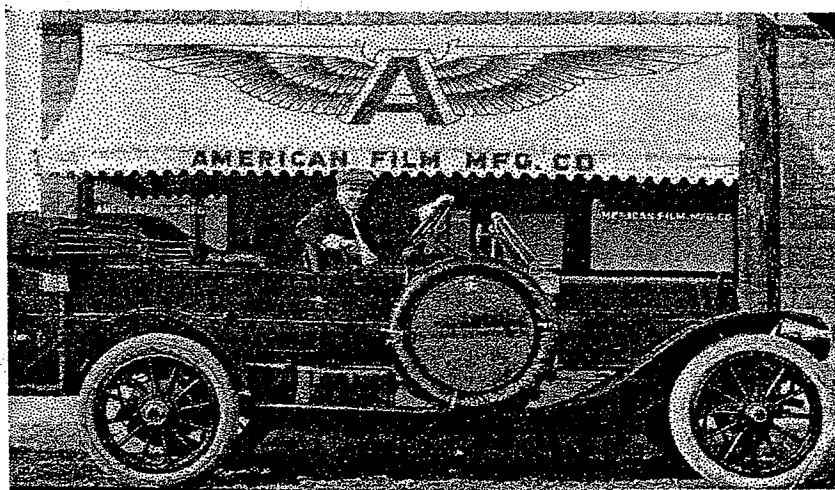
Alan Dwan and the Flying A film company continued to make 8-10 minute



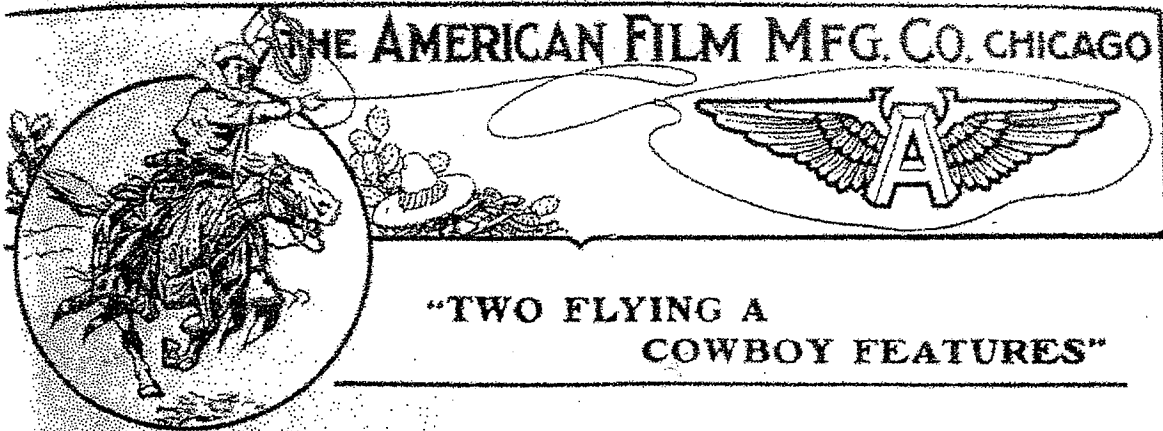
*A group of La Mesa girls, c.1912. Flying A used local residents as extras in their productions.*

one-reelers (two per week) from the La Mesa base of operation until the summer of 1912 when he felt that the scenery and the faces of the extras had become too familiar. He then moved the company on to Santa Barbara to continue its work.

While located in La Mesa, Dwan and company made over 100 films in and around the town, none of which seems to have survived through the decades. The Essanay film company, as well as several other independent film companies, also made movies in and around La Mesa. Essanay filmed several episodes of its western series, *Bronco Billy*, around La Mesa.



*Director Alan Dwan in front of Flying A's headquarters on La Mesa Blvd. in 1911*



## "TWO FLYING A COWBOY FEATURES"



Pauline Bush and Warren Kerrigan, in "Cattle, Gold and Oil"

Released this week,  
Monday, August 7th

### "Cattle, Gold and Oil"

A quaint Western comedy drama, picturing a ranchman's experience in the purchase of a salted mine. The story unfolded in the film is full of interest, and the situations depicted extremely laughable. A Western feature in all that the name implies.

Released this week,  
Thursday, August 10th

### "The Ranch Girl"

Featuring the rescue of Warren Kerrigan from the hands of outlaws, through the medium of his cow-pony. This rescue is startling and is a liberal education in the intelligence of the horse. The film is a thrilling one throughout its entire length. Just the class of production that the exhibitor requires during the hot summer months.

Arrange to obtain both of these films from your exchange to-day. All Independent Exchanges buy the Flying A product.



Warren Kerrigan's rescue by his cow-pony in film entitled "The Ranch Girl."

RELEASE OF MONDAY, AUGUST 14th

RELEASE OF THURSDAY, AUGUST 17th

### "THE POISONED FLUME"

### "THE BRAND OF FEAR"

**American Film Manufacturing Co.**

3<sup>RD</sup> FLOOR Ashland Block,  
CHICAGO, ILL.



Motion Picture Dis. & Sales Co., Sole Agents for the U. S. & Canada.

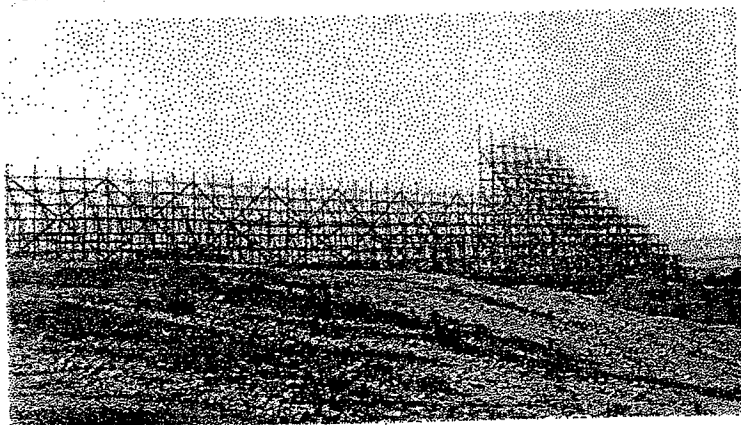


## The Egyptian Movie Epic

A "bigger than life" film was made at the S-L Studio by San Diego-based film company Hart-Loring-Wells. This epic movie was part of a planned series of five historical films which were to be shown at schools and also for public viewing.

Beginning in November of 1923, five outdoor sets were built near the S-L Studio on 5 acres leased from Ed Fletcher. It was reported in the *La Mesa Scout* newspaper on May 2, 1924, "The whole set... is stated to be the largest ever built in motion-pictures, exceeding any of those in D.W. Griffith's famous production, *Intolerance*". The article said that over 300 costumes and wigs were being made for the actors and extras.

This very ambitious undertaking, which the film company predicted would take over three years to finish, was probably never completed. Many of these independent companies were big on ideas and short on cash. But, there is no doubt that the one or two episodes that were made provided years of conversation and memories for the local people and their children who, as extras, portrayed Egyptians during the production of the film.



## NATURAL ADVANTAGES FOR PHOTOGRAPHY

**Motion Picture Companies Realize Scenic and Climatic Advantages For Business**

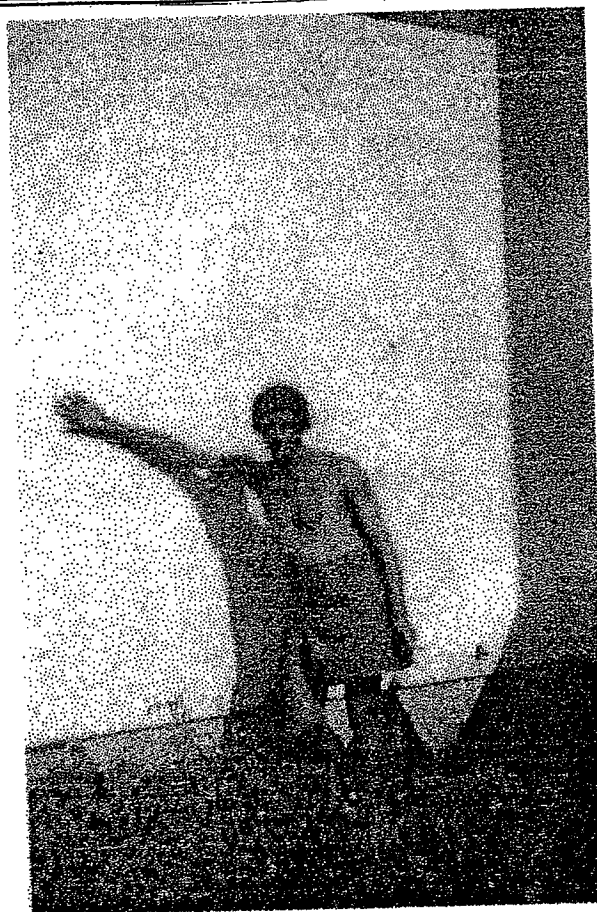
One of the best evidences of the fact that La Mesa's climatic conditions and her scenery are worthy of particular note is the location here of a company of the American Film Manufacturing company of Chicago. This company selected La Mesa during the middle of last year as the seat for staging all of its great western picture dramas. A company of twenty-five people is maintained here, the company sending two reels of films each week to the home office in Chicago. Remarkable though it may seem, it is a fact that during the last month, when scarcely a day passed without its raining, the regular two films a week was made. On one occasion a film was made during

This remarkable happening is attributed to the bright light that exists even while the sun is clouded.

A few months ago an effort was made by the Essanay Film company to secure accommodations here for its large traveling company and outfit, but this effort failed and it was necessary for the Essanay company to locate temporarily at Lakeside.

Another motion picture company, The New York company, seeing the climatic and scenic advantages here, has leased quarters for a large plant and will occupy them shortly.

The American company leased quarters here temporarily for its a rain and the results were perfect. necessary plant, but, since the real natural advantages for this business have been better learned, arrangements have been made to have this as a permanent location for the western company. Additions to the plant are being made steadily, the plan being to eventually equip this office with all the machinery needed to manufacture reproductions of original films. Then each copy will be shipped direct from here to its consignment of theatres.



Top: The director and camera crew of the Egyptian epic are pictured at the Grossmont studio in 1923. Left: A replica of the corner of the pyramid of Cheops was built near S-L's studio on Grossmont in 1923. When completed, it was 100 feet high and nearly 300 feet long at its base. Right: Earl Roberts, a local extra, is pictured in make-up and costume.

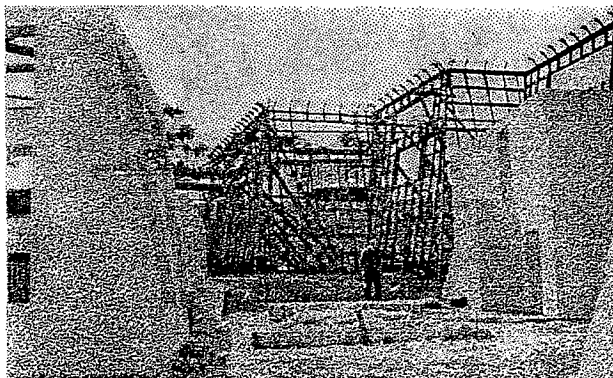
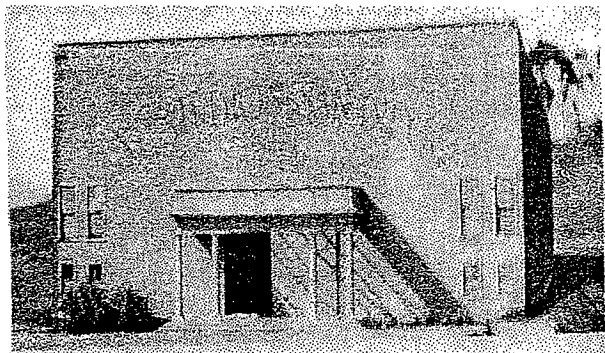
(La Mesa Scout, Oct. 10, 1924, p. 1)

### HART-LORING-WELLS PROCEED WITH PICTURE

About every trade and form of occupation in San Diego was represented in the Saturday filming of the historical picture series which is being produced by Hart-Loring-Wells motion picture company at Grossmont.

Four hundred persons were employed in the Egyptian make-up and dress, among these 50 or more school children from the La Mesa schools. A flock of goats, a string of pack-mules and a wiggling, mischievous puppy completed the cast and lent the touches of realism necessary to transform the pages of history into a living, human tale.

This is the largest number which the motion picture company has used in its work, which has been progressing steadily for the past few weeks. On location last week, 40 miles inside of old Mexico, a hundred extras in addition to the principals were taken along.



(La Mesa Scout, Dec. 2, 1924, p. 1)

## LEGION WILL SHOW GROSSMONT MOVIE AT LOCAL THEATER

The Hart-Loring-Wells educational picture, which was filmed at the S-L studios at Grossmont last summer, will be shown in this vicinity for the first time at the La Mesa Theater tonight (Friday) and tomorrow evening, Saturday, under the auspices of La Mesa post of the American Legion.

This picture will be of exceptional interest to La Mesans, as it not only is the product of a local concern, but also for the fact that a great many townspeople took important parts in it, and this showing of the film will give them their first opportunity to view themselves in action.

In addition to this feature a full program has been arranged for by the Legion to assure a complete and unusually interesting show.

A feature of both evening performances will be the appearance in person at the theater of Mary Grace Sherrill, who took the leading role in the picture.



*Clockwise from upper left: The S-L Studio located at Grossmont; Theobaldi, one of the professional Hollywood actors who performed in the Egyptian epic, 1924; Construction of five outdoor sets, over 5 acres of land, began in November 1923. The sets included several houses, a grainary, and garden;*

## 1922 - 1930

By 1922, La Mesa's population was approaching 1600 people. In February of that year, the president of newly-formed S-L Studios came to La Mesa's merchants and governing body (then called Trustees) with plans to locate in the La Mesa area. They proposed to build a large production stage on land located north of present-day Interstate 8 and near Severin Drive that would be leased to them by Ed Fletcher. The funding for this enterprise was to come from the sale of shares in the S-L Company to the public. Funding and approval were obtained and construction began in September of 1922. The project was completed and dedicated on November 19, 1923. The wooden barn-like structure was 150 feet in width and 292 feet in length. It had a number of permanent stages inside (a barroom, room interiors, etc.). On November 24th, a gala opening ceremony was held at the site



*A scene from "The Beloved Bandit" starring Ethyl Wade and Tom Bay, filmed at Grossmont Studio in 1925.*

## MOVIE DAY

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 19 22

### TWENTY-FIVE PROMINENT MOVIE STARS

WILL POSITIVELY APPEAR IN PERSON AT THE

DEDICATION OF THE NEW

MILLION DOLLAR S-L MOTION

PICTURE STUDIOS

AT GROSSMONT

MOVING PICTURES WILL BE TAKEN OF ALL PRESENT

**BIG PROGRAM  
BAND CONCERT**

**EVERYTHING FREE!**

with Hollywood movie stars, local dignitaries, stockholders and townsfolk in attendance.

A number of independent film companies used the S-L Studio to make various westerns, comedies, and documentaries, but S-L never achieved financial security. In January 1925, a new corporation bought S-L Studio and changed the facility's name to Grossmont Studio.

Movies continued to be made at Grossmont Studio until about 1929. Then, the building was renovated by Ed Fletcher and turned into a roller-skating rink. In 1934, it became a dine-dance spot, but in October of that year, the building was totally destroyed by fire.

Movie-making didn't return to La Mesa again until 1988 when the center of town was chosen by Columbia Pictures to film the opening parade scenes of "Little Nikita", starring Sidney Poitier and River Phoenix. The buildings and shops on La Mesa Blvd. are immediately recognizable in these scenes. In more recent times, several TV series have filmed some of their scenes on location in La Mesa.

### In Memory of Lucile DeWaide

August 1, 1913 - August 22, 2000

*Lucile had been a member of the LMHS since its beginning in 1975 and served on the Board of Directors several times through the years. She was always supportive of all the Society's activities. Her cheerful presence among us will be greatly missed.*

### LMHS Officers and Directors 2000-2001

President: Karna Webster  
1st Vice Pres: Carol Lockwood  
2nd Vice Pres: Pat Kettler  
3rd Vice Pres: Ed Blackman  
Secretary: Pat Kettler  
Treasurer: Karna Webster  
Past President: Donna Regan  
Directors: Jim Orsborn • Norrie West  
Desiree Romero • Susan Mitchell



P. O. Box 882, La Mesa, California 91944

## La Mesa Historical Society

Museum: Rev. Henry A. McKinney House (1908)  
8369 University Avenue

Non-Profit Org.  
U.S. Postage  
PAID  
La Mesa, CA 91941  
Permit No. 208

Change Service Requested

**DON'T FORGET...and don't miss the La Mesa Historical Society's upcoming special program,**

### **La Mesa In The Movies**

*The silent western, "Three Million Dollars", which was made in Lakeside in 1911, will be shown.*

**Sunday, Nov. 5th - 2 p.m.**

**Nan Coutts Cottage - La Mesa**

### **La Mesa Historical Society's 25th Anniversary Celebration**

**Sunday, Oct. 1st • 2-4 p.m.**

**Nan Coutts Cottage - MacArthur Park  
4975 Memorial Drive - La Mesa**

***Special guests • Displays • Refreshments.***  
***For questions, call Karna Webster, 463-1029.***



The La Mesa Historical Society operates the Rev. Henry A. McKinney House, a 1908 house-museum located at 8369 University Avenue (corner of Pine Street) in La Mesa. Open 12:00 to 3:00 p.m. on Saturday, or by appointment. Group tours are available. Call 466-0197 for further information.

*Lookout Avenue* is the official quarterly publication of the La Mesa Historical Society  
P.O. Box 882, La Mesa, CA 91944.

*Lookout Avenue* was the original name of La Mesa Boulevard. From the 1890's until the City Council voted to change the name in 1940, *Lookout Avenue* was La Mesa's main street.

### *An Invitation to Join...*

## **La Mesa Historical Society Membership**

*The Society depends on membership dues, bequests and fund-raising activities to support the restoration and preservation of local history.*

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> \$250 Benefactor          | <input type="checkbox"/> \$15 Family (2 adults)  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> \$125 Life (single)       | <input type="checkbox"/> \$10 Individual   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> \$40 Patron               | <input type="checkbox"/> \$1 Student (under 18 yrs.)   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> \$25 Sponsor/Organization | <input type="checkbox"/> <b><u>I wish to become involved</u></b><br><b><u>in the Society's work.</u></b> |

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Phone ( ) \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_ City \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

**La Mesa Historical Society, P.O. Box 882, La Mesa, CA 91944**  
*Memberships and donations are tax deductible to the extent allowed by law.*