

FILM & TV

Corinne Griffith Was a Silent-Film Superstar. Then the World Heard Her Voice.

The actress journeyed from Texarkana to Hollywood, eventually becoming a real estate mogul, a best-selling author, and one of the richest women in the world.

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Corinne Griffith in 'The Divine Lady.'
John Springer Collection/Corbis via Getty

Texans You Should Know is a series highlighting overlooked figures and events from Texas history.

On May 12, 1966, spectators packed into a Los Angeles County Superior Court building. They were eagerly waiting to find out if the elegant woman sitting among them was Corinne Griffith—acclaimed early-Hollywood actress and one of the wealthiest women in the world at the time—or just a stand-in who had replaced her. In an unexpected turn of events for an otherwise straightforward annulment hearing, the plaintiff didn't purport to be the renowned actress. She claimed to be an imposter hired by Griffith.

A witness was called to the stand: Betty Blythe, a star who had worked with the Texarkana-born actress in the late 1910s. "Is Corinne Griffith in the room?" the defense attorney asked. Blythe turned and pointed to a lavishly dressed woman sitting under a wide-brimmed hat. "Yes," she said. "It's the lady in the beautiful hat, and the beautiful face. And I would know her hands anywhere."

The defense attorney, holding a record of one of the actress's previous marriages, asked the woman in the hat to confirm her identity. "That was the other Corinne Griffith," she said. "Not I."

Sweden has Greta Garbo; Germany has Marlene Dietrich; Texas has Corinne Griffith. In the 1920s, long before she landed in that L.A. courtroom, Griffith was one of the world's biggest stars. She was known for her sophisticated performances and Southern charm, but most of all for her ethereal good looks—wistful brows, what *The New York Times* called a "perfect nose"—which earned her the nicknames "the most beautiful woman in the world" and "the orchid lady of the screen." A silent-era star, Griffith was nominated for Best Actress at the second-ever Academy Awards, in 1930. But as silent films gave way to sound, she was forced to leave the screen behind. Instead of wilting, she flourished in her second act as a real estate tycoon, a best-selling

author, a painter, and a composer. Despite her once astounding fame and success, Griffith today plays only a small role in the annals of Hollywood history. Her Texan accent—which she kept hidden from the public for as long as she could—may be to blame.

Depending on whom you ask, Griffith started life in either Texarkana or Waco. “Corrie,” as she was affectionately known, was a third-generation Texan on her mother’s side. Her maternal grandparents had settled in Texarkana, where her grandfather, A.L. Ghio, served as mayor thrice. Her father, John Lewis “Jack” Griffin, worked as a trainmaster for the Texas and Pacific. Her mother, Amboline, was “one of the wealthy and leading society belles” of Texarkana and an accomplished pianist, according to *The Waco News-Tribune*. The two were married in 1887, and Corinne was born on November 21, 1894. She spent her early years in Waco, but the family didn’t last there long.

Griffith was a pretty, blond child, and the apple of her father’s eye. The two made quite a pair. Case in point: Six-year-old Griffith wanted a pony. Her father, suffering from the alcoholism that would have been termed a “delicate condition” at the time, bought the whole circus instead. When he returned home to Waco, full circus in tow, his horrified wife took the children and fled to her father’s house, in Texarkana. Jack, pony, and cart in pursuit, the group converged on the town, where Corinne’s grandfather was locked in a tight mayoral race. All of a sudden, Ghio had an unbeatable campaign event; the circus propelled him to victory. In the excitement, however, Corinne’s father ran over his wife with the pony, disfiguring the pianist’s hands. He never drank again. (The story was made into a 1963 movie starring Jackie Gleason—a casting choice Griffith despised.)

From there, Griffith’s story gets hazy. Jack passed away in 1912, leaving the family penniless and homeless. Records show that Griffith was enrolled at the University of Texas at Austin that year, but she preferred to tell a different story. The tale that she later fed to the press: After her father’s death, Griffith and her mother moved to New Orleans, where she studied at the Sacred Heart Convent. It was there that the shy girl with no aspirations

for the screen got her big break. One brisk February afternoon, she went out into the city for its famous Mardi Gras celebration and, much to her surprise, found herself elected its queen. Griffith told a New York *Daily News* reporter: “Surrounded by a constantly shifting maze of color . . . I seemed to be living in another world. Then out of the bewildering haze came a modern figure with a very modern suggestion. Rollin S. Sturgeon, a Vitagraph director, was attending the Mardi Gras. ‘Did you ever think of going into motion pictures?’ he asked.”

Early film stars were often encouraged to present romantic origin narratives to the press. We don’t know the real story of how Griffith was discovered, but by 1916 she was in Hollywood, having signed a \$15-per-week contract with the Vitagraph Company. She changed her surname from Griffin to Griffith (perhaps to capitalize on Hollywood magnate D.W. Griffith’s success) and began appearing in silent two-reel movies, in which she played supporting roles. In 1917, Griffith landed the female lead in the feature *The Stolen Treaty* alongside Earle Williams, the studio’s top box office draw. She shot to fame; by 1920 Griffith was Vitagraph’s most popular star. That year, she received critical acclaim for her dual role in *The Broadway Bubble*, in which she played twin sisters. A critic from the *Austin American-Statesman* described the film as Griffith’s “crowning achievement” and the “strongest and most fascinating role in her notable career.”

Between 1918 and 1922, Griffith starred in 28 Vitagraph films, but by 1923 she had outgrown the company, demanding a salary that exceeded its meager budget. She left for First National Pictures, signing a three-year contract and commanding \$2,500 per week. When she signed her final contract with First National, in 1927, she was being paid \$10,000 a week, or around \$500,000 a year (more than \$9 million today). At that point, Griffith was one of the highest-paid actresses in Hollywood. She had a bungalow on the studio lot, financed by First National, and a thousand-dollar Doberman pinscher, which escorted her to the set.

Griffith wasn’t only an affluent superstar; she was also an executive producer. By 1923 she had started her own production company, Corinne Griffith

Productions, and went on to executive produce eleven feature films. She was also awarded a significant amount of oversight on her productions with other companies, including input on scripts, casting, cutting, and titling—highly unusual for a star of her time. A writer for *The New Movie Magazine* declared: “You think of Corinne Griffith merely as a beauty. If you were to meet her, you would be surprised at her penetrating wit, her shrewd philosophy and her practical common sense.”



A lobby card for the 1921 Vitagraph film *What's Your Reputation Worth?*

LMPC via Getty



A lobby card for the 1929 First National Pictures film *Prisoners*.

LMPC via Getty

In 1929 Griffith landed the role of her dreams, playing the English dame Lady Emma Hamilton in *The Divine Lady*. *Photoplay magazine* called it the “greatest picture of her career,” and in 1930, it earned her a Best Actress nomination at the second Academy Awards. The achievement marked the beginning of the end for Griffith’s stardom. Foreshadowing her imminent decline, in 1925 reporter Harry Carr described Griffith as “purely pictorial. Somehow, you never could imagine her as speaking.” *The Divine Lady* was not only Griffith’s highest achievement—it was also her first sound film. It was a partial “talkie,” with music but no dialogue. The public had yet to hear Griffith speak.

The year after *The Divine Lady*, the world's beloved "orchid" had her first speaking role. The crowds who flocked to see *Lilies of the Field* were shocked: Griffith's voice didn't quite live up to expectations. Put mildly, it was "distinctly at odds with [her] visual image." The movie is now considered lost, so we will perhaps never know for ourselves what her voice sounded like in this film. However, it could reasonably be likened to the infamously grating voice of Lina Lamont in the 1952 musical comedy *Singin' in the Rain*, as Lamont was partially based on Griffith. The statuesque bombshell reportedly "talked through her nose," with a nasal tone and a thick Texas accent. As she herself wrote, in 1921: "As every one [*sic*] instantly knows, who hears my drawling voice and notes the missing r's, I am a daughter of the sunny South." *Lilies of the Field* was a flop, a critical and box office failure. It was one of Griffith's last Hollywood productions. Five months later, her second sound film, *Back Pay*, was also released to terrible reviews. First National paid Griffith \$250,000 to terminate her contract. With the exception of a small role in one final film, in 1962, her career as an actress was over.

By the late 1930s, Griffith had left her Hollywood persona behind and reinvented herself. In 1939 she told the *Fort-Worth Star Telegram*: "All I have is in California real estate." She had a lot of it: Griffith had started investing in property in 1926, and she owned a Beverly Hills real estate company and an impressive collection of personal homes, including a chateau in France and a Japanese-style abode in Santa Monica. In the early 1950s, she made history as the first woman to address the National Realty Board. She also became a major force in Republican politics in California, particularly as an advocate for the abolition of personal income tax (a topic that, as a multimillionaire, she had a vested interest in) and was considered an "expert on taxation."

Griffith pursued other artistic endeavors during these decades, including painting, composing, and writing. She published dozens of successful books, including cookbooks, short story collections, a best-selling autobiographical novel about her upbringing in Texas, and *My Life with the Redskins*, about her experiences with the Washington football team, which her third husband

owned. Despite her varied professional and artistic accomplishments, Griffith's romantic life was tumultuous. She was married and divorced four times.

It was her fourth marriage that brought Corinne Griffith into the courtroom that day in 1966, when she denied her identity. Before the judge, the woman in the wide-brimmed hat claimed the real Corinne Griffith had died in Mexico in the 1930s and that she was a stand-in who had assumed Griffith's identity. It was a confusing move; one explanation might lie in Griffith's lifelong refusal to admit her age. Now she was on the stand, being asked by the judge to admit it into the record. "I don't give my age because it's part of my religion not to," she contended. This would not do, and when she was pressed for a direct answer, the 71-year-old replied that she was "approximately fifty-one." Even though a few of Griffith's silent-era colleagues were called to the witness stand and asserted that the plaintiff was, in fact, the original, Griffith still won the case, successfully ending her 36-day-long marriage to 44-year-old Broadway star Danny Scholl without having to pay him alimony.

Griffith might have cast off her identity as the great silent-era actress and renowned beauty, but she was no less an impressive figure for it. When she died of a heart attack in 1979, living in a Beverly Hills mansion with her servants, her estate was worth \$150 million, making her one of the wealthiest women in the world. Up until her death, Griffith maintained that she was a (much younger) imposter. She needn't have worried so much about aging—her youthful beauty lives on, preserved, in her surviving films. As one writer for *The Waco Times-Herald* argued, in 1926: "The camera, that preserver of pulchritude, will . . . convince the future that Corinne Griffith possessed at least as much beauty as will any woman who succeeds her."

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