

# Phyllis Haver

1899-1960



## BIOGRAPHY

Early film star Phyllis Haver was born in Douglass, Kansas on January 6, 1899 to James H. and Minnie (Shanks) Haver. Both the Haver and Shanks families were early pioneers to this area. The family lived on a farm east of Douglass.

While Phyllis was still very young, her parents divorced; she and her mother moved in with her maternal grandmother, a widow named Sarah Shanks. Phyllis' father remarried when she was five years old.

Late in 1907, Sarah Shanks sold her farm and moved to Los Angeles, California, along with Minnie and Phyllis. They had visited California several times previously during the harsh Kansas winters before moving for good. After several years, Sarah returned to Kansas, but Minnie and her daughter remained in California.

Phyllis attended public schools in Los Angeles, graduating from the Manual Arts High School around 1917. While in high school, she became close friends with Marie Prevost. Later they worked together with Mack Sennett, remaining lifelong friends.

Her mother, Minnie, kept a scrapbook of Haver's personal mementos, including her marriage certificate and specially designed Christmas cards. This is now in the collection of The Douglass Pioneer Museum.

In California, Minnie met and married L. R. Malone. The 1920 US Federal census lists Mr. Malone as working for a tractor company. Phyllis, living with the Malone's, is already listed as an actress on this census. It is unknown if the Malone's marriage ended in death or divorce; there is no mention of him in the scrapbook.

Described as a pretty blond with extremely active blue eyes, later magazine writers described Haver as a “picture of health”, “like peaches and cream”, with a smile as “coquettish and charming.”

After having been a part of the film scene for ten years, a reporter wrote that Haver’s name had never once been linked with scandal or gossip. She once made the comment that she didn’t have time for romance; she was focused on her career and on getting her mother taken care of financially. Explaining in an interview that she found happiness in discovering her work and sticking to it, she remarked that she wouldn’t make a good wife because she was too interested in herself and her career.

An active person, Haver enjoyed swimming, golfing, and biking. A short film in 1929, *Players at Play*, featured a clip of her playing a comic bit of croquet with Marie Prevost. She was also interested in real estate, making a modest but respectable fortune from this speculative hobby. She owned several dogs and cats; her Persian cat won a prize at a cat show.

In 1929, at the height of her career, Haver left it all to marry. She had fallen in love with New York multimillionaire playboy William “Billy” Seeman, the son of a wholesale grocery magnate. Billy’s friend, Mayor Jimmie Walker, performed the ceremony. It was held in the home of Pulitzer Prize winning cartoonist Rube Goldberg, who was a brother-in-law of the groom.

Many tried unsuccessfully to lure Haver back into pictures. Refusing them all, she said, “Frankly I haven’t a remnant of ambition beyond being just Mrs. William Seeman.” The Seeman’s lived in an eleven-room plus roof penthouse in Greenwich Village, New York. Trees growing on the roof surrounded a table seating sixteen. Here, Phyllis also enjoyed gardening.

Unfortunately, the marriage did not last. Of the reasons behind their 1945 divorce, neither Seeman nor Haver would speak publicly. It was rumored that Seeman left her for a younger woman; he did marry a younger woman, whom he also divorced. Seeman’s love of drinking and all-night partying couldn’t have helped.

Haver eventually made a home for herself in Falls Village, Connecticut, where she entertained many friends, including Mr. and Mrs. Rube Goldberg, Randolph Hearst and Gloria Swanson.

On November 19, 1960, a housekeeper found Haver in the bedroom of her Connecticut home, lying quietly in her bed. She had died in the night from a drug overdose. Police suspected suicide; her aunts in Kansas did not accept this theory. She was still grieving over the breakup of her marriage, as well as the recent death of Mack Sennett, who had been a father figure to her. The truth will probably never be known.

CONNECTION TO BUTLER COUNTY

Born in Butler County, Phyllis lived on several farms east and north of Douglass for the first eight years of her life.

By her own accounts, Phyllis was an adventurous child while living in Kansas, with a habit of wondering off. At five years of age, she thought a tramp's life to be romantic and set out one day to become one, walking out of town following the railroad track.

Another time, hearing of the wonderful Chautauqua events being held in Winfield, she stowed away on a train to attend. Discovered by her Uncle Bert Shanks, she was sent home the following day.

Phyllis' father, Jim, was a prominent farmer and stockman, like his father before him, farming east of Douglass. In 1917 oil was discovered on the Haver family's land holdings, becoming part of the Fox-Bush oil field. Jim oversaw the production of oil on his father's land.

#### LEAVING THE AREA

Just before Phyllis' ninth birthday, her mother and grandmother sold their farm and moved to California, where she grew up.

Never forgetting her Kansas roots, Haver often returned for visits to family and friends in Butler County. She once autographed a newspaper photo of herself "I am very proud to say that Kansas is my native state. I can only hope that the pictures I make will be good enough for the people of Kansas."

#### ACHIEVEMENTS

Haver got her start as an actress with the Famous Players Film Company, what later became Paramount. During a summer vacation from high school, a young man working as an extra invited her to visit the lot. Taking a quick look at her, a director asked if she would like to do an occasional bit of acting. After discussing it with her mother, she said yes; the salary of \$7.50 per day being offered was more than she made working at a millinery shop. She was only fifteen at the time.

Earlier, when Phyllis was about thirteen years old, she had appeared before the public as a pianist in a movie theater. One day she and her mother had attended a movie where, for some reason, there was no music being played to accompany the silent film. Haver went to the piano and began playing by ear. She was hired immediately, holding the job until her repertoire soon gave out. She only knew about twenty appropriate compositions.

While she picked up occasional work at Paramount, Haver's friends Marie Prevost and Gloria Swanson were becoming famous working for Mack Sennett. So in 1917, she went in search of a job. She was to become one of Sennett's most celebrated glorified bathing girls.

Several times William Randolph Hearst, a publisher who also produced movies, tried to hire Haver away from Sennett. After talking the offers over with Mr. Sennett, she agreed that she needed more acting experience and chose to stay with him. But Hearst's persistence highlighted her career, leading her to become a much sought-after property. Haver soon became leading lady to Ben Turpin, Sennett's top actor.

After becoming associated with Christie Comedies, Haver later made movies for Fox-Pathé. When this company split, Cecil D. DeMille moved to Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM), taking Haver with him.

Gaining wide recognition as a dramatic actress in Goldwyn's 1923 production of *The Christian*, a critic for *Film Daily* wrote of Haver's genuinely fine piece of dramatic portrayal as an unwed mother. "Miss Haver registers a real 'choke in the throat'", he wrote. Another reporter wrote, "Phyllis Haver earns for herself a permanent place among the sincere dramatic actresses of motion pictures."

Perhaps one of the more flattering, sincere descriptions of Haver came from a studio electrician: "She doesn't get a swelled head . . . She's just as interested in the extras as she is the directors. Remembers everyone's names, and always has a good word for you." Coworkers gave her the title of "a good little trouper," with a reputation for not being temperamental, as some actresses were, and getting along well with the entire film crew.

Among Haver's most noted films is the first film version of *Chicago*, released in 1927, in which she played accused murderess Roxie Hart. In this fictionalized account of a true crime, Haver put all sorts of unique touches on the role; her scenes during the murder trial were said to be wonderful gems of comic acting. The film was an international success, making Haver recognizable throughout the world.

In this silent film version, the part of Roxie's husband, played by Hungarian film star Victor Varconi, was much larger than in the 2002 film, while the roles of Billy Flynn and Mama Morton were greatly reduced, and the character of Velma Kelly was absent altogether. But the impact of the story's critique on modern media and the public's responsibility in enabling the media to peddle trash seemed to have a much greater impact with the earlier film.

Other notable films Haver starred in were *What Price Glory?*, *The Battle of the Sexes*, and *The Way of All Flesh*, a film which co-star Emil Jennings handpicked her to star in. She appeared in *Sal of Singapore*, which was nominated for a 1928 Oscar for achievement in writing, only the second year of Academy Awards. In 1923, she starred with fellow Kansan Buster Keaton in *Balloonatic*.

The Internet Movie Database lists Haver as appearing in over 100 films, including several features in which she played herself. One of these, 1918's *It's a Cinch*, was a fund-raising short feature for the United States Fourth Liberty Loan Drive during World War I. She last appeared in a TV episode of *This is Your Life*, sharing remembrances about her friend, Mack Sennett.

Her films were popular overseas, judging by the many clippings in her scrapbook from German, Italian, and French magazines. Among American magazine covers Haver appeared on were *Screenland*, *Motion Pictures*, *Pathe Sun*, *Picture Play*, and *The Police Gazette*. Her face also graced the cover of sheet music, calendars, matchbook covers and postcards.

In a booklet compiled in 1928, *How I Broke Into the Movies* by 60 Screen Stars, Haver appeared with such notable stars as Greta Garbo, Clara Bow, Gloria Swanson, Wallace Beery, Charlie Chaplin, Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks, and Lon Chaney.

At the time of Haver's marriage, she was coming into a time of greater professional glory than previously known. Having just signed a new four-year contract with MGM, she was reported to have invoked the "act of God" clause in the contract, cracking, "If marrying a millionaire ain't an act of God, I don't know what is".

Haver's final film was a talking picture called *Thunder* with Lon Chaney. It was reported that when she retired, she was being paid \$5,000 per week.

Former co-star Emil Jennings offered her any amount of money to come out of retirement to play the lead in another picture with him, believing her to be America's finest actress. When she refused, he chose Marlene Dietrich for the part that made Dietrich a star.

Phyllis Haver's fame eventually faded away; today few people have even heard of her. Yet one can't help but wonder how her career might have gone had she not retired so early.