



Unearthing the Archives

By Charlotte Kohlmann



PART XI: JANE GAINES AND THE WOMEN FILM PIONEERS PROJECT

The virulent coronavirus has changed every facet of daily life in just a few short weeks. Our collective efforts to mitigate its impact on global public health, safety, the environment, and the economy will continue to make ripple effects for generations to come.

As layoffs and closures come to a devastating upsurge, cultural institutions continue to suffer major

losses. Mechanisms put in place for public funding relief – and resources that ensure emergency support for archives, museums, historical societies, libraries, galleries, community-based organizations, and other non-profit cultural organizations – must be shared equitably, with advocacy towards those serving marginalized communities, and/or ones with disadvantaged resources.

For non-essential workers who aren't risking their lives fighting off the harmful surge of this pandemic, the new normal of staying inside has recast the internet as a newfound lifeline, offering alluring expeditions into its cavernous corridors. As public institutions shut their doors, individuals can retreat to virtual ones.

The focus of this series, *Unearthing the Archives*, will shift towards digital repositories, initiated both locally and out-of-state. Online archives, resources, databases, libraries, museum tours, and amateur YouTube uploads now have greater meaning in a time when safety issues concerning public space are momentarily unresolved.

One free digital resource to explore is *The Women Film Pioneers Project* (TWFP), available online at wfpp.columbia.edu, which features peer-reviewed scholarship and career profiles of women who worked in the national and international silent film industries between 1895 and 1925. The project aims to highlight and encourage the exploration and independent research of these women's immense, but mostly unheard-of, careers in the industry.

Their occupations in the business ranged from directors, studio managers, film editors, costume designers, agents, animal trainers, film animators, art directors, camera operators, carpenters, casting directors, censors, screenwriters, composers, documentary makers,

distributors, metalworkers, and producers to war cinematographers and much more.

Archivist Jane Gaines

I recently spoke with Jane Gaines, a venerated film scholar, professor, and founder of this online database, which is published in partnership with the Columbia University Library System.

"This project came into being while I was a professor at Vassar College. I wanted to know about the women who had careers in early photography and motion pictures and share it, especially with female professors," said Gaines. "As I started to collect names from various archives and libraries, the list just kept on growing."

Soon enough, graduate students were collecting more and more names and adding them to her search. She first envisioned this project taking on the form of an encyclopedia, but a single-volume set would not be big enough to print all of these unacknowledged women.

When Gaines later joined the Columbia University Film and Media Studies Program, the project was selected as a digital pilot project by the Columbia University Libraries. It officially launched in 2013 with the technical support of the library, making it a free platform for every internet user – a rare attribute for databases which frequently charge subscription fees to fund their publications.

Pioneers Revealed

An underlying principle of the database is "What we assume never existed is what we invariably find." Misinformation, or information that exists but simply lacks a spotlight, are phenomena that latch onto public perceptions of history. The past is just as endless as the future. Recovering these women's roles, even in fragmented form, can help reinstate the history of cinema as a whole.

"When I went to graduate school in the 1970s, there was an assumption that there might have been women in the film industry, but it just simply didn't exist," said Gaines. In the 1990s, she would help uncover a truth that already lived in the archive stacks: women did, in fact, have a remarkably strong impact on the early film industry. It just took individuals like Gaines to bring it back to light.

The Women Film Pioneers Project has so far published 288 profiles of women from around the world, with 649 names of pioneers to be investigated further. The profiles reflect their instrumental efforts in this field, short biographies and a multitude of resources which can be used to locate any available digitized surviving copies of their works on nitrate-cellulose film.

"In order to change the canon of film, we need to prove how deep the treasure is, and how much actually exists," said Gaines.

"What was even more shocking to learn was, for instance, how there were whole worlds of women in the international silent film industry that were never fully recognized."

Second-wave feminist scholars in the 1970s were reintegrating women back into all kinds of cultural histories that they had been ominously censored out of, or simply forgotten, due to constructed gender disparities. But these scholars had missed out on readdressing the women who played a major role in motion picture history.

In Gaines' academic article, "Sad Songs of Nitrate," she mentions a preconception that "even if there had been any work by women, it was inferior; that of such inferior work, no examples survived...we are studying an unfortunate object, misused and left alone, the subject of earlier neglect" (*Camera Obscura* 22, 2007).

The shift to online digitized engagement can create new expectations for archives to responsibly provide open and accessible collections for broader audiences who would not otherwise have a chance to utilize these materials.

While thousands of films were produced out of the Silent Era, a staggeringly low number of them exist today. This is partly due to cellulose nitrate film, the standard medium of the time. This film-type decays over time and is extremely

flammable. The costs to preserve these early cinema films are so high that only those with important significance get priority when it comes to preservation. Therefore, films heavily produced by women don't actually get priority simply because of National Archives policy.

This online database archive is trying to overturn the fallback of access to these neglected films. It is organized into the following sections: *Overviews*, *Pioneers*, *Resources*, and *Projections*. "Overviews" are peer-reviewed essays written by scholars from around the world, featuring topics such as Latin American women who worked in the silent film history, women camera operators, and African-American women in the silent film industry.

The "Pioneers" page showcases brief bibliographies of women in film with their names, photographs, links to other sites, works cited, further resources, and any available videos that showcase their film repertoire. These profiles were submitted and written by film scholars, curators, archivists, and historians – they are peer reviewed and fact-checked constantly, which makes changing or replacing any information in them, very accessible to do online.



Alice Guy-Blaché

French filmmaker Alice Guy-Blaché was the first woman to own her own film company and studio in the United States. In the early years of cinema, she directed, wrote, and created the very first narrative genre film called *La Fée aux Choux* (1896).

Although Guy-Blaché made a prolific 1,000 films during her lifelong career, which began when she was 22, it was never acknowledged that the "forefathers" of cinema had a female counterpart. Guy-Blaché was just the tip of the iceberg, but even with so many women in the industry for decades, they suffered from erasure or lived in the margins.



Haydée Chikly Tamzali

Haydée Chikly Tamzali (1906-1998) started her career when she was 16. She was a Tunisian film actress, screenwriter, film cutter, journalist, and hand-colorist of films. At that time, women had no authority in Tunisia, and lived oppressed lives; they could not remove their veil, or work to support their families. Not many films were produced out of Tunisia during this era, but

Haydée played a part in dismantling these barriers, and helped shape early Arabic and African film.



Marija Jurić Zagorka

Marija Jurić Zagorka (1873-1957) – also known as M. Jurica Zagorski, Marija Jurić, Z., Z-a, Ilglica, Vlastelinka, and Zagorka – was a journalist, screenwriter, and film source author in Croatia and the Kingdom of Yugoslavia.

Zagorka was the first female journalist in Croatia; she wrote about local politics and was first published in 1896. Forced to use a fictitious name, she was not allowed to work in the same offices as the other newspaper staff, as they believed it would cause a scandal if anyone discovered her working there.

She also wrote numerous novels concentrating on female protagonists who overcame social pressures. According to Dijana Jelaca's biography on the TWFP website, "Her literary plot twists often featured cross-dressing and other forms of playing with traditional gender roles."

Zagorka received recognition as a screenwriter for two Croatian motion picture films: *Matija Gubec* (1917), based on August Šenoa's novel *Peasants' Uprising*, and *The Grič Witch/The Hill Witch* (1920), based on her own novel. But due to the lack of preservation, there are no remaining copies of these films, which make all references dependent upon written accounts, surviving film stills, and poster advertisements located in the Croatian state archives.

A Unique Resource

This multifaceted database can be used in many ways. It can be a resource for scholarship by anyone from amateur to established historians, writers, teachers, film enthusiasts, and archivists. It can be a hub for discovering other archives, libraries, and digitally curated records for further investigation of these unhistoricized pioneers. Or it can simply be used as a nuanced Wikipedia search.

What makes this site unique is that it is free, and that it was started from just a list of names and materials gathered from deep dives into preexisting libraries and archives. With help, Gaines was motivated to build a grassroots database free of any major institutional editorial control.

Archives can only do so much, collecting shreds of information available about a finite number of events. This creation and organization of resources is reconstituting old, lost narratives.

But is inclusion enough to bring these pioneers into cultural view? Can this database create a visceral shift in a viewer's understanding of the history of cinema and gender?

Be sure to check out *The Women Film Pioneers Project* at <https://wfpp.columbia.edu/>.



Aloha Wandervell Baker (1906-1996) was a cinematographer, director, editor, documentary maker, writer, producer, film cutter, and lecturer. She was a part of the making of eleven travelogues from 1921 to 1952, which took her to over fifty countries.

All images courtesy *The Women Film Pioneers Project*.



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