

Historical Ramblings

Lompoc's Contribution to Hollywood History

Lompoc has a direct link to the history of Hollywood and to the general welfare of thousands of movie stars. Meyer Weill was born in Lompoc in 1881. His birth year is reported as 1888 or 1889, depending on the source, but his grave marker in Glendale's Forest Lawn Memorial Park clearly states 1881. Meyer's father, Isadore, owned Weill's Combination Store on South H Street and later went on to become one of the founders of the Bank of Lompoc in what is now known as the Lilley Building. Isadore died at the age of 50 in 1895 and his wife at the age of 47 or 48 in 1901. We know nothing of Meyer's whereabouts or his upbringing until we catch up with him at the University of California, where he made his first stage appearance with the legendary Sarah Bernhardt. Assuming the stage name of Morgan Wallace, he eventually landed in New York. On October 17, 1904, he made his Broadway debut in *Romeo and Juliet* with the E.H. Sothern-Julia Marlowe Company. He became lead juvenile for the Morosco Stock Company, and kept busy for years managing and performing in his own theatrical stock company and in vaudeville. Through the early and mid 1920's, he appeared on both the stage and in silent films, even directing some Keystone Comedies. "As the Marquis de Praille in D.W. Griffith's 1921 silent drama of the French Revolution, *Orphans of the Storm*, he was no doubt hissed for his lustful aspersions towards Lillian Gish who played the virtuous Henriette," according to the Screen Actors Guild website. He began appearing in talking pictures in 1930, in supporting roles of varying size, including President James Monroe in "*Alexander Hamilton*" and as Prosecutor Black in "*Smart Money*." He appeared with W.C. Fields in 1934's "*It's a Gift*," in which he demands, "I want my kumquats," a commodity which he never gets! It is said that Wallace was one of Fields' favorites. Perhaps it is this relationship with Wallace that began Fields' fascination with the Lompoc name and its subsequent prominence in his 1940 comedy "*The Bank Dick*." According to the Internet Movie Data Base, Wallace appeared in 122 moving pictures from 1919 until his retirement in 1946. In October, 1932, "The Cast," a quarterly directory of actors, stated that Wallace had appeared in 300-400 theatrical and movie roles thus far in his career. That publication listed him in the category of Leading and "Heavy" men.

In 1933, a change for all moving picture actors was in the making. Morgan Wallace played an important part in that change. Along with a group of 20 British and American contract and freelance players, Wallace became a founding member and board member of the Screen Actors Guild (SAG). The group of actors, all members of Actor's Equity, were instrumental in the organization of a union designed to look after the welfare of actors and protect them from adverse working conditions, long grueling hours and workweeks and unreasonable, restrictive, exclusive studio contracts. Morgan Wallace, holding SAG membership card number three, was highly regarded in the SAG organization and remained active in its operation until his 1946 retirement from films, at which time he withdrew from the union.

Throughout his life, it is reported that Morgan Wallace made annual trips to Lompoc to oversee his interest in Weill property in the lower valley. Morgan Wallace passed away in 1953 and is buried alongside his wife, Louise Chapman Wallace in Forest Lawn Memorial Park's Meditation Section. He was not as recognizable as those with whom he starred - W.C. Fields, Mae West, Lillian Gish, Lew Ayres Jeannette MacDonald, Ingrid Bergman or Angela Lansbury. His star shone as brightly though, through his influence and leadership within the Hollywood community and the Screen Actors Guild, which he helped to organize and which now represents a membership of 120,000 actors.