

SILENTS!

The Back Story

By H.P. Oliver

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Part One: Bromfeld

The two square blocks of wood-frame offices, tar paper shacks and barn-like stages in which Western National Films conducted the business of producing motion pictures looked a lot more like a shanty town than a leading film studio. The fact that no two buildings on the entire lot even closely resembled each other in architecture was largely due to Western National's overnight success. There simply wasn't time to design an attractive, efficient facility like those of Chaplin and Famous Players-Lasky.

Only twelve months earlier, at the beginning of September, 1923, Western National Films was still a resident of Poverty Row and appeared for all the world to be breathing its last gasps. In New York, the studio's investors were already thinking of their venture into the realm of film-making as a very expensive object lesson, and divesting themselves of the studio was the first item of business on the agenda of their quarterly board of directors meeting, scheduled for the first Friday in September.

One week before that meeting, however, two of Western National's largest investors were approached by Leonard Aaron Bromfeld, a short, overweight, middle-aged, Polish-born Jewish immigrant who boldly guaranteed he could turn their failing investment into a pot of gold if they would let him run the studio. Bromfeld readily admitted that what little he knew about making movies he learned either by watching them at the local Bijou or from conversations with a distant cousin of his wife's who directed films for the Warner brothers.

These were hardly the qualifications the unhappy investors would seek in an individual to manage their studio, if they were looking for such a person, which they were not. There was, however, one item in Bromfeld's background that caught their attention and raised a glimmer of hope that their losses might be recovered.

Bromfeld had recently resigned his position as Vice President of Sales at the Attica Hat Company. This was significant because the Attica Hat Company was legendary in the east coast garment trade, and the garment trade was something Western National's investors understood because it was where they had made their fortunes.

What made the little upstate hat works a legend was the fact that it went from virtually unknown to the country's largest hat maker in less than two years. Attica Hat Company accomplished this feat by giving in to the persistent requests of a middle-aged worker in their factory. He wanted to sell hats instead of making them. Attica's president finally agreed to try the man out in a traditionally unprofitable sales territory just to keep "that Bromfeld" out of his hair. Twenty months later Attica Hat Company had a new factory to keep up with the demand for their products and a new vice president of sales, Leonard Aaron Bromfeld.

Western National's investors discussed Bromfeld's proposal in depth at their meeting. The consensus was that a man with the drive and enterprise Bromfeld demonstrated up in Attica might well have similar success in any industry, even the bizarre business of making motion pictures.

There were, however, some less than attractive points associated with placing Western National in Bromfeld's hands. For example, he demanded absolute control over all aspects of the studio's operation. He also insisted on what seemed like an exorbitant operating budget and a salary based on a very high percentage of the profits. On the other side of the ledger, however, was the fact that, if there were no profits, they didn't have to pay Bromfeld a dime.

It was also noted at the board of directors meeting that, along with the tales of Bromfeld's success at Attica, there were also rumors implying that the man was less than completely ethical

in some of his dealings with customers and, especially, with competitors. In response, someone observed that, even if there was some truth to these rumors, it might well be that a little more “aggressive” management was just what Western National needed to be competitive in the cut-throat motion picture business.

The meeting ended with a unanimous decision in favor of attempting to recoup some of their losses by making L.A. Bromfeld the new managing director of Western National Films. Seven days later, on Friday the fourteenth of September, L.A. and his wife, Ruth Hampton Bromfeld, stepped off the Santa Fe Chief in Pasadena for their first look at southern California.

Part Two: Use The Best Cheese

Six months later Western National was well on its way to duplicating the incredible success experienced by the Attica Hat Company. The studio quickly outgrew its small plant on Sunset Boulevard near Bronson and moved to a large empty block on the north side of Santa Monica Boulevard between Cahuenga and Cole. In September of 1924 the studio expanded again, acquiring the next block west on Santa Monica, between Cole and Hudson.

All of this physical growth was necessitated by the frantic production schedule required to meet L.A. Bromfeld’s distribution commitments. These agreements were the tangible benefits of Bromfeld’s first tenant of business: “It’s not just who you know, but what you know about who you know that makes money.”

Upon arriving in Hollywood, the first thing L.A. did was, in his words, “put his ear to the grindstone.” A few well-spent dollars distributed among the employees of his competition brought him a nearly continuous flow of inside information. Much of what he learned was of little value by itself, but when Bromfeld assembled the various bits and pieces of information in the manner of a jig-saw puzzle, the resulting picture often proved quite useful.

One such picture alerted L.A. to the fact that a prominent nation-wide exhibitor, Lennox, was growing desperate because they were running short of films for their chain of theaters. This was because Lennox had an exclusive distribution agreement with a major studio whose production had slowed to a crawl. The problem was, as L.A. learned long before the story became general knowledge, that the studio was embroiled in simultaneous contract disputes with two of its most important players. Poor management and an over extended credit line at the bank compounded the studio’s woes and provided Bromfeld with a double-barreled opportunity.

First, he quietly negotiated with Lennox to take advantage of a clause in their distribution contract which allowed the chain to sign an interim agreement with another studio in the event their principal supplier was unable to fulfill its contractual obligations. Then, applying a liberal dose of what was to become well known as the “Bromfeld Charm,” he stole one of the embittered players involved in the contract dispute right from under the other studio’s nose. It cost a bundle, but Western National Films not only owned a lucrative distribution agreement, it also owned Mae White, a young actress whose popularity at the box office rivaled that of America’s Sweetheart, Mary Pickford.

The new limited distribution agreement offered only a temporary respite from Western National’s financial woes, but it offered Bromfeld an opportunity to apply his second tenant of business: “Use the best cheese and the mouses will beat a path to your trap.” In the motion picture business, he believed, the best cheese meant the biggest names appearing in the most spectacular films. To this end, Bromfeld spent a good deal more New York money adding some

of the best directors, technicians, and supporting players in town to Western National's talent stable.

With the New York investors on the verge of collective cardiac arrest over production costs, the first two Bromfeld productions opened in Lennox theaters across the country. Sticking to his best cheese formula, Bromfeld had also purchased the film rights to a pair of classic literary works for these films. The first starred Mae White in a light-hearted version of Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew*. For his second extravaganza, L.A. applied the flamboyant directing skills of Ernst Frohmm to an equally flamboyant adaptation of Jules Verne's *Around the World in Eighty Days* with experienced and popular leading man, Nigel Pierce starring as Phileas Fogg. Both motion pictures were produced in record time amidst a frantic environment of barely controlled chaos, but when the smoke cleared, critics raved, box office tills overflowed and, in New York, blood pressures dropped back down to near normal levels.

Of course none of this surprised L.A. Neither was he surprised a few months later when the country's second largest theater circuit approached him with an offer to exhibit Western National films. It was all part of Bromfeld's master plan—a plan known only to L.A. Bromfeld.

To meet the production schedules resulting from Western National's new distribution contract, offices, shops and film stages began popping up like mushrooms all over the new Santa Monica Boulevard lot. Bromfeld would call the studio's chief carpenter to his office and say something like, "We must have a bigger costume shop. Go and build it."

The carpenter would ask where to build it, and with more than mild exasperation, Bromfeld would say, "Wherever there is room, just build it!"

The frustrated carpenter would then ask how large to build it and Bromfeld's already high pitched voice would raise another octave as he screamed, "Big! And, we must have it before the end of the week, so stop with asking all these foolish questions and go build me a costume shop!"

Fortunately for the aesthetic sensibilities of Western National's residential neighbors, most of the studio's shanty town lot was concealed behind tall concrete walls. Actually, there were two sets of walls because the studio was bisected on a north-south line by Cole Street. Each wall on the Santa Monica Boulevard side was interrupted by an elaborate, arched entrance bearing an inscription which boldly announced that the architectural chaos beyond the iron gates was the domain of Western National Films.

At 7:00 a.m. sharp, five—often six—days a week, the iron gates opened wide to admit the bit players, carpenters, seamstresses, painters, film editors, camera operators and secretaries who made the movies. At 8:00 a.m. sharp, the gates to the eastern half of the lot opened again to admit L. A. Bromfeld.

Part Three: Viola's Costume Shop

One face in the seven o'clock crowd belonged to seamstress Lillian Lee. It was an innocent face, still in the full bloom of youth with deep green eyes and rosy cheeks framed by shoulder-length blonde hair. Given a choice, Lillian would not have spent her days sewing costumes at Western National Films, but she accepted the necessity of being there without complaint.

At the tender age of seventeen, Lillian was the sole support of her father, Harry and herself. Those who knew Harry Lee described him alternately as a drunken bum or a drunken gambler. Of the two, Harry was substantially more successful at being a bum. By trade, he was a farm

laborer, but for some inexplicable reason he was seldom able to find employment, even at the height of the harvest season.

Lillian learned to sew by helping her mother, Marie, who supplemented her husband's meager income by doing fancy handwork for the well-to-do ladies of Hollywood. Sadly, Marie was gone now. During the winter of 1923, Lillian's mother was stricken with pneumonia which, aggravated by fatigue, eventually proved fatal, even in the mild climate of southern California.

Overcome by grief and once again temporarily unemployed, Harry Lee prevailed upon his only child to pick up where her mother left off in the matter of providing for his family. Fortunately for Harry, his daughter held him in higher esteem than most. In Lillian's eyes, Harry could do no wrong. If he had some failings, they were the result of misfortune, certainly not laziness.

Lillian's skill with needle and thread was known to some of the film industry's more influential wives, and with their recommendations in hand, she went to work in Western National's costume shop. Her greatest regret was leaving school. She enjoyed her classes and friends at Hollywood Union High School. Still, Lillian reasoned, working at the studio was only temporary until her father got back on his feet again. Perhaps she could even return to finish her final year of school in the fall.

The building in which Lillian Lee worked was as close to Bromfeld's demand for a big costume shop as the chief carpenter could manage in the largest remaining vacant space on Western National's west lot. Unfortunately, the two-story, wood-frame structure he and his crew erected on the narrow slot of land next to their own shop and behind the studio commissary had a few shortcomings.

The most serious of those shortcomings was a lack of windows. The chief carpenter reasoned that, since there was nothing to look at outside but other buildings, there was no reason to spend a lot of time and money on windows. This rather limited perception of windows failed to take into consideration their usefulness as sources of light and fresh air. As a result, the costume shop was dark and stuffy because it had only two windows at each end of the building.

Of course, light fixtures were hung from the ceilings and they might have even been adequate for the delicate handwork required for authentic period costumes except that they were on the same circuit as several other buildings, including a film stage with gigantic arc lamps. It was quickly discovered that only half of the lights in the costume shop could be turned on at one time because turning them all on immediately resulted in a blackout that affected the entire western half of the lot.

In spite of the gloomy surroundings, Viola Wiebe ran her costume shop with the same skill and efficiency she began learning nearly three decades earlier while sewing gold braid on the Czar's uniforms. In 1918, when the Bolshevik revolution deprived her of both a job and a country, Viola came to America. She found work sewing theatrical costumes in New York City, where her natural talent for costume design was discovered and appreciated. Within a span of less than two years, Viola rose from lowly seamstress to one of Broadway's most sought after wardrobe designers.

This prominence eventually brought her to the attention of L. L. Burns, proprietor of Hollywood's largest and most successful costume supplier. In 1922, Burns offered Viola a position with his Western Costume Company. Happy to leave crowded urban New York for the more rural surroundings of southern California, she accepted his offer and her costume designs soon became as well known in Hollywood as they were on the east coast. Then, in November of

1923, Viola was approached by L.A. Bromfeld's representative and persuaded to head Western National Film's costume department at twice the salary she received from Western Costume.

Well past her fortieth birthday, Viola Wiebe was still a "maiden lady" and thought of the young girls she supervised as the daughters she never had. Of the fourteen women working in the Western National costume shop, Lillian Lee was easily her favorite. To Viola's eyes, Lillian was little more than a child and still much too naive for the world into which her bum of a father had pushed her. It was for this reason that Viola Wiebe witnessed the "discovery" of Lillian Lee with genuine sadness. It was the opportunity thousands of girls all over the country dreamed about, but experience told Viola it would only bring unhappiness.

Part Four: The Discovery of Lillian Lee

On the day of her discovery, which Photoplay magazine would describe as one of Hollywood's golden moments, Lillian's skill at handwork had earned her the enviable task of adding the finishing touches to a fancy ball gown. In the costume shop this was an enviable task only because the person performing it got to sit next to one of the building's few windows.

To Lillian, the assignment was an honor because she knew the gown would be worn by Mae White in a film called *The Long Night*. An actress of Miss White's stature deserved the straightest seams and finest handwork possible, so it was a matter of pride to Lillian that Miss Wiebe chose her for this important work.

Since it was a typically sunny morning, Lillian was surprised when the light from her window suddenly dimmed. Looking up to see what sort of cloud could possibly be blocking the sun on such a beautiful day, she was startled to see, instead of a cloud, a cigar. Behind the cigar a fat bald head was peering intently in at her. Behind the head, there were two younger, impatient looking men in suits. Then the head was gone, sunlight streamed in again and Lillian went back to work.

Seconds later the costume shop door burst open and the cigar, accompanied by the fat man smoking it, steamed in. The other two men followed the blue smoke cloud through the door at a respectful distance.

A high-pitched voice screamed, "I want her!"

The fat man was pointing directly at Lillian, and she shrank back in wide-eyed terror. To Lillian's relief, Viola Wiebe jumped up and stepped between her and the scary man.

The wardrobe mistress clapped her hands together sharply and shouted, "Stop this immediately! I will not have you crashing in there and upsetting my girls this way!"

In astonishment, one of the younger men blurted, "Missus Wiebe, this is Mister Bromfeld!"

"I am MISS Wiebe and I know who he is. It makes no difference! He will treat my girls with respect or he will leave at once!"

Bromfeld was leaning first to one side, then the other, trying to see Lillian past Viola's considerable bulk. When the anger in her words finally got his attention, Bromfeld straightened and leaned his head back to look Viola straight in the eye. Turning the Bromfeld charm on to its high-power setting, he bowed from the waist and said, "Dear lady, please accept my humblest apologies. You are precisely correct. I am being extremely rude to be coming in here and making such a fuss."

L.A.'s abrupt change in manner took Viola by surprise, and before she could think how to respond, he stepped politely around her and strode purposefully toward Lillian, saying, "I was so taken by this girl's beauty that I am losing my head."

Lillian's fear rose to panic level again, and clutching Mae White's gown to her bosom as if it were a shield that might protect her against impending doom, she stared fearfully at Bromfeld. When the man arrived at her table, he simply stood there and stared. This terrified Lillian even more and she averted her eyes to the floor, fervently praying this awful man would go away.

She was near tears when he finally asked, "What is your name, my dear?"

While Lillian was trying to find her voice so she could answer the man, Viola Wiebe's protective instincts shifted back into high gear. She stood behind Lillian with her strong hands resting reassuringly on the girl's shoulders. Glaring at Bromfeld, she said, "Go ahead, dear. You can tell him your name. In spite of his bad manners, he is our employer."

Her voice barely above a whisper, Lillian said, "I am Lillian Lee, sir."

Bromfeld was suddenly gleeful. He turned to the impatient men still standing just inside the costume shop door and said, "Lillian! What a perfect name to go with such a lovely face!"

He turned back and beamed down at Lillian. Then, taking her shaking hand, he said, "Lillian Lee, I want you should come with me for a screen test. When the film is showing us what I know it will, I am going to make you the newest and brightest star in all the heavens of Hollywood."

The two younger men nearly fell over each other in their haste to open the door for L.A. Bromfeld as he led Lillian from the shop, she looked back over her shoulder at Viola, her expression now less fearful than bewildered. The wardrobe mistress tried to smile reassuringly, but her heart just wasn't in it.

Thus, Lillian Lawrence—L.A. decided Lawrence sounded more all-American than Lee—was introduced to motion picture audiences through a hastily added part supporting Mae White in *The Long Night*, directed by Ernst Frohmmme. The film was another Western National box office success, and raving critics mentioned Lillian nearly as often as Mae White in their reviews. Of course, none of this came as any surprise to L.A. Bromfeld.

**WESTERN NATIONAL FILMS
PRESENTS**



**MAE
WHITE**



**LILLIAN
LAWRENCE**

TOGETHER IN

**HELLO,
GOODBYE!**

**DIRECTED BY ERNST FROHMME
FEATURING NOAH BEERY & ROBERT HARRON**

ON THIS NON-COMMERCIAL POSTER MAE WHITE IS DEPICTED BY DOROTHY JANIS & LILLIAN LAWRENCE IS DEPICTED BY CLAIRE WINDSOR