
LOS ANGELES IN 1924 was still coming into its own. It had been Spanish territory a century and a half earlier when Franciscan friars cut a swath through the native villages and built the mission and plaza that soon formed the nucleus of the pueblo of Los Angeles. There was a brief Mexican reign before California was “proclaimed for America” in 1846, but while the gold rush that stimulated statehood in 1850 made a huge impact on Northern California, turning San Francisco into a major cosmopolitan city, Los Angeles remained a “tough cow town.”

It wasn't until the land boom of the late 1800s that major changes grew visible, and soon midwestern families were joining together to buy hundreds of acres, moving en masse to the area to create their own communities infused with their own values. The discovery and exploitation of oil accelerated the changes, spurring the development of the port and interspersing lean-to refineries and wells among the orange groves, the churches, a few hotels, and clusters of houses and shops. By the beginning of the new century, the Southland was a series of three dozen incorporated towns, and it was close to impossible to know where one began and another ended. The region was tied together by the Red Cars, electric trains running from San Fernando down to Newport Beach and from Riverside out to the Pacific Ocean, providing cheap, easy access from one town to the next for tourists and residents alike.

The sun, the dry air, and the ocean all factored into bringing the new phenomenon of moviemaking slowly but surely to the area. Los Angeles

had been introduced to “flickers” in 1896 when the lights dimmed at the Orpheum Theater, and the image of a life-sized Anna Belle Sun danced for a few precious moments on a large white sheet. It would be another decade before the filmmakers themselves arrived in earnest.

It was a young business, initially driven by immigrants, Jews, and women — talented, ambitious, and creative souls unwelcome in more respectable professions. If moviemaking was looked down upon as less than reputable, and it was, individuals on the fringes of that community were the ones who first came to Los Angeles. They were seeking refuge from the Trust, the name commonly given to the Motion Picture Patents Company controlled by Thomas Edison, which mandated license fees for the use of its patented cameras and projectors. The rising demand for movies and the corresponding increase in theaters made enforcement a challenge; renegade companies fled to Florida, Cuba, and California to dodge the Trust’s vigilantes.

By 1915 the Trust was beaten, and Los Angeles was the burgeoning center of filmmaking. Movies were no longer an idea one week, in front of the cameras the next, and in theaters within a month, but the locals were none too thrilled to see women walking the streets in heavy makeup, cameras using parades as a backdrop, and men sitting under trees in biblical costumes. Yet what initially was greeted with shock and disdain gradually turned to civic pride as moviemaking became the city’s largest source of jobs. The ripple effect on the hotels and restaurants and on tourism became not only appreciated but, by 1920, depended upon.

Barns and empty lots had given way to more permanent filming locations, and by 1924 large studios were a part of the landscape. Along Melrose Avenue and Gower Street, the huge United Studios abutted the much smaller FBO. The Warner brothers were up on Sunset Boulevard, and

Universal City had been flourishing in the San Fernando Valley since 1915. Metro Goldwyn Mayer had just opened its gates in Culver City the spring of 1924, and the following year Cecil B. DeMille took over the Ince Studio down the street on Washington Boulevard.

Roads that had been loose dirt and gravel only a few years before were now smoothly paved, and the hills above all this activity were graced with the huge HOLLYWOODLAND sign, recently constructed to promote yet another housing development.

Three hundred thousand people were calling Los Angeles home in 1910; when Valeria Belletti arrived in 1924, she was just one of the one hundred thousand who poured into the city in that year alone, bringing the population to almost one million. Like Valeria, they came to seek their fortune and a new life; for many, that meant the movies. The hopefuls who were arriving that year were the first to have grown up collecting photographs of the stars from fan magazines; Mary Pickford and her fellow luminaries of the previous decade had risen to fame without any path to follow. It had all changed very quickly.

Margarita Valeria Belletti was born in New Jersey on October 11, 1898, the only child of parents who had emigrated from Italy several years before. Her father, Giuseppe (who changed his name to Joseph when he came to America), was in construction and did well enough to buy a house in West New York, New Jersey, but he never adjusted well to his new home. The family visited Italy together when Valeria was two, and shortly thereafter Giuseppe went back alone and stayed there. When Valeria was ten, she and her mother, Giuseppina, visited him in Italy but returned to New Jersey after a few months.

Valeria and her mother both suffered in the cold weather, but as Valeria

later reflected, “even though it was within our means to make a change, we just stayed because we didn’t have the courage of making a change.” Yet they had enough courage to make their home without the constant presence of a husband or father and instead lived with Giuseppina’s sister and her children.

When Valeria was almost sixteen, she left school and went to work in Manhattan for Lawrence and Herbert Langner, who were opening their own international patent practice. Lawrence Langner was soon dividing his time between his professional work and his first love, the theater, and, as the founder of the Theater Guild, he would become a prime mover behind Broadway in the twenties, thirties, and forties.

In 1914 Valeria was the Langner brothers’ one and only secretary, but during the ten years she worked for them, their business grew to include half a dozen partners and offices in Chicago, Washington, London, Paris, and Berlin. Langner described Valeria as “unusually bright” in his autobiography, *The Magic Lantern*, and although she rose to be put in charge of their annuity department, she was still little more than a glorified stenographer. For women the glass ceiling was still in the future; there was a steel ceiling that limited them to little beyond a secretarial role.

Yet Valeria enjoyed her work; she “hero worshipped” her boss, who was polite and considerate and communicative, all qualities she would find lacking in her later employers, especially Sam Goldwyn. At the Langners’, she was grateful for the opportunity to work in the city and to take advantage of all that New York had to offer, including free theater tickets provided by her boss. It was the era of the royal “we”; she felt she was an integral part of their business even though the Langners were making a fortune and she was taking home \$25 a week.

For a while her life in New York was enough for her, with her interesting job, social events, and friends to share it all with. Valeria proudly marched

in suffragette parades supporting the vote for women before the Nineteenth Amendment became law in 1920. With her short brown hair and her blue eyes, she was always on the lookout for a good time — within the bounds of propriety of course — and for a man to enjoy it with. She was very much a young woman of her times, proper but curious, taking her work seriously and ambitious to a point, but always wondering if the next man she met was husband material.

By the early 1920s the Great War had been over for several years and the Jazz Age was in full swing. Valeria was the first to say she was “conventional” and “prim,” even “a little too narrow,” but she was glad of it because she also saw herself as adventurous, certainly in relation to some of her friends, who were content to live their lives without going to see the newest stage show or latest club or traveling outside their own little worlds. As Valeria entered her midtwenties without finding a man she was seriously interested in, she shared confidences with several close girlfriends. One of the best was Irma Prina, who also worked in Manhattan, at the office of her family’s produce business. The girls had known each other since childhood.

In early 1923 Valeria’s mother died, at the age of fifty-one. Valeria stayed on with her aunt and cousins in New Jersey, but she began to reevaluate her situation. She and Irma had been talking for some time about taking a trip to California; Irma had relatives in Berkeley, near San Francisco, and if not now, when? As they began planning in earnest, Valeria realized she had little to hold her in New York; her mother was dead, her father was in Italy. Everyone said the West was good for your health, and she had long suffered from asthma. Valeria decided she would stay on in California if she liked it.

She shared her thinking with Lawrence Langner, who said he hated to see her go but wrote her a glowing letter of recommendation and several

letters of introduction to friends in California. He assured her that if she changed her mind, he would welcome her back, but the more Valeria thought about it, the more sure she was that she was ready for a new adventure. After all, at twenty-five she wasn't getting any younger and if she was ever going to make a change, now was the time.

Valeria and Irma took the train west and shared a fabulous summer, visiting San Francisco and the Bay Area and then traveling on to Santa Barbara, Los Angeles, and San Diego. They looked like Mut and Jeff, with Irma at five feet nine inches and tiny Valeria, who didn't hit five feet. But together they were downright daring for two women traveling alone — they took a boat to Catalina and flew in a plane over Coronado in San Diego. In September they returned north to Berkeley, where they stayed with Irma's aunt and where Mr. Langner had contacts. Valeria considered staying there, but she had been enchanted by the weather and the palm trees of Los Angeles. She and Irma parted company in Berkeley, with Irma packing to return to the East Coast as Valeria headed south again. She checked into the Los Angeles YWCA and, armed with a hundred dollars and her letters from Langner, set out to make a new life.

Our story begins with Valeria's first letter to Irma that fall.

OCT. 12, 1924

SUNDAY MORNING

Dear Irma,

Well, I'm back in Los Angeles and am rooming for the time being with 2 other girls in the Y.W.[C.A.] as they had no private rooms. These girls seem to be very nice and in a way it's better that I'm not alone. Although I feel much better, my cold is loosened up and of course I

have to cough quite a bit, and you know how you feel in public when your cold is in that stage. These girls in my room are awfully considerate and have offered everything they have to help me get over it.

I slept until 11:30 this morning and the girls have just gone out for breakfast. They told me not to bother to get dressed but just stay in bed and they are bringing me toast and coffee. You see Irma, one is not always out of luck, you usually find people who are willing to lend you a hand.

It's quite warm here today so that in the afternoon I'll sit in the sun on the porch and then go to bed early.

On the train from Barstow I met a fellow who was awfully nice to me, even though he saw that I was not so well and quite unsociable. He carried my suitcase for me and he saw me to the Y.W. He wanted to take me out today but I told him I couldn't because I wanted to doctor myself and get well as soon as possible. This fellow's name is Jack Purcell and is a chef for the Fred Harvey people. He said that if I wanted to he would speak to one of the head men to get me a position so that I could travel from place to place and in that way see all the resorts. This fellow seems awfully good hearted, but as usual I don't like him very much so that I hope he doesn't call me up.

How is everything in West Berkeley? I'd like to hear from you and if you'll write me care of the YWCA at 200 S. Vermont Street I'll get your mail because I think I'll stay here for at least a week.

With kind regards to your aunt and uncle, I am

*Yours,
Valeria*



OCTOBER 12, 1924—SUNDAY NIGHT

Dear Irma,

Tonight is so beautiful. The moon is so big and yellow and looks like a picture through the trees in front of my window. I'm beginning to get romantic again in this warm climate.

The two girls in my room are out—one with a boy friend and the other has to work nights as she is telegraph operator.

I didn't mind staying here by myself today because there is an auditorium right next to my window and the opera singers here in Los Angeles are practicing for 2 weeks. They tell me that they practice here every day during their stay so that I expect to be entertained for nothing for the rest of the week.

If I see Catherine I'll tell her about your leaving the 20th and of course I'll write you as soon as I see her. With kind regard to all, I am,

*Yours,
Valeria*



OCTOBER 31, 1924

Dear Irma,

I suppose your trip to California is now a thing of the past and you are down to business again. How does West New York look after beautiful California?

I'm still here at the Y and feel splendid. I've gotten a job working only half day, that is, from 1 to 5 in the afternoon and off all day Saturday. I'm assistant to a big doctor (one of those nature and drugless doctors) here in Los Angeles. He writes articles called "Care of the Body" in the Los Angeles Times and he's also writing books.

He's quite clever and has an immune practice. My job is a cinch; all I have to do is write a few letters in reply to letters from people asking what to do in regard to their ailments; write out the dietary lists for the patients; escort them into their treating rooms; collect fees and make appointments.

The doctor has left the management of the business end of the office entirely in my hands because he says he knows nothing about business. He told me that what was the most important thing was that I should be pleasant to all the patients who come in and talk to them. I have to wear a nurse's outfit and he's also given me a book on Hydro-Therapy that he wants me to study.

I'm getting \$50 a month for just sitting around being pleasant, etc. and if I'm the girl he wants, I'll work all day. By the 1st of the year he'll give me \$150 and after I've learned enough about diets, etc. that I can answer the mail myself, he said he'd give me \$300. Of course, you can't believe all they tell you, but I'll stick to it for the time being because I have all morning to myself and the weekends and I make enough to pay my room and board. I'm also learning a lot about what to eat and how to live.

I'm writing this letter while I'm eating my breakfast, squatted on the bed. My breakfast consists of 3 bran muffins, a half pound of grapes and one apple and 4 glasses of water. The doctor says if I follow his instructions, I'll be real strong in about 3 months. I also have to do some exercises and walk as much as possible. It almost seems like fate or whatever it is that I should get into a place like that when I really came out to California to learn how to live and get real strong.

Today is simply gorgeous, the sun has been out since six this morning and everything looks so fresh and green because we had rain

during the night. The Y is situated about 3 blocks from Hollywood and is partially surrounded by hills. It's quite pretty and it's out of the heart of the city. Do you remember where the University of California Southern Branch was located? Well, the Y is on the same street only a few blocks down.

How is your niece Patricia? You were so anxious to hear about her when you were here, remember? Please write to me soon and let me know how everything is.

I haven't forgotten to send you some orange blossoms, but I have yet to find out when they bloom. Please remember me to all your folks and hoping to hear from you soon, I remain,

Your Western Chum, Valeria



DECEMBER 1, 1924

Dear Irma,

Your awfully nice letter received and hungrily devoured for all the news of home you gave me. You don't say anything about your trip back East, but I presume you met with no misadventure.

Well, my job is no more. I was fired this morning. I don't know just why. It's simply a mystery and I haven't bothered to ask for an explanation. Dr. Losell's secretary called me up this morning and just said "Oh, you need not come in any more, we've decided that I can manage the office alone, without additional help. Do you want to come down for your check or shall we mail it?"

I flippantly replied "Oh, all right, mail it. I don't feel like coming downtown for it." And that ended it. I have my suspicions as to why I was fired and that's due to Dr. Losell's secretary. I noticed

lately that it quite annoyed her when the doctor preferred to give me dictation and showed some interest in me. I suppose she was afraid I might eventually succeed her so she found some way of getting me ousted. I know that I did my work well, because all the articles the doctor dictates to me I got out without a mistake and further more, so far as I could see, he was quite pleased with the way I handled matters and let me have full sway of the business end of the office. That's one more experience added to my life—that of being fired. I often had wondered how it felt—now I know.

I believe I have another job, but won't say definitely until I'm working. I'm to start a week from today, and it's only a temporary position for 3 months. One of the men whom I was introduced to, Mr. Joseph P. Loeb, by Lawrence Langner, called me up last week and wanted to know if I could be his secretary for 3 months as his secretary is leaving on a 3 month vacation. I told him at the time that I couldn't as I already had a job. This morning when I was notified that I was fired, I called up Mr. Loeb and asked him if the position was still open. He said it was and that I should see him tomorrow for an interview and then start work next Monday. Mr. Loeb is a member of the firm of Loeb, Walker and Loeb, corporation lawyers who represent all the big movie companies. They have wonderful offices and so far as I can see I believe the change will be for the better, even if temporary.

I certainly did learn an awful lot at Dr. Losell's office. He took such pains with me to see that I learned all about the body and whenever he could he would tell me the cause of various illnesses and their cure. He also gave me information concerning matters which I had been entirely ignorant of, and in fact taught me how to live right. In a way, I'm sorry that I had to leave him, but on the other hand, I also had some disagreeable tasks. He was just breaking

me in to assist him in examinations and while some were alright, there were some examinations that I didn't quite like to witness. He told me beforehand that I'd have to forget all my prudery in doing this work, but you know Irma, it's hard to do it when you've been brought up the way we girls have.

I suppose you all had a wonderful time Thanksgiving. I did too. A woman I met some time ago in a restaurant invited me to her home for Thanksgiving and I must say that I enjoyed myself.

I don't know if I already told you, but Eva (a girl I met in the Y and whom I have now made a friend and chum of) and I have a lovely apartment in Hollywood. It's much nicer than the one in the Buckingham Apartments because everything is clean and new. We had quite a lot of company yesterday and had a wonderful time preparing dinner. Eva's mother came down from the ranch to spend the week end in the City and Eva's sister and husband were here too and one of Eva's beaux. Tomorrow night two friends of Eva's are coming to the home and we're going to make candy and play cards. Next weekend I believe I'm going to get a real thrill. We've made up a party of six and we're going to hike to the Sierra Madre Mountains. We're going to leave early Saturday afternoon and stay overnight at one of the mountain lodges. I'll write and tell you all about it.

I'm sorry you're not here to see the Calla lilies. They're in full bloom and so are the poinsettias. The nights here are now cooler, but the days are just the same as in September when you were here. If you ever saw my apartment and the wonderful weather, I bet you'd hate to go back to New York now. I just adore it. I look around and hardly believe it can be me in this beautiful place. We pay \$50 a month for it which includes gas, electricity and private phone. We have real silverware and all aluminum pots and pans. Our