

# IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## REFERENCE SERIES

NELL SHIPMAN - 1892-1970

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Nell Shipman evolved from a young girl who joined a traveling theatrical company to a woman film pioneer. Shipman produced the first film made in Idaho in 1920 and 1921, The Girl From God's Country.

Nell Shipman was born Helen Foster Barnham on October 25, 1892 in Victoria, British Columbia. She became a Coeur d'Alene resident after a badly sprained ankle stopped her from touring with "The Barrier" in 1910. As the tour traveled on to Spokane with a new leading lady, she stayed behind at her brother's local cabin on Lake Coeur d'Alene.

In 1911 Nell married Ernest Shipman, a long-time Shakespearean producer and theatrical manager. On February 24, 1912 gave birth to her son Barry, who went on to act in Nell's first attempt at directing. Shipman directed the film by accident, as the contracted director ran off to marry the leading lady. Her acting career included Cecil B. DeMille films and a host of silent films, including Back to God's Country, God's Country and the Woman, The Girl From God's Country, Grub Stake, and The Black Wolf. The lifestyle and history of Idahoans captivated her, causing her to return and produce a number of films near Priest Lake in northern Idaho between 1923-1926.

In 1925 Shipman married artist, Charles Ayers. While in Spain, she gave birth to her twins, Charles and Daphne Ayers on May 3, 1926. She stopped producing films in the mid-1920's, but continued to write stories and screenplays, including Wings in the Dark. The production of Wings in the Dark starred Myrna Loy and Cary Grant. Shipman continued writing and producing movies throughout her career and wrote a number of novels, short stories, and screenplays. A three-part short story was published in the March, April, and May, 1925 issues of Atlantic Monthly, entitled "The Movie That Couldn't be Screened."

She died in Cabazon, California in 1970, just one year after she finished her autobiography. Her unusual success as one of the earliest female directors has been an example to many women following her.

In 1987, Boise State University published her autobiography, The Silent Screen and My Talking Heart. The following cover description summarized her career:

Shipman's candid saga chronicles the career of a girl who joined a travelling theatrical company while still a

teenager and who became a woman film pioneer, a movie-maker who insisted on the humane treatment of animals, the value of location shooting, and the necessity of independent production in film making.

Barry Shipman donated Nell Shipman's papers to the Special Collections Department of Boise State University. Additionally, a great many of her films have been preserved at the Hemingway Studies Center for Western Studies. Video tapes have been made of several and can be purchased from the Hemingway Center.

By Guila Ford and Elizabeth Jacox

(This information has not been edited.)

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