



Hollywood: Her Story July 2020 ENewsletter Honoring Women of Color in the Silent Film Era

A quote good enough to repeat from last month's newsletter is from Oscar-winner Viola Davis, "The only thing that separates women of color from anyone else is opportunity." In this newsletter, we profile women of color during the silent film era whose contributions to the movie industry were hard-earned and the obstacles that they encountered underappreciated. They took whatever opportunities came their way to demonstrate their talents.



Actresses

The first Japanese performer to appear in films professionally, actress **Tokuko Nagai Takagi** appeared in four Hollywood movies for Thanhouser between 1911 and 1914. She returned to Japan after the outbreak of World War I. **Tsuru Aoki** was also a Japanese actress and she is believed to be the first Asian actress with top billing.

Princess Red Wing was the leading actress in the 1914 Western, *The Squaw Man*. Although often typecast because of her ethnicity and her weight, another Native American actress, **Minnie Devereaux** (also known as Minnie Ha-Ha - pictured), became known for her wit, dignity and talent.

Called "The First Lady of the Screen" within the African-American community, **Evelyn Preer** was the first African-American actress and singer to achieve celebrity and popularity. Like Evelyn Preer, **Anna May Wong** achieved stardom. She is considered the first Chinese-American Hollywood star and received international recognition for her work. Although she made the transition to talkies, her biggest career disappointment was not being selected for the starring role of O-Lan in the 1935 screen adaptation of Pearl Buck's novel *The Good Earth*. The role went to a Caucasian actress.



Directors and Producers

Generally recognized as one of the earliest African-American female filmmakers during the silent film era, **Madame E. Toussaint Welcome** called herself the "foremost female artist of the race." She and her husband established their own film company and produced a 12-part documentary on the African-American soldiers of World War I titled *Doing Their Bit*.

Chinese-American **Marion Wong** (pictured) was a multi-tasker like many women in the early days of the film industry. She directed, produced, acted, wrote, performed music for movies, and had her own production company. In 1916, when she was 21 years old, she established the Mandarin Film Company which was the first Asian-American film company.

Another early African-American female filmmaker, **Tressie Souders** directed, wrote, and produced the 1922 film *A Woman's Error*. It was distributed by the Afro-American Film Exhibitors' Company based in Kansas City, Missouri.

Screenwriters

An African-American actress and writer, **Dora Mitchell** began writing when she was eleven. That writing included screenplays, pulp fiction, articles and songs. She wrote and acted in the 1921 short film *By Right of Birth*.



Women in front of and behind the camera make the movies that we all welcome into our hearts and homes. Women across all the areas of moviemaking from actress to animator, editor to stuntwoman, costume designer to screenwriter, producer to director have contributed to the success of the movie industry since its founding in the 1890s. Help us celebrate these women who are written into movie history in *Hollywood: Her Story*.

Jill S. Tietjen and Barbara Bridges

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