

## *An Industry and an Art*

*T*he home office of the Universal Film Manufacturing Company was located at 1600 Broadway, a midtown Manhattan office tower not far from several of Universal's eastern studios and the company's laboratory in Bayonne, New Jersey. On a cold Saturday morning in March 1915, two hundred of the company's employees gathered on a platform at Grand Central Terminal. Their boss, Carl Laemmle, was about to leave for the West Coast to open the company's vast new studio, to be called Universal City. Bundled up against the chill air, Laemmle arrived at the terminal in the tonneau of a flashy touring car, part of an entourage of honking horns and waving banners assembled by the studio press office. His thinning white hair made him seem older than his forty-eight years, and to many in the industry he was already "the old man," or "Uncle Carl," a diminutive Bavarian immigrant known for his broad smile and thick accent. Laemmle had started as an exhibitor in 1906, had moved into distribution, and since 1909 had been making his own films. When a group of independent producers coalesced as the Universal in 1912, Laemmle had come out on top, but the corporate pot was still bubbling. Pat Powers, a giant Irishman who served as treasurer and owned 40 percent of the stock, was also coming along for the ride. He too smiled for the cameras, but Powers wanted Laemmle out. The trip would give him an opportunity to confer with his allies and agents on the West Coast.<sup>1</sup>

To Laemmle, Powers was a known irritant, and corporate infighting a way of life. What bothered him most at the moment, however, was the United States Supreme Court. In a statement to reporters, Laemmle denounced the Court's recent decision in the Mutual case. Ruling that motion pictures were "a business pure and simple," the Court had denied the Mutual Film Corporation's argument that first-amendment guarantees protected their film *THE BIRTH OF A NATION* from prior restraint by Ohio censors. The immediate effect was to stop the showing of the film in the state of Ohio, but everyone in the industry knew that state and local censorship boards across the country could now act with impunity, treating their precious films like so much interstate baggage. Laemmle announced his strong support for the National Board of Censorship, an industry-sponsored body whose judgments were, in effect, powerless.<sup>2</sup>

Laemmle may or may not have seen *THE BIRTH OF A NATION*, which had opened in New York just two days earlier. Was he aware that many of its great battle scenes

had been filmed at the Providencia ranch, picturesque acreage just east of his own studio and quite often the location of his own Western and Civil War Pictures?<sup>3</sup> In any case, he had certainly seen the daily reviews, which suggested a revolution in motion-picture content and style. As one "first-nighter" would put it:

In dramatic and photographic technique it is beyond our present day criticism. . . . The true greatness of this production lies in its emotional appeal, an appeal so forceful that it lifts you out of your seat and thrills you as the speaking stage never did and [never] realized. And did any of us ever believe it could be done—like this? (*Motion Picture News*, 13 March 1915, quoted by Seymour Stern, *Film Culture*, Spring-Summer 1965, p. 147).

Universal had distributed occasional features as far back as 1912, but the company's prosperity was based on a "balanced program" of short subjects. How the clamor over *THE BIRTH OF A NATION* might affect future release schedules would be a major topic of concern at upcoming strategy sessions. Not only was the picture extraordinarily expensive (\$110,000), but at twelve reels, it simply did not fit the established patterns of distribution and exhibition. No film exchange handled *THE BIRTH OF A NATION*, and no nickelodeon was showing it. Instead, it was running at Klaw and Erlanger's Liberty Theatre, one of a series of legitimate houses that both K & E and the Shuberts had recently announced would be given over completely to feature pictures.<sup>4</sup>

The previous April, Vitagraph had leased its own Broadway showcase, and a palatial theater called the Strand had caused a sensation when it opened its doors with a feature-picture program. Even the Hippodrome was starting a movie season for the spring and summer, with the films accompanied by its pipe organ, one-hundred-piece orchestra, and chorus of three hundred voices. It was clear that exhibition would be in upheaval for the next year or two, and Universal would have to make a gesture in the direction of long films. But Laemmle was convinced the short-film market was too well established ever to be abandoned.<sup>5</sup>

Of course, Laemmle and Powers were not the only VIPs leaving for the opening. Exchange manager M. H. Hoffman was going, at the head of a contingent of Universal's distribution chiefs from across the country. The exchange men and the exhibitors they serviced were the company's lifeline, and impressing them with such a gala was one way of demonstrating Universal's formidable size and strength. Hoffman would leave the company a few years later to start his own studio, Tiffany. Joe Brandt was going only as far as Chicago. He was Universal's general manager, a lawyer (like Hoffman), and the future president of Columbia Pictures. Laemmle's brother, Louis, was also in the party. (He did something for Universal, but no one could quite figure out what. In the years to come, nepotism at Laemmle's studio would become an industry joke, but some other producers were not far behind.) Least noted of the group was Julius Laemmle, the president's seven-year-old son. A few years later he would change his name to Carl Laemmle, Jr. For his twenty-first birthday his father would put him in charge of the studio, and he would produce *ALL QUIET ON THE WESTERN FRONT* (1930).<sup>6</sup>

A reception line of stars from Universal's eastern studios offered formal farewells at the platform. The first to shake Carl Laemmle's hand was Mary Fuller, star of the



*Exhibitors and exchange operators on their way to the opening of Universal City, March 1915.*

original serial picture, *WHAT HAPPENED TO MARY* (1912). Laemmle had hired her away from the Edison Company but was becoming quite ambivalent about the entire subject of stars. He was much more interested in serials, however, and had turned Universal into one of the industry's leading producers. Nonetheless, he saved Mary Fuller for two-reel dramas and melodramas. After her on the reception line came King Baggott, William Garwood, Hobart Henley, Matt Moore, Violet Mersereau, Harry C. Myers, Charles Ogle, and Ben Wilson, all names to conjure with in 1915 and all wondering whether the opening of the new California studio would mean the closing of their eastern stages and a long trek west. In fact it would take three years.<sup>7</sup>

Filming the proceedings for the *Universal Animated Weekly* was that newsreel's editor, Jack Cohn. With his brother Harry, and Joe Brandt, he would be part of the triumvirate behind Columbia Pictures.

The Lake Shore Limited pulled out of Grand Central and headed for Chicago, where more Universalites would join the party and a special train would be ready to take them all to the Coast. Laemmle had begun his theater and exchange operations in Chicago and had once been the largest distributor in the Midwest. In fact, servicing great numbers of small middle-American theaters was still the basic method of doing business at Universal. Chicago was a symbol for this company, not just a necessary transfer point.

The Universal Special left the Dearborn Street Station in Chicago on Sunday evening, stopped in Kansas City, and reached Denver by Tuesday. The local exchange operator was at the station with a circus band and seven open limousines. For eight hours the party saw the sights of Denver, was greeted by Governor Carlson on

the steps of the capitol, and lunched at the Savoy in the company of Buffalo Bill Cody. Buffalo Bill and his Wild West troupe had perfected the modern method of bill-poster ballyhoo, but these movie people were prepared to extend his lavish local campaigns to a national level. The president of the Morgan Lithograph Company, P. J. Morgan, was also along for the trip. He supplied Universal with its posters now, but in later years Morgan would dominate the entire industry.<sup>8</sup>

At 7:45 that night the group left Denver's Santa Fe Station en route to the Grand Canyon, a side trip that took another day and a half. Typical tourists, they grumbled at the encroachments of civilization (the supposedly tranquil canyon "sounds like the Brooklyn express making up time under the East River," one quipped) but insisted on luxuriating in heated baths, despite the seventy-five-cent extra charge.<sup>9</sup>

By now the train was loaded with Universal executives and exchange managers, theater owners, and journalists. U. K. Whipple, the company's legendary newsreel cameraman, was on board with his entire outfit. Harry Vestal and his wife had been on since Chicago. He was chairman of Ohio's film-censorship commission, a post he would soon be forced to resign because of this little junket. One of the nation's first prominent movie reviewers, Kitty Kelly, was there to cover the event for the *Chicago Tribune*. *Billboard*, the Western Newspaper Union, the *National Magazine*, *Leslie's Weekly*, *Motography*, and the *Motion Picture News* all had representatives on the train. Among them were Robert Grau and Homer Croy, whose descriptions of filmmaking in this period were among the first attempts to suggest the real complexity of the industry's art and economics. The "youngest man on board" was Ned Depinet, twenty-four years old, an exchange man from Dallas who earned a reputation on the trip as a fancy dancer. Years later, he would become president of RKO Radio Pictures.<sup>10</sup>

It was on Saturday, six days after leaving Grand Central, that the Special deposited Laemmle and his crew in Los Angeles. Even without the sight-seeing, the California studio seemed very far from 1600 Broadway. Land and labor were cheap, but was it a good idea to set up the company's factory so far from executive supervision? The pluses appeared to outweigh the minuses, but the issue was hardly closed.

The general manager of Universal City, Isidore Bernstein, had met the train at San Bernardino. He brought along a bevy of "poppy girls" bearing gifts of flowers and fruit and rode with the party to the Santa Fe Station in Los Angeles. There a mounted escort of cowboys and Indians, whooping and hollering and firing their revolvers into the air, accompanied the visitors to their quarters at the Hollywood Hotel. The following day, Sunday, was spent sight-seeing at Busch Gardens and ogling the millionaires' homes along Pasadena's Grove Avenue. Bernstein had other things to attend to, however. Six weeks earlier the entire lot had almost been washed away by a flood, and tomorrow ten thousand visitors were expected for the grand opening.<sup>11</sup>

Of course, this was not Universal's first West Coast studio. In 1911 the Horsley brothers had established the Nestor studio in an old roadhouse on Sunset Boulevard—the first studio in Hollywood proper. The following year, when the Horsleys joined in the creation of Universal, their studio became the new firm's West Coast headquarters. Another facility was built at Edendale in 1912. Universal's West Coast "ranch" could produce 15,000 feet of negative (*i.e.*, finished product) per week, but a much larger facility was needed, capable of 30,000 to 40,000 feet, with enough room for a vast array of permanent standing sets—a motion-picture city.

Bernstein began looking for a suitable location and in 1914 acquired the 230-acre Taylor ranch in the San Fernando Valley, five miles across the Cahuenga Pass from the old studio. Stanley Anderson, the developer of Beverly Hills, handled the \$165,000 purchase. The spring crop of oats was harvested, and on 18 June ground was broken for Universal City. William Horsley was put in charge of construction, and by the autumn of 1914 the western part of the lot had been leveled for stages and grading was completed for a network of roads, including a mile-long "Laemmle Boulevard" linking the back lot to the front gate. By October five hundred people were living on the property, seventy-five of them in teepees situated along the hills that provided the studio's dramatic backdrop. Bernstein took advantage of this permanent population to obtain for "Universal City" a ranking as a third-class city, with its own post office and voting precinct. The city's first birth occurred in December, to the wife of a cowpuncher foreman. She named her son Carl Laemmle Oelze.<sup>12</sup>

Filming proceeded even during construction, and approximately fifty films were shot here before the formal opening. Most important of these was *DAMON AND PYTHIAS* (released 21 December 1914), a four-reel production intended to challenge the popular Italian spectacle films. As the winter rainy season progressed, it became obvious that Universal City needed an indoor stage, so Horsley converted a structure he had originally intended as a garage. It was still being hung with Aristo Arcs and Cooper-Hewitt lamps when the great flood hit.<sup>13</sup>

A river meandering through the property, usually a tepid stream, had been swollen by excessive winter rains. On the night of 30–31 January a gale caused it to surge over its banks, undermining every building on the lot and demolishing all the pre-1914 structures. Seven hundred laborers were called in to help repair the damage, estimated at \$130,000. Among the standing sets destroyed were the Indian temples built for Francis Ford's serial *THE MASTER KEY* (1914–1915). Release of its final chapters had to be delayed until they could be reconstructed.<sup>14</sup>

As Universal City's opening date approached, its competitors sought to get their own strengths on the record as well. The American Studio, up the coast at Santa Barbara, was said to be employing four hundred people. Selig's ace director, Colin Campbell, was returning to their West Coast studio after a location trip to the Canal Zone. Edwin Thanhouser had just returned after three years to take charge once more of the company he had founded. And Sigmund Lubin was opening the largest artificially lit stage in the world at his studios outside Philadelphia. If Universal wanted to boast of its size and wealth, Vitagraph would not be outdone. The week Laemmle opened his new city, Vitagraph announced its own capital investment as \$5 million, with real-estate holdings alone of \$1 million. Every week, twelve hundred Vitagraph employees in Brooklyn, Los Angeles, and Paris spent \$70,000 of the company's money, while its laboratories churned out 1,500,000 feet of release prints.<sup>15</sup>

Universal was about to open a producing plant of unprecedented size, capable of generating great amounts of film at limited cost. Special projects like *THE BIRTH OF A NATION* had no place in this scheme, and even ordinary feature-length films were not easily accommodated. Laemmle was prepared to leave the high road to the competition, but would his cut-rate policies justify the overhead of this new plant? Universal's West Coast stars would greet him at the gates of the city on Monday. Could they carry the company into the new era that was obviously coming?

On Monday, 15 March the visiting party left the Hollywood Hotel in a fleet of



*Visiting a set during the opening-day festivities at Universal City, 15 March 1915. Directors Otis Turner and William Worthington; studio general manager Isidore Bernstein; executives Pat Powers, Carl Laemmle, and R. H. Cochrane; Western star Anna Little.*

buses and drove up through the hills above Hollywood. Seen from Lankershim Boulevard, Universal City was a white city, fresh paint and stucco gleaming in the California sunshine. True, these were only the administration buildings, the studio's public face, but one year ago nothing had stood here but a chicken ranch. At 10:15 the chief of police of Universal City, Laura Oakley (who doubled as a Western star), made a simple presentation: "Mr. President, acting for the west coast studios, I am pleased to present you with this golden key, a key which will permit you to open the gates of this wonder city." Laemmle turned the key, the band struck up "The Star Spangled Banner," and Pat Powers ran the stars and stripes up the flagpole. Laemmle led his army of executives and exchange operators through the gates, followed by a cheering crowd of ten thousand. They marched between two ranks of Universal stars until they reached another flagpole, where R. H. Cochrane, vice-president and Laemmle's silent right hand, raised a special Universal City flag. The band played "I Love You, California," and Laemmle, Cochrane, and Powers were showered with a hail of flowers tossed by their employees.<sup>16</sup>

Not far behind the administration buildings was the main stage, in fact a great open-air platform three hundred feet long. The stage was divided into segments on which various companies could simultaneously shoot a number of different silent

films. A dramatic company filming on one set might be flanked by a comedy unit rehearsing to their left and a construction crew knocking together sets on their right. Sunlight was the only illumination, moderated by a series of overhead diffusion screens that could limit the amount of light pouring down on the actors. When it became too cloudy for uniform photographic results, a banner with the words DON'T SHOOT was run up a pole and all production companies stopped filming. Beneath this stage were various traps and water-tight pits, while one corner housed a revolving turntable and another a rocking setup. For an open-air stage, it was state-of-the-art, but even in California Cecil B. DeMille and other filmmakers were already making use of improved arc lighting to allow them to shoot indoors at all hours of the day.<sup>17</sup>

This stage now became the scene of a mass review, where Laemmle and his party inspected the companies "in true military fashion." When this was finished the resident cowboy-and-Indian cavalry mounted their own review.<sup>18</sup>

After lunch, a few things began to go wrong. Director Henry McRae's "101" Bison Company staged a flood scene in which 60,000 gallons of water poured from a reservoir, sweeping away a Western town. Marie Walcamp rode through the waves to warn the inhabitants. But there was a little too much force to the inundation, and Walcamp was almost swept away too. As the flood reached the crowd, Carl Laemmle jumped atop an automobile to keep his feet from getting wet, but a number of other guests needed to be sent to the wardrobe department for a change of dry clothes. No one mentioned the January flood, at least not in print.

There were five hundred cars parked on the lot at the moment, and the crowd was said to have swollen to twenty thousand. Streetcars and buses had been delivering more and more visitors all day. Universal City was establishing itself as a tourist attraction, even comparing itself directly to the Panama-Pacific Exposition in San Francisco. Visitors continued to come in large numbers in the days following the opening, and soon Laemmle was charging them to get in and building special stands from which they could watch the action on the main stage. That night, a grand ball was held in William Horsley's new studio, a converted garage decorated with banks of flowers and lit by the eerie glow of Cooper-Hewitt tubes.<sup>19</sup>

Tuesday morning was given over to a general inspection of the buildings and grounds, and after lunch, Eddie Polo, a circus stuntman now working with Francis Ford's company, had his crew demonstrate a series of daring leaps from a high parapet. The location was "The Wall of Lucknow," part of a large standing set originally built by Ford for *THE CAMPBELLS ARE COMING* (1914), which had survived the rainy season. Henry McRae's unit followed this with a full-scale rodeo, taking good advantage of Universal's resident cowboys and Indians.

Frank Stites, Universal's stunt pilot, had been scheduled to take off earlier in the day for a bit of exhibition flying. But news of the crash of another aviator, his friend Lincoln Beachey, so upset Stites that at the last moment he refused to go up. Later in the day he reconsidered, although what induced him to change his mind was never made clear. Stites took off, crashed, and was killed before thousands of horrified spectators.<sup>20</sup>

Stites's death effectively ended the celebration. The visitors drifted away, and for a long time Stites's fall was read as an omen by many in the industry. Played down in the press, it was the single indelible image many of those at the opening would carry away with them.<sup>21</sup>

Activity at the factory studio went on as scheduled for the rest of the week. As one



*Henry McRae's "flood scene" accidentally inundates much of the back lot during opening-day festivities at Universal City.*

observer noted, "If Universal City has a motto it is this: We must never let the 'footage' fall behind." Laemmle and Cochrane were hearing constant rumors that Pat Powers was about to instigate a coup, but they were at a loss to understand how. The press carried reports that Vitagraph, Lubin, Selig, and Essanay would join together to establish a single booking agency for spectacular films, a powerful new combination. By the end of the week, Universal had another thirty reels of film ready for release.<sup>22</sup>