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Mary Pickford

On Sunday, May 27, 1973, at 3:30 p.m., an historical plaque commemorating film star Mary Pickford was unveiled on the grounds of the Hospital for Sick Children, 555 University Avenue (near the corner of Elm Street) in Toronto. The site is close to the former location of the home where Mary Pickford was born.

The unveiling ceremony was arranged and sponsored by the Ontario Film Institute, then part of the Ontario Science Centre. Dr. Matthew B. Dymond, M.P.P., Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Science Centre, acted as programme chairman. Others invited to take part in the ceremony were: The Hon. Jack McNie, MPP (Hamilton-West), Minister of Colleges and Universities; Mr. William Cranston, Chairman of the Archaeological and Historic Sites Board of Ontario; Mrs. Margaret Campbell, MPP (St. George); Mr. Peter Stollery, MP (Spadina); Mr. David Crombie, Mayor of the City of Toronto and member of the Toronto Historical Board; Mr. James W. Cochane, representing the Board of Trustees, Hospital for Sick Children; Mr. J.D. Snedden, Executive Director of the hospital; and Mr. Kenneth Rowe, the hospital's Assistant Administrator. Mr. Gerald Pratley, Director of the Ontario Film Institute, gave an historical background of Mary Pickford. The plaque was unveiled by Mr. Charles "Buddy" Rogers, Mary Pickford's husband.

On the evening of May 27, at 8 p.m., the Ontario Film Theatre at the Ontario Science Centre presented the film *My Best Girl*, made in 1927 – the only film in which Mary Pickford and her husband, Charles "Buddy" Rogers, appeared together.

The commemorative plaque bears the following inscription:

MARY PICKFORD

Born in 1893 in a house which stood near this site, Gladys Marie Smith appeared on stage in Toronto at the age of five. Her theatrical career took her to Broadway in 1907 where she adopted the name Mary Pickford. The actress's earliest film, "Her First Biscuits", was released by the Biograph company in 1909 and she soon established herself as the international cinema's first great star. Her golden curls and children's roles endeared her to millions as "America's Sweetheart". She was instrumental in founding and directing a major film production company and starred in over fifty feature-length films including "Hearts Adrift", "Pollyanna" and

"Coquette". For the last-named film, she received the 1929 Academy Award as the year's best actress.

Historical background

This internationally famous film star was born Gladys Marie Smith on April 8, 1893, at 175 University Avenue, Toronto. (The house, now the site of the Hospital for Sick Children, was later numbered 211 and still later 561.) Gladys was the first of three children born to John C. and Charlotte Pickford Hennessey Smith. Her father was a bartender at Small's Grand Opera House Saloon at the Rising Sun Hotel, and finally aboard the Toronto-Lewiston steamer S.S. Corona. John Smith died in 1898 following a shipboard accident, and his wife became a dressmaker.

Soon afterwards Gladys, with her sister Lottie, made her Toronto stage debut in the Cummings Stick Company production of *The Silver King*. The same play was later mounted by the newly formed Valentine Stock Company and Gladys obtained a larger role. Thereafter she appeared in a variety of children's parts, including a tour with *East Lynne* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Using a combination of family names, Baby Gladys Smith was transformed into Mary Pickford for her New York stage debut in 1907 when she was 14. The petite, attractive young woman with long blond curls appeared in *The Warrens of Virginia*, a production by the famous impresario David Belasco. This production ran until 1909; it was during the slack aftermath to that play that Mary, urged on by her mother, began to look for employment in the new and growing motion picture business, then centred in New York. According to Alexander Walker in *The Celluloid Sacrifice*, Mary Pickford was rejected by both Essanay and Biograph Studios before being seen, on a subsequent visit to Biograph, by the greatest director of the early cinema, David W. Griffith. The first film in which she appeared was *Her First Biscuits*; her first major film role was in *The Violin Maker of Cremona* (both 1909). Mary Pickford appeared in well over 100 films during the ensuing three years at Biograph. Most of these pictures were directed by Griffith and filmed by G.H. "Billy" Bitzer, both of whom were to work on such masterpieces as *Birth of a Nation* and *Intolerance*.

In 1913, Mary Pickford moved from Biograph to Adolph Zukor's Famous Players Company. Here, often directed and photographed by Edwin S. Porter, a contemporary of Griffith and most famous for his 1903 film *The Great Train Robbery*, Mary starred in some of her most famous vehicles: *Hearts Adrift*, *Tess of the Storm Country*, *Cinderella* (1914); *Little Pal*, *Rags*, *Madame Butterfly* (1915); *Poor Little Peppina* (1916). Her salary rose from \$1,000 a week to \$10,000 during her stay at Famous Players (1913-19).

The roles played by Mary Pickford – "America's Sweetheart" – began to change during the First

World War. In her early parts, Mary played the tough but likeable child. In the 1917 film *The Little American* (directed by the legendary Cecil B. De Mille), Mary Pickford was growing up - she played a teenage girl with an emerging interest in boys. However, her public demanded more “sweetheart” roles and, in the same year that *The Little American* was released, Mary starred in *Poor Little Rich Girl*, *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* and *Amarilly of Clothes-Line Alley*.

She left Zukor in 1917 and signed a contract with First National Pictures (now Warner Brothers) for the staggering sum of \$350,000 per film. The first release through this company was *Daddy Long Legs* (1919). It was directed by Marshall Neilan and filmed by Mary's favourite cameraman, Charles Rosker. She made only three films with First National, the last being *Heart o' the Hills*.

In 1919, four of the screen's most significant personalities – Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks, Charlie Chaplin and D.W. Griffith – decided to form their own production company, United Artists.

For some time the romance between Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford was the source of some of America's happiest speculation. Mary was the nation's sweetheart, and Fairbanks its idealized screen hero. When they were married in 1920 and moved to "Pickfair", their estate in Beverly Hills, they reigned as the King and Queen of Hollywood. Because of their lavish parties and sumptuous entertaining, they did more than any other couple to set the standards of Hollywood life and to get film people accepted by the social elite of the United States.

Pollyanna (1920), *Little Lord Fauntleroy* (1921) and *Tess of the Storm Country* (1922 remake) were some of Mary's early releases through United Artists. In 1923, Mary Pickford, who had a knack for discovering and making use of new talent, brought to America from Germany one of the great directors of cinema history, Ernst Lubitsch. He was later to make his reputation with witty and sophisticated comedies and musicals such as *The Love Parade* (1929), *One Hour with You*, *Trouble in Paradise* (1932), *Design for Living* (1933), *Ninotchka* (1939) and *Heaven Can Wait* (1943). In her film with Lubitsch, *Rosita* (1923), Mary Pickford played the part of a seductive Spanish singer. In this and her next film, *Dorothy Vernon of Haddon Hall* (1924), she attempted to portray mature women. Both pictures were financial, if not artistic, failures. The American people wanted their sweetheart back; and so, in 1925, at the age of 32, Mary Pickford again donned the children's clothes, played with large people in oversized sets to make her appear smaller, and acted the role of a 12-year-old in *Little Annie Rooney*. Not until after her mother died in 1927 did Mary cut off the famous curls and again try adult roles.

In 1927, she starred opposite her future husband, Charles “Buddy” Rogers, in *My Best Girl*. Her first “talkie”, *Coquette* (1929), brought her the first Academy Award to be given to an actress in a talking film. That same year Mary Pickford made *The Taming of the Shrew* with her husband, Douglas Fairbanks. Mary Pickford made only two films after that, *Kiki* (1931) and *Secrets* (1933)

with Leslie Howard. Although both films had energy and vitality, Pickford's popularity waned and "America's Sweetheart" retired from the screen in 1933.

She divorced Fairbanks in 1935 and married actor-turned-band-leader "Buddy" Rogers in 1937. She had an enduring interest in films and did not relinquish control of her half-interest in United Artists until 1951. During her film career (1909-33) Mary Pickford made over 125 short features and 53 full-length films. She was a significant influence on the medium as an art and as an industry in the United States and elsewhere.

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