

A black and white photograph of a woman, Samantha Barbas, sitting at a desk. She is wearing a light-colored blouse and a necklace. She is holding a telephone receiver to her ear with her right hand and has her left hand resting on a typewriter. The typewriter is a vintage model with a visible carriage and paper. There are several sheets of paper on the desk in front of her. The background is a plain wall.

SAMANTHA BARBAS

THE FIRST LADY  
OF HOLLYWOOD

A BIOGRAPHY OF LOUELLA PARSONS

# Prologue

September 1941

IN HOLLYWOOD IT WAS A DIFFICULT TIME. Though film attendance was at an all-time high—that year eighty-five million tickets were sold each week—the major studios were under attack. The war in Europe and Asia had led to a decline in foreign markets, the House Un-American Activities Committee was investigating the alleged involvement of several prominent actors with communism, and a Senate commission accused Hollywood of war-mongering by making films that promoted U.S. intervention in the overseas conflict. Moreover, the Federal Communications Commission had allowed regular commercial television broadcasting to begin on July 1, 1941, panicking those in Hollywood who saw the new medium as potentially formidable competition.<sup>1</sup>

Louella, too, had struggled that year. In the spring, Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane*, a scathing attack on her employer, William Randolph Hearst, had been released in theaters across the nation. Americans watched Welles's onscreen portrayal of a manipulative, megalomaniacal Hearst, and they read in national publications about Louella's conniving attempts to suppress the film. The *New York Times* and *Newsweek* described Louella as a vicious opponent of free speech who used her power to carry out her employer's tyrannical wishes. Shortly afterward, the Screen Actors' Guild launched an attack on her, publicly condemning her refusal to pay actors who appeared on her radio show and calling her an enemy of the film industry. Though Louella's worldwide readership of nearly twenty million was more than triple that of her primary rival, Hedda Hopper, pundits predicted that it would not be long until Hopper surpassed her and became the new first lady of Hollywood.

Yet all this seemed to matter little on the morning of Friday, September 12, when Louella left her home on Maple Drive in Beverly Hills for Los Angeles' Union Station. The strain of turning out a daily movie gossip column,

monthly features for several fan magazines, and a weekly radio program seemed to disappear as Louella envisioned the upcoming journey to Dixon, Illinois, her hometown, over two thousand miles away. It would be no exaggeration to say that she had waited for this day all her life.

In Dixon, a town of thirty-five thousand in the heart of northern Illinois's farm country, the excitement and anticipation ran high. Mayor William Slothower had predicted that Louella Parsons Day, a celebration of the region's most famous daughter, would be "a spectacle that has never before been seen in the history of Dixon—a spectacle that few communities are privileged to witness."<sup>2</sup> Featuring a gala dinner, a parade through the streets of Dixon, and a radio broadcast by Louella and other Hollywood celebrities, the event had been planned for weeks by the Dixon Chamber of Commerce, the *Dixon Evening Telegraph*, the local Lions Club, and representatives from twelve local communities. Throughout the region, schools were closed for the event. Representatives of the American Legion and the Illinois Reserve Militia were scheduled to be on hand, as were several nurses, a fleet of ambulances, and Boy Scout troops from throughout the state. "Never in the history of the city has such painstaking effort and citywide cooperation been put forth in any civic undertaking, and no individual, native or otherwise, has been given such a reception as is being given to our nationally famous and much beloved Miss Parsons," crowed the *Dixon Evening Telegraph*. At least thirty thousand movie fans from northern Illinois, if not more, were expected to attend.<sup>3</sup>

The two-day trip from Hollywood aboard the City of Los Angeles streamliner was for Louella a working journey. With a typewriter propped up on two hatboxes, she wrote her columns and, with her publicist Virginia Lindsay, prepared her remarks for the celebration. Louella's brother, Ed Ettinger, a Hollywood publicist, accompanied her on the trip, as did a group of actors—Bob Hope, Jerry Colonna, Joe E. Brown, George Montgomery, Bebe Daniels, Ben Lyon, Ronald Reagan, and Ann Rutherford—who were scheduled to perform with Louella during the festivities. For Ronald Reagan, too, the trip to Dixon was a homecoming. A former lifeguard at Dixon's Lowell Park and a football star at Dixon High, Reagan had lived in Dixon only nine years earlier. Louella had left in 1905, though her ties to the community remained strong.

At nine in the morning on Sunday, September 14, 1941, crowds began

milling around Dixon's northwestern train station. By 9:30, the assembly had filled the streets of the Dementtown section of Dixon, causing older residents to declare it the largest crowd the city had ever seen. When the train pulled in at 10:36, an estimated thirty-five thousand onlookers cheered, held signs, and readied their cameras in anticipation of Louella and "Dutch" Reagan. When Louella stepped out on the platform in the long silver fox coat she wore despite the eighty-degree heat, the throng screamed, waved, and snapped photos. Years of working in the film industry had taught her how to play for the camera; with a stiff white-gloved wave and beaming smile, she accepted a huge floral key to the city from Mayor Slothower and stepped gracefully to the microphone. What she said, though, seemed to be no phony Hollywood acceptance speech but to come truly from the heart. "This is an event, my old friends in Dixon, which I shall never forget," she told them. "I will remember this occasion as long as I live, and I know that Ronald will too.

"You remember that I always used to call our Rock River the Hudson River of the west. Then I hadn't been anywhere. Since then I have been in Switzerland, Italy—all around the world—and I still say that Dixon is the most beautiful city in the world. It's home."<sup>4</sup>

Very little had changed in it. As the motorcade proceeded down Galena Street, Dixon's main thoroughfare, the three-story brick buildings and square clapboard houses were as plain as they had been three decades earlier. Though the welcoming arch over the boulevard had been decorated with a "Welcome home" banner bearing pictures of Louella and Dutch, and a few new stores and movie theaters now stood by the downtown square, Dixon remained as humble, quiet, and conservative as ever. "These are not pushy, celebrity-bored crowds," Mayor Slothower had told reporters from the *Chicago Herald American*, "but ninety-nine percent native-born Americans, church-going folks, who are proud of their Dixon civic band in blue, the home guard, and the American Legion Auxiliary."<sup>5</sup>

At a banquet the following evening, prominent Dixonites paid tribute to Louella's rise from her rural roots. They remembered her riding her bike down a dusty road to Dixon High each day, her prize-winning oration at commencement, and the prophecy of the school principal, Benjamin Franklin Bullard, that someday she would be known as "Louella the Writer." Aspiring actresses in the community put together a dramatic sketch depicting Louella's involvement in the Kendall Club, one of Dixon's earliest social service organizations, and several longtime residents recalled that Louella, as a young reporter for the *Dixon Star*, had patrolled the streets each morning

looking for a scoop. “How she used to walk down First Street going into every store along the way asking for news for the evening paper!” remembered Gwendolyn Bardwell, who had worked with Louella. After her first big story, she “walked wide eyed” around town, electrified with a thrilling sense of accomplishment. She was a “happy, ambitious scribe,” claimed Mabel Shaw, the editor of the *Dixon Telegraph*, blessed with “great determination and inspiring energy.” “Sometimes when fame wraps its velvet robe around a person, it changes its recipient, but not so with Louella Parsons. She loves her old friends and remembers them with graciousness,” said another acquaintance. The *Telegraph* even noted that Louella had taken time out of her busy schedule to visit an “old gentleman, now blind, who used to see her on her way to school and [who] had expressed a desire to talk to her.” On this day it seemed she could do no wrong.<sup>6</sup>

That evening, following the dedication of a Louella Parsons wing of the local hospital, a screening—the world premiere of the film *International Squadron*, starring Ronald Reagan—and the crowning of the Rock River beauty queen, Louella walked the grounds of the Charles Walgreen estate, Hazelwood, where she and the visiting celebrities were staying. Alone under the stars, she may have wondered how much her old friends had not said but had known: Louella’s troubles with her first husband, John Parsons; her secret divorce; and an unhappy second marriage that she had hidden from her colleagues in Hollywood for over twenty years.

The following morning, standing on the train platform, she stared out one last time at the dusty roads, the low wooden shanties, and the deep green fields that stretched into the distance. With her brother and publicist not far behind, she lifted the hem of her fox coat, clutched her purse, and slipped gracefully into the rear car of the train. She was amazed at how simple it seemed this time; a wave, a smile, and a quick good-bye. The first time it had not been so easy.

TWO

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*Essanay*

Hog Butcher for the World,  
Tool Maker, Stacker of Wheat,  
Player with Railroads and the Nation's Freight Handler;  
Stormy, husky, brawling,  
City of the Big Shoulders:  
They tell me you are wicked and I believe them, for I have seen  
your painted women under the gas lamps luring the farm boys.  
And they tell me you are crooked and I answer: Yes, it is true  
I have seen the gunman kill and go free to kill again.  
And they tell me you are brutal and my reply is: On the faces of  
women and children I have seen the marks of wanton hunger.

CARL SANDBURG, "Chicago," 1916

LOUELLA WAS NO STRANGER TO THIS CITY OF BIG SHOULDERS, this gritty metropolis that, in 1910, over two million residents called home. Like Frank Cowperwood of Theodore Dreiser's 1914 novel *The Titan*, she had seen from the train window the flat brown land that ringed the city's outskirts, the Chicago River "with its mass of sputtering tugs and its black oily water," and the "little one and two story houses" that stood on the edge of town.<sup>1</sup> Before, on her visits from Freeport with Helen, Louella had enjoyed the bright lights of the theater district and the color of the streets downtown. Now she faced a different Chicago, one of bustling streetcars and open-air markets and filthy, rundown cold-water flats crowded with workers and their families.

Louella was not the only newcomer to seek her fortunes in Chicago. Between 1880 and 1920, nearly two and a half million immigrants arrived, having fled poverty and political persecution in southern and eastern Europe.<sup>2</sup>

Tens of thousands of native-born Americans also went to the city in search of employment, and many of these migrants were women. Self-supporting women—unmarried, divorced, or widowed—were the largest group of native-born Americans to move to Chicago in the early twentieth century. Between 1880 and 1930, the female labor force in Chicago increased from thirty-five thousand to four hundred thousand, or over 1,000 percent. During those years, rural towns in Iowa, Minnesota, and northern Illinois experienced a “defeminization” as daughters left the countryside for work in the city.<sup>3</sup>

In her autobiography, Louella described Chicago as “gutsy.”<sup>4</sup> That word better characterized Louella. In the early twentieth century, leaving a philandering husband took strength: women were expected to tolerate affairs, considered a man’s prerogative. Depressed but optimistic, Louella moved in with her aunt and uncle Hattie and Eli Oettinger, who had since moved from Freeport to a small flat on the city’s North Side. She quickly found a job as a secretary in a company that manufactured stereopticons, an early form of motion picture projector, but when she found that her “chief chore seemed to be playing flunky to the boss’s little blonde secretary,” she moved on. Louella then secured a position at the *Chicago Tribune*, in the syndication department. Being hired by a newspaper thrilled her, but her enthusiasm was short-lived. Within a week, Louella discovered that her job was essentially clerical—she retyped the syndicated articles that came off the wire—and within two weeks, she was bored. At a salary of only nine dollars a week, considered barely subsistence wages, she was also broke.<sup>5</sup> She allowed herself one luxury—regular trips to the movies.

The cinema flourished in Chicago, with its large immigrant and working-class population. In 1910, there were 407 movie houses for a population of slightly over two million, twice as many movie theaters per capita as in New York.<sup>6</sup> Film fans often went to the movies three, four, or even five times a week, and they were lured to the theater not only by films but also by an emerging motion picture celebrity culture.

Before 1910, the actors who appeared in films were unbilled. Fearing association with the “lowbrow” cinema, they insisted on remaining anonymous. Neither they nor the heads of the fledgling New York-based film companies anticipated the level of curiosity among moviegoers, who sent hundreds of letters to the studios asking for the identities of their favorite screen players. In response to pressure from moviegoers, in 1910 Carl Laemmle, head of the IMP studio, publicized the name of his leading ac-

tress, Florence Lawrence. In a carefully planned stunt, Laemmle planted a rumor that Lawrence had been killed in a car accident, then refuted the accident with a flurry of press releases and newspaper stories that he used to publicize Lawrence's name. Laemmle set off a trend for name popularization that resulted in the development of a movie star system, much like the star system that had dominated the theater. By 1911, films were being advertised not only by "brand name"—prior to 1910, studios used their companies' reputations as a marketing tool—but also, increasingly, by the names of the stars who appeared in them.<sup>7</sup>

Drawing on stage tradition, film companies began publicizing personal information about their stars, both in the mainstream press and in two new motion-picture fan magazines. In February 1911, the Vitagraph studio head J. Stuart Blackton launched *Motion Picture* magazine, the nation's first publication devoted exclusively to motion pictures. Although the publication initially printed cinematic plots in short-story form, in 1912 it began printing interviews with popular film actors and question-and-answer columns that answered readers' inquiries about stars' private lives. By January 1913, the "Answer Man," the columnist who presided over the magazine's "Answers to Inquiries" section, claimed that he was receiving twenty-five hundred letters from film fans each month.<sup>8</sup> Beginning in 1912, another new fan publication, *Photoplay*, offered readers a similar diet of star news along with advertisements for perfumes, clothing, and cosmetics, all bearing celebrity endorsements.

Fans devoured the information and begged for more and, by 1912, began to organize into movie star fan clubs. Unlike theater fans, who had the chance of meeting their idols in person, there were few if any opportunities for film fans to see motion picture stars in the flesh. As a result, movie fans depended on tidbits of personal data about stars, rather than personal contact, to create the feeling of intimacy with their idols that was the essence of the fan-star relationship. From the fans' perspective, the more personal the information, the better. But detailed private information about stars' marriages and romantic affairs was the last thing the magazines or studios wanted to reveal. Truthful depictions of stars' often turbulent and scandalous romantic lives, they felt, would only further damage the cinema's already precarious reputation. *Motion Picture*'s Answer Man refused to respond to the hundreds of questions he received each month about actors' marriages and romantic affairs. "Questions concerning the marriages of players," the magazine warned, "will be completely ignored."<sup>9</sup>

By 1913, however, the magazine had changed its policy, publishing slightly more revealing articles that disclosed actors' marital status. But on the whole, the fan magazines' approach to star "gossip" was timid and innocuous. Typical pieces described actors as virtuous, hardworking, and devoted to their spouses. In an article on actress Helen Gardner's home, *Photoplay* gushed, "Here Miss Gardner and her mother, who looks no older than her daughter . . . live happily, plan pictures, design costumes, and receive their friends."<sup>10</sup> In their free time, actors allegedly pursued such hobbies as cooking, embroidery, gardening, reading, and socializing with friends, and the magazines took great pains to distance film actors from their allegedly debauched theatrical counterparts. In contrast to stage life, "with its night work, its daytime sleep, its irregular meals, [and] its traveling and close contact," working for a film studio was stable and dignified. A film "player is located in one neighborhood and is recognized as a permanent and respectable citizen. Evenings can be spent at home, and the normal healthiness of one's own fireside is an atmosphere conducive to refining influences," *Motion Picture* wrote in 1915.<sup>11</sup> These details and "slice-of-life" depictions were, of course, thoroughly false, the concoction of imaginative magazine editors, studio publicity departments, and press agents.

Though the magazines skirted carefully around actors' personal lives, they were aggressive on the subject of scenario writing. In the years around 1910, thousands of moviegoers began writing their own short "scenarios," the one- or two-page plot summaries that were the scripts of early silent films. According to one estimate, by 1913 over twenty thousand fans had submitted scenarios to studios, and thousands more were harboring half-written pieces that sat unfinished in desk drawers.<sup>12</sup> Thankful for the free material, the film studios encouraged the submissions and occasionally offered cash prizes for high-quality material. The fan magazines colluded with the studios, offering advice to aspiring scenarioists and frequently running scenario success stories. In 1912 *Photoplay* reported that Cordelia Ford, a housewife who wrote in her spare time, earned \$250 in a screenwriting contest. Helen O'Keefe, who "scribbled" after her children had gone to bed, paid off her debts with a prize from the American Film Company; and Elaine Sterne, winner of the Thanhouser studio's screenwriting contest, earned a position with the studio as its chief scenario writer.<sup>13</sup>

By 1911, Louella was thoroughly immersed in movie fan culture. She bought and read the fan magazines, developed crushes on popular stars, and went to the movies almost nightly. Reviving her long-dormant interest in

writing, she also tried her hand at scenarios. She wrote dozens of short scripts, which she sent to a few Chicago film studios, and received dozens of rejections. But she enjoyed the work and was intrigued by the cash prizes, so she persisted. She was determined to see her work on the screen, even if it took years. Little did she know that her encounter with the film industry would come much sooner.

Many film historians correctly cite New York as the moviemaking capital before World War I. But Chicago, between 1907 and 1915, ran a close second. The city had two assets that made it ideal for film production: a central midwestern location, perfect for shipping finished films to either coast, and over ten thousand theater actors and stagehands, frequently unemployed and eager for part-time work in the “flickers.” By 1911, Chicago was home to the film industry’s official trade journal, *Moving Picture World*, and two studios, Essanay and Selig.<sup>14</sup>

Essanay was founded by Gilbert Anderson, a cowboy actor who had starred in the famous 1903 film *The Great Train Robbery*, and George Spoor, owner of a small chain of movie theaters. Spoor had wanted to go into film production but needed an experienced hand to work with him. In 1907, Spoor and Anderson joined forces as partners and founded the studio, which they named after their initials (*S* and *A*). The studio was known for its slapstick comedies, many of which featured the studio’s janitor, Ben Turpin. In one of the studio’s first films, *An Awful Skate*, Turpin careened down the streets on roller skates, mowing over pedestrians. Unbeknownst to the film’s viewers, the slapstick was hardly staged. Turpin could not skate, and many of the unsuspecting passersby were injured during the filming.<sup>15</sup>

Such disasters were common during Essanay’s first years. Like most early film studios of the period, the company was a fly-by-night operation. The cavernous warehouse was packed to the gills with a collection of broken-down props—old clothes, rusted cars, headless mannequins—and its small staff, a troupe of loud and often foul-mouthed former stage actors, puttered around the studio building sets, mending costumes, performing stunts before the camera, and playing practical jokes on each other. Cameramen operated crude, hand-cranked machines, and due to poor indoor lighting, all filming had to be done outside. When the sky turned cloudy, the actors sullenly waited around the studio for the next sunny day. In 1910, Essanay set up a studio in Niles, California, to shoot its cowboy films, but its Chicago crew constantly struggled with lighting problems.<sup>16</sup>

Like most studios, Essanay was inundated by fan-written screenplays, which arrived at the studio at a rate of about a hundred a day. In 1911, George

Spoor decided to hire a full-time staff member to sift through the contributions and advertised in local papers for a “scenario editor.” Immediately the studio was swamped with mail. Along with the usual volume of screenplays came hundreds of applications from frustrated novelists, unemployed playwrights, and former newspaper reporters, all eager to be hired for the editorial position. One of those applications was from Louella. Her resume, like most of the others, ended up in the trash.

One day over dinner Spoor’s wife announced that she had met a young woman in the neighborhood who was ideal for the position. “Introduce her to me sometime,” Spoor mumbled. “She’s standing outside the dining room,” Mrs. Spoor replied, and motioned for Louella to come to the table.<sup>17</sup>

Maggie Oettinger, Louella’s twelve-year-old-cousin, played with a girl named Ruth Helms, who lived next door to Spoor. When Louella found out that Ruth’s neighbor was the head of Essanay, she begged the girl to introduce her to Mrs. Spoor, offering her movie tickets if she would make the introduction. Though George Spoor was less impressed than his wife with Louella’s possibilities as an editor, Mrs. Spoor persuaded him to hire her. In the spring of 1911, Louella quit her job at the *Tribune* and signed on with Essanay as its chief scenario editor.<sup>18</sup>

The job turned out to be a godsend. The generous income of twenty dollars a week enabled Louella and Harriet to move to an apartment on Magnolia Street, not far from the Argyle Street studio. Before long, Louella was saving a little each week and building a bank account; she was also reestablishing the emotional confidence she had lost in Burlington. She found her work creative and engaging, was thrilled by her position of authority, and for the first time in years, felt part of an intimate community. The sudden boost to Louella’s ego allowed her to make friends, meet new men, and pour a prodigious amount of energy into her new career. She returned to Burlington that fall, and on September 29, 1911, Louella and John divorced.<sup>19</sup>

Louella never admitted to the public how her relationship with John Parsons really ended. For the rest of her life, she insisted that she was widowed—Parsons, she claimed, died in World War I. Indeed, after marrying Ruth Schaefer in 1917, John Parsons enlisted in the army and died in 1918 of the flu.<sup>20</sup> But he and Louella had divorced seven years earlier. During the early twentieth century, divorce was still considered a moral transgression, and divorced women often bore the stigma for the rest of their lives. Ashamed, Louella concealed her separation from Parsons from her friends and colleagues, and only her family and closest confidantes knew.

In late 1911, around the time of Louella's divorce, Helen and John Edwards also decided to separate. John Edwards left Dixon and returned to his hometown of Amboy, Illinois, where he lived until his death in 1931.<sup>21</sup> Helen sold the house in Dixon and, for the next seven years, lived with Louella and Harriet in their apartment on Magnolia Street. Essentially Louella's housekeeper, she cooked, cleaned, and cared for Harriet while Louella was at work. During Louella's four years at Essanay, that was most of the time.

Like many men and women involved in early film, Louella told friends that she was working in a "studio," creating the nation's newest "art form." In reality, the Essanay Film Company was less a studio than a factory. Like "sausages," as one director dubbed them, movies were filmed hastily and carelessly and shipped out to exhibitors as quickly as possible. The studio's five harried directors rushed around the Essanay grounds in a frantic attempt to fill their quotas, which seemed to increase every week. Because films were so short—the typical film of 1911 averaged about fifteen or twenty minutes—nickelodeon owners showed several during an evening's program. Moreover, to keep fans interested, they changed the program almost nightly. By 1911, when an estimated ten million Americans were attending movie theaters each week, the demand for films had become overwhelming.<sup>22</sup>

Louella's job, the first stage in the "sausage-making" process, was one of the most important. Each day she sorted through the scripts that came to the studio, found some promising ones, and sent twenty-five-dollar checks to the lucky writers whose works would be made into films. On her desk sat a row of boxes with the names of Essanay's directors, and Louella dropped the new scripts into the boxes randomly. "Directors might yell and moan over my choice of story, but when they were handed a play by me, they didn't have any other court of appeal," she recalled.<sup>23</sup> Often the scripts required editing, and with fellow scenario editor Edward Lowe, Louella frequently added scenes, characters, or instructions for the cameraman. She recalled that she always tried to work in a bride as a character, since "there were a lot of white dresses in the wardrobe."<sup>24</sup>

A humorless "bluestocking," according to one Essanay employee, Louella was consumed by her work. She perpetually scribbled in a yellow notebook, walked around the studio grounds lost in concentration, and complained bitterly when actors talked loudly outside her office.<sup>25</sup> Louella later claimed to have read more than twenty thousand scenarios during her years at Essanay.<sup>26</sup> The manuscripts arrived "on wallpaper, bits of shoe box covers, and torn envelopes" and came from a diverse range of fans—from the "blacksmith, the

janitor, and the college girl and boy,” Louella recalled.<sup>27</sup> In 1912 she purchased a script from an old woman from Waukegan, Wisconsin, only to discover that the woman had sold the same story to the rival Vitagraph studio. When Louella and George Spoor confronted the woman and asked if she had indeed sold the story to other studios, she smiled innocently. “I got it out of a magazine,” she said, “and I have lots more of them if you are interested.”<sup>28</sup> Essanay, which had already produced the film, was forced to destroy it, at a loss of several thousand dollars. For not confirming the script’s originality, Louella almost lost her job.

When the day’s mailbag failed to yield suitable scenarios, Louella took to the typewriter and wrote her own. Her scripts were often maudlin tearjerkers about death, betrayal, or failed romances, and some of them—she wrote over a hundred in all—depicted feminist themes. In a script called the *Broken Pledge*, three women pledge never to marry and instead remain independent; in 1915, it was turned into a film starring Gloria Swanson. Other scripts Louella wrote for specific actors, including the Essanay superstar Francis X. Bushman, who commissioned Louella to write several films that would showcase his athleticism and impressive physique.<sup>29</sup> In 1912, Louella wrote a script titled *Margaret’s Awakening* for an aspiring six-year-old actress. The child, who appeared in the film, was billed as “Baby Parsons.”

Harriet’s career in the movies, cut off by her enrollment in elementary school, lasted only a year. In both *Margaret’s Awakening* and a subsequent film, *The Magic Wand*, she had starring roles. In *The Magic Wand*, Harriet played a loving child who hoped to save her poor, single mother from destitution with an imaginary magic wand. The performance rated mixed reviews. One critic called Harriet “wonderfully sweet,” though other reviewers were less impressed. “A delightful and very promising situation was quite ruined by its treatment in this particular picture,” *Moving Picture World* wrote. “The great trouble with the picture is the child player, who never for a moment forgot the camera and was quite wooden throughout.”<sup>30</sup> Back in Dixon they paid no attention to the critics; the town was overjoyed. “On Friday evening at the Dixon Opera House, Dixon people will have the opportunity of seeing pretty little Harriet Parsons taking a lead role in a play, *The Magic Wand*, written for the little girl by her mother,” the *Dixon Evening Telegraph* announced in November 1912. “Little Harriet Parsons is said to be a clever little actress and her appearance will be of much interest to the Dixon people.”<sup>31</sup>

Perhaps Louella’s proudest accomplishment as a screenwriter was the 1912 script *Chains*. The film, about a convicted killer who marries his fiancée while

awaiting execution, was based on Louella's front-page story at the *Dixon Star*, and it became one of Essanay's greatest successes. Featuring top stars Ruth Stonehouse, Francis X. Bushman, and Bryant Washburn, it was advertised as "one of the greatest, most powerful and tense dramatic studies ever offered by Essanay."<sup>32</sup> On the eve of his engagement to a young woman, Ruth Keene, Harry Madden becomes entangled in a barn-loft card game with some "dissolute companions." When he detects one of the players cheating, Madden quarrels with him and kills the man with his own revolver. Afterward he hides in Ruth's home but is caught and sentenced to death. Ruth's "innocent love" prompts her to marry Madden in jail. Fan magazines gave the film glowing reviews; the trade journal *Motography* hailed it as a "masterpiece of dramatic construction."<sup>33</sup>

Immersed in a whirlwind daily schedule of writing and editing, Louella was truly in her element. "I think," Louella told interviewers from *Photoplay* magazine, "that I have found my life vocation."<sup>34</sup>

In her autobiography, *The Gay Illiterate*, Louella recalled her years at Essanay as among the most joyful in her life. "Those were the days before the war," she remembered, "overbrimming with excitement. The world was my oyster, and Chicago was providing the cocktail sauce."<sup>35</sup>

The "Essanay gang" was eclectic, to say the least. Actor Wallace Beery, a noisy drunk, chased starlets around the lot, Francis X. Bushman came to work in a lavender limousine, and the cross-eyed Ben Turpin was so homely and clumsy that it was comic. But they were brilliant, and between 1910 and 1915, they were movie pioneers. Along with their colleagues at Biograph, Vitagraph, Selig, Fox, and Universal, the major film companies of the period, the Essanay troupe built the artistic and technological foundations of the movie industry. The studio's performers developed techniques that would become the basis of film acting, and writers and editors like Louella lay the groundwork for modern screenwriting. Essanay's directors and cameramen pioneered a repertoire of cinematic devices that are now the foundation of modern cinematography, such as the fade-in and fade-out and the double exposure. In 1912, the studio brought out a "powerful battery of searchlights" to do some evening filming on the set of a feature, *King Robert of Sicily*, and was praised by trade journals for its pioneering work with night lighting.<sup>36</sup>

The atmosphere at Essanay was chaotic, and minor "emergencies" happened on a near-daily basis. In 1913, several reels of finished film were stolen

from the studio and found inexplicably discarded in a nearby cement mixer.<sup>37</sup> A Chicago policeman, not knowing that a train “holdup” in Highland Park was staged for a film, started down the track for the bandits and ruined 140 feet of film.<sup>38</sup> Actors frequently quit the studio when they found more promising work on the stage; when this happened, Louella was often assigned to take their parts. When the wardrobe department ran out of clothes or the prop room fell short of furniture, Louella was dispatched back to her apartment for another dress, chair, or pair of shoes.

When Francis X. Bushman, the studio’s top actor, won a “most popular star” contest run by the *Ladies’ World* magazine in 1912, he received over seven thousand fan letters from women ranging from teenagers to grandmothers.<sup>39</sup> Bushman hired three secretaries to respond to the letters, and he employed Louella as their supervisor. Her task was to ensure that “his” letters to the fans concealed the truth about Bushman’s personal life—that he was married and had five children as well as a lover at the studio.<sup>40</sup> Louella was also told to make sure that the letters were romantic but not too passionate; just enough to keep the fans interested. Once Louella became “too fervent” with her reply, she recalled, “and some woman came in all decked out in bridal array, ready to marry him.” An angry Bushman instructed her to be “less personal.”<sup>41</sup>

During lunch hours, members of the company, many still in costume—“queerly garbed figures, some of them old and wrinkled and grey-haired, some of them young and gay and vigorous,” wrote the film trade journal *Motography*—trouped down to the corner of Broadway and Winona for a working lunch at the Witt Food Emporium. “Jokes and gags are bandied about, this player is joshed and that one praised . . . and a director over in the corner is busily explaining just the sort of costumes he wants for the Colonial drama he is going to stage the first of the week,” *Motography* noted in 1913.<sup>42</sup> After hours, many of the Essanay troupe congregated at Sternberg’s saloon, on the corner of Argyle Street; others joined Louella, Francis Bushman, and actress Beverly Bayne at Bayne’s apartment for long evenings of gin rummy and beer.<sup>43</sup> Life and work were one as Louella and her Essanay colleagues immersed themselves in each others’ lives and in the movies. In the end, it was much more than a job. As editor, screenwriter, costumer, accountant, secretary, and in a few instances, even a minor actress, Louella was exposed to virtually all aspects of motion picture production. Ten years later, as a result of the strict division of labor imposed by the studio system that dominated film production between the mid-1920s and late 1940s, this kind of immersion in

the artistic, financial, and technical aspects of the filmmaking process would have been impossible. Louella worked at Essanay in one of the most intimate and stimulating environments in the history of American film.

And by 1914, her work had won her a national reputation. That spring, she was mentioned in an article in *Motion Picture* magazine on women screenwriters and appeared in a piece in the *Saturday Evening Post*, which called her a “short-story writer of note.”<sup>44</sup> Later that year she was the subject of a feature article in *Photoplay* magazine celebrating her accomplishments both as a writer and as a successful female professional.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, Louella was one of a handful of women who had secured important jobs in motion pictures. As a result of the loose and informal structure of the early industry, and because filmmaking was not yet taken seriously as an art or business, women were able to rise to high positions that would later be inaccessible in the male-dominated studio system. Alice Guy Blache, head of her own film studio, produced more than three hundred movies between 1910 and 1914, and Lois Weber, in 1916, became Universal Studio’s highest-paid director before forming her own independent production company. Jeanie MacPherson began working as a screenwriter for director Cecil B. DeMille in 1915, Anita Loos began writing for director D. W. Griffith in 1912, and Frances Marion was America’s highest-paid screenwriter from 1916 through the mid-1930s. According to some estimates, women screenwriters wrote nearly a quarter of Hollywood screenplays between 1910 and the 1930s.<sup>46</sup>

Louella’s star was rising, and she was not modest about her success. In the summer of 1914, she returned to Dixon for a vacation and wired the *Dixon Telegraph* with instructions to announce her arrival. “Louella O. Parsons of Chicago,” the *Telegraph* reported, had “made good” in the big city. As “scenario head of Essanay, every picture put out by the company is her selection and her position is one of the greatest responsibility and requires a brilliance of mind that is rare.”<sup>47</sup>

When Louella returned from her trip, she found the studio in a panic. While she was away, someone had decided to balance the books for perhaps the first time in Essanay’s history. What they found was terrifying. Though their films had been turning a profit, and the company had maintained its overseas market in spite of the European war, the studio was in trouble.<sup>48</sup> All fingers pointed at Spoor and Anderson, who had mismanaged the studio’s finances. Actors and directors rushed around the grounds cursing “S and A,” whose bad business sense and poorly planned efforts to expand the studio had brought on the crisis.

In 1913, Spoor and Anderson spent \$50,000 to construct a new studio in Niles, California, where the studio's cowboy films were shot. Later that year they built a new Chicago facility down the block from the existing studio on Argyle Street.<sup>49</sup> These expenses would have been manageable had Anderson not decided to hire Charlie Chaplin. A rising comedic star who had worked at the Keystone film studio for \$100 a week, Chaplin, in 1914, had finished his contract at Keystone and was negotiating with Carl Laemmle of the Universal Studio when Anderson offered him a weekly salary of \$1,250, plus a \$10,000 signing bonus. Chaplin accepted and Anderson was thrilled, but when Spoor learned about it, he was furious. Knowing that the studio could not afford Chaplin, Spoor tried unsuccessfully to break the contract. In desperation, Spoor then brought in an "efficiency man," Homer Boushey, to trim expenses around the studio. Boushey's first stop was Louella's office.

Louella hated Boushey, a dour, humorless accountant, and the feeling was mutual. After reviewing the account books in the scenario office, he declared that Louella was financially irresponsible: she had been buying too many scripts and sometimes paid up to \$75 for a single manuscript. Not only were the expenses unjustified according to Boushey, but Spoor and Anderson were planning to phase out the scenario editor position and, like many film studios at the time, hire professional screenwriters. From this point on, amateurs who sent scripts received notes saying that, "in line with its policy of progress, the Essanay company has discarded the scenario from its business. The reason is that Essanay photoplays are beyond the scenario stage. The high art of production as standardized by this company cannot be sustained by mere scenarios."<sup>50</sup> Louella's days were numbered, and for the next few weeks she complained to her friends about the "stool pigeon" who was taking away her job.<sup>51</sup>

Strategically, one of those friends was Mary King, an acquaintance from the *Chicago Tribune*. An editor at the paper, as well as fiancée of its publisher, Joseph Medill Patterson, King took pity on Louella and arranged a meeting for her with James Keeley, publisher of the near-bankrupt *Chicago Herald*. King suggested to Keeley that Louella might write a movie column that would boost circulation for the floundering paper. Thrilled at the possibility of again working in journalism, in November 1914 Louella went downtown to the *Herald* office.

Keeley immediately gave her the brush-off. In light of the paper's financial troubles, he had little interest, he explained, in hiring a movie writer. A second-rate publication with a long history of money problems, the *Herald*

had narrowly averted bankruptcy when Keeley, formerly an editor at the *Tribune*, purchased the paper in early 1914. Though Keeley's dream was to increase circulation by hiring well-known reporters and expanding the paper's news coverage, his financial backers—industrialist Samuel Insull and Sears, Roebuck president Julius Rosenwald—halted the plan. Instead, the *Herald*, circulation two hundred thousand, remained flimsy and undistinguished. In the words of one critic, it was as “dull as a church sermon.”<sup>52</sup>

One of the paper's strong suits was its motion picture coverage. The daily *Herald* carried two movie columns: “Reel Facts,” a short column that dispensed news and tidbits of personal information about Chicago film actors, and “In the Picture Players,” a daily film review. The Sunday *Herald* also ran two features about movies, “News of the Players” and “Gossip of the Photo Theaters,” as well as serialized short stories based on the plots of Essanay films. When Louella returned to the *Herald* office a second time, hoping to convince Keeley to hire her, she found that the publisher had not budged. The paper already had too many movie columns, he replied. How about a Sunday feature on screenwriting? Louella asked. Again Keeley shook his head. Louella then resorted to more desperate measures.

“I was young, and . . . pretty,” Louella recalled. So when she flirted with him, “Mr. Keeley was quite intrigued.”<sup>53</sup> Louella's column for the *Herald*, “How to Write Photo Plays,” debuted on December 20, 1914. It was the first of a weekly series on screenwriting slated to last through the spring of the following year.

Featuring a large picture of a slim and beautiful Louella with short dark hair and intense, deep-set eyes, the feature took up nearly an entire page of the Sunday magazine section. The photo of Louella was stunning; her prose, unfortunately, was not. Envisioning herself a schoolroom “scenario teacher” and her readers her pupils, she filled her column with haughty platitudes:

DON'T say after you have been to the moving picture show: “I can write a story every bit as good as the one we just saw.” Aim high and say to yourself: “I can and I will write a better story than the one I saw tonight.”

DON'T get discouraged over the amount of postage you have spent on worthless scripts.

DON'T read over our lessons hurriedly without absorbing the contents, and expect results. Apply yourself and study hard.

DON'T ask your teacher to read your work, or try to telephone her for assistance.<sup>54</sup>

Despite the clichéd prose, the series was a success. After a few months Louella had nearly five hundred regular readers, who sent her letters asking for advice about both their scripts and their personal matters. “Obey your mother by all means. Mothers have a way of knowing what is best for us, and if she does not want you to write any more letters to your favorite movie actor, do as she says,” Louella counseled a young woman.<sup>55</sup>

The screenwriting column, however, was only a part-time job, and throughout the winter of 1914 Louella continued her work at Essanay, waiting for the day when the axe would finally fall. Meanwhile, the studio continued to go downhill. As film studios began producing longer, more sophisticated dramas that drew on literary material, Essanay’s repertoire of cowboy films and slapsticks were going out of vogue. When Louella tried to tell Spoor that historical costume pictures, such as Adolph Zukor’s famous 1912 production of *Queen Elizabeth*, were the wave of the future, he laughed and continued making his comedies and Westerns. “You’re not as smart a girl as I thought you were,” he told her.<sup>56</sup>

In mid-December, Louella, Harriet, and Helen left Chicago to spend Christmas in Dixon. After leaving Helen and Harriet in Dixon, Louella traveled alone to Burlington to visit her friend Adeline Moir. Over dinner one night Moir introduced her to a handsome and eligible bachelor named Jack McCaffrey, a forty-year-old steamboat captain who made a living piloting ships up and down the Mississippi. The son of Irish immigrants who had settled in Louisiana and eventually become prosperous plantation owners, McCaffrey had quit his studies at Northwestern University to pursue an adventurous life on the river. After several years working on boats and at odd jobs, he eventually bought a home in LeClaire, Iowa, not far from Burlington, and from his base in LeClaire continued his steamboat work. He had acquired many friends and clients in Burlington, including Adeline’s father, Alexander Moir, who had once employed him.<sup>57</sup>

Adeline Moir remembered McCaffrey as “handsome and very intelligent.” He was well educated and well spoken, and according to many acquaintances, he bore a strong resemblance to Franklin D. Roosevelt.<sup>58</sup> “He had a marvelous personality,” recalled another neighbor. “He was one of the sweetest and one of the kindest people I have ever known.”<sup>59</sup> He had also gained a reputation in the area for his skills as a captain, and it was rumored that he was the first to have piloted a riverboat down the Mississippi through the Gulf of Mexico and up the Atlantic coast to New York.<sup>60</sup> When Louella met

McCaffrey, the attraction was instant, and the spark quickly became a flame. By the time she left Burlington, she and McCaffrey were deep in the throes of a passionate romance.

Back in Chicago, Essanay's prize catch, Charlie Chaplin, did not work out as expected. When he arrived at the studio during the first week of January 1915, he was instructed by an office boy to go to the first floor, where "the head of the scenario department, Miss Louella Parsons, . . . will give you a script." "I don't use other people's scripts, I write my own," he snapped.<sup>61</sup> The studio eventually relented and allowed Chaplin to use his own material, but the seeds of an unhappy relationship had been sown. Chaplin left Essanay in late 1916, just as the studio was heading toward bankruptcy.

By that time, Louella was long gone. After convincing Keeley to hire her full-time, Louella quit Essanay in January 1915. In addition to the Sunday screenwriting feature, Louella would now write a daily column, "Seen on the Screen," that combined film reviews with tidbits of gossip about film stars. A precursor to her Hollywood column, it would inform Chicago's movie fans and film industry employees of the latest news from the nation's film studios.

The parting from Essanay was bittersweet. She had loved her work, grown attached to her colleagues, and gained tremendous respect for George Spoor, a "kind, generous" employer whom she would praise for decades. But she was ecstatic about her new job at the *Herald* and deeply in love with Jack McCaffrey, who less than a month after their initial meeting had proposed marriage.

On January 9, 1915, Louella and McCaffrey took a train to Crown Point, Indiana, the infamous "marriage mill" of the Midwest, where weddings were performed twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, without a waiting period. After a brief civil wedding, they picked up Harriet from Chicago and traveled to McCaffrey's parents' plantation, Hermione, near Tallulah, Louisiana. Harriet stayed at Hermione while Louella and Jack honeymooned in New Orleans. According to Martha Sevier, McCaffrey's niece, Harriet became immediately fond of her stepfather and even wanted to change her last name to McCaffrey, but Louella forbade it.<sup>62</sup>

When the couple returned to Hermione, the McCaffreys offered Jack a lucrative job as a manager on the plantation. McCaffrey accepted immediately, without telling Louella, and when she found out, she exploded. "She wouldn't have any of it, she wouldn't even think about it," recalled an acquaintance, Katharine Ward. "She couldn't tolerate the country. She just

couldn't put up with the small town stuff. She was just not going to have it."<sup>63</sup> McCaffrey agreed to return to Chicago and share the Magnolia Street apartment with Helen and Harriet.

This was a poor decision. Helen had known nothing about the elopement, and Louella had never introduced her to McCaffrey. The day after the wedding, a friend of Louella's from the *Herald*, planning to run the news in the paper, called Helen for a comment. "Did you know your daughter was married at Crown Point today?" he asked. "Married! Well I should say not!" Helen screamed over the line before hanging up. Infuriated, the reporter ran the story of his conversation with Helen in the *Herald*, and the story was reprinted in the *Dixon Telegraph* the following day.<sup>64</sup>

Helen then called the *Telegraph* editor and demanded a retraction of the story, which eventually appeared in early February 1915. "Some weeks ago the Chicago papers carried stories of the marriage of Miss Louella O. Parsons to Jack Murray McCaffrey. The articles were copied in the Dixon papers and from their tone led one to believe the wedding had been rather an elopement, but such was not the case," the *Telegraph* lied. "The fact that Mrs. McCaffrey was writing under the name of Louella O. Parsons in the *Chicago Herald* made it desirable to keep her marriage from becoming public and the affair look like an elopement."<sup>65</sup> In late January Helen sent out cards announcing the wedding, to make it appear that the event had been planned, but by then everyone in Dixon knew what had really happened.

Though Louella and McCaffrey loved each other, the marriage was destined to be turbulent. Louella "made a lot more money than he did," recalled a friend from Chicago. "And she started buying clothes and this and that for him, he just didn't like it."<sup>66</sup> There were also disputes about Louella's friends. Louella often dragged McCaffrey to the movies in the evening, or to Beverly Bayne's apartment to spend time with the "Essanay gang." But McCaffrey felt uncomfortable around Louella's movie star friends and thought them a bunch of pretentious snobs. He had little interest in movies and thought them "frivolous" and "boring."

As winter turned to spring and spring to summer, the truth about Jack McCaffrey became clear. Though he was good-hearted and genuinely in love with Louella, and though he grew to care deeply for Harriet and even warmed up to Helen over time, he was slow, relaxed, quiet, and unambitious. And he was uncomfortable socially and unpretentious. He would not have fit well in Hollywood. Ultimately, he was not a good match for Louella.