

# Testimonial Advertising Using Movie Stars in the 1910s: How Billie Burke Came to Sell Pond's Vanishing Cream in 1917

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*American Girl* was a recognized character type in popular culture before World War I. She embodied qualities understood at home and abroad to be "American." This bundle of traits coupled with her widespread appeal made her a most suitable authority for the advertising industry to use in its testimonial advertisements beginning in 1914.

My objective in this paper is to show how, beginning in 1914, particular film actresses were selected by manufacturers or their advertising agencies to give testimony for certain of the products they sold. I will argue that the timing correlated with developments in the young American film industry. Very popular actresses like Billie Burke were often identified with a role--the American Girl--that was recognized by journalists and the movie-going public at the time. I will argue that portrayals of the Girl and, via articles about her in newspapers and magazines, the actresses who played her, manifested American core values. Especially relevant for this study, the American Girl was opinionated, straightforward, and democratic among her other qualities. Role and actress melded in magazine profiles and other publicity material. When writers attributed to both the fictional character and the young working actress the traits of the American Girl, they enhanced the credibility of these stars who endorsed nationally distributed products including shoes and face cream. This study represents a very early convergence of film and advertising through the medium of the American Girl.

This essay is historical in its method and interdisciplinary in its nature. It is founded on primary research conducted in the Billy Rose Theatre Collection of the New York Public Library, the Theatre Collection at Museum of the City of New York, and the J. Walter Thompson Collection at the Duke University Library. I watched the two extant films starring Billie Burke, *Peggy* (Triangle, 1916) and *Arms and the Girl* (Famous Players Film Co., 1917) housed in the film archives of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences and the George

Eastman House. The arguments made here are based on a survey of testimonial advertising in the *Ladies' Home Journal* (LHJ) from the late 1890s through 1917 and a study of the early film career of popular actress Billie Burke. I will call on well established history of the American film industry (Bordwell, Staiger, Thompson 1985) as well as my own work on the film industry's consolidation in the middle 1910s (DeBauche 1997). My analysis of advertising strategy draws on principles of advertising practice gleaned from the J. Walter Thompson Company materials housed in Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections at Duke University (JWT), publishing and advertising trade papers including *Printer's Ink* (1916-1917) and *Advertising and Selling* (1915-1916) as well as from an early textbook, *Advertising Procedure*, written by Otto Kleppner in 1925 and a contemporary history of advertising by Frank Presbrey (1929). These diverse historical strands will come together in an analysis of Billie Burke's endorsement of Pond's Vanishing Cream for the J. Walter Thompson Company's campaign "Every normal skin needs two creams" in December 1917.

## ***Ladies' Home Journal* and the J. Walter Thompson Company**

**"Here was a shopping trip through new and endless department stores but with no tired feet...Such smart women—in such beautiful homes...But *she* had the same curtains."(Townsend 1923, 3,4)**

The *Ladies' Home Journal*, advertising produced by the J. Walter Thompson Company, and the movies made by the American film industry became natural allies in the early twentieth century. Each aimed at a broad middle class audience to maximize its profits, each told stories though of various lengths and in diverse ways, and each sold an ideology along with its putative product. Each industry was national in its scope and delivered its goods, narratives, and values to cities, small towns, and rural areas thus helping to link them and to forge a national American culture (Wiebe

1967; Cooper 1990). Each also made money and its business grew.

Jennifer Scanlon has studied the important role *The Ladies' Home Journal* played in women's history in her book, *Inarticulate Longings, the Ladies Home Journal, Gender, and the Promises of Consumer Culture* (1995). She documented that by 1900 it was the most widely advertised magazine in the United States to constituencies which included women readers and also potential advertising clients (14-15). This strategy proved successful—on both fronts—and by 1914 the *Ladies' Home Journal* commanded the highest advertising rate of any women's magazine on the market (Scanlon 1995, 199). It was known by ladies across the country who purchased it at the stationer's, received their subscription in the mail, read it at the public library, or borrowed it from a friend, and equally important, it was familiar to manufacturers of nationally distributed goods and their advertising agencies. Ellen Gruber Garvey, in *The Adman in the Parlor; Magazines and the Gendering of Consumer Culture, 1880s to 1910s*, has stated that under the editorship of Edward Bok (1889-1919), the magazine "was notably aggressive in seeking to serve advertisers." (1996, 149) Significantly, he innovated the practice of "tailing," sifting advertisements among the fiction and nonfiction, and even placing ads next to related articles (Grubar Garvey 1996, 149) Stories, fact, opinion, and sales pitches were tactically juxtaposed in the *Ladies' Home Journal*. The message in one might illustrate, echo, or reinforce the main point of its neighbor, and when that neighbor was a lovely, youthful, American Girl actress like Billie Burke telling readers, "No one appreciates Pond's Vanishing Cream more than I," it only enhanced the persuasive power of journalism, advertising, and the movies (LHJ 1917, 93).

In August 1916, four months before he took over as president of J. Walter Thompson, the company's Vice President Stanley Resor reported on the success his clients had when they heeded company advice and bought full pages or even double-page spreads to advertise their products. *Ladies' Home Journal* was one of the women's magazines where J. Walter Thompson invested most heavily in the mid-1910s buying space for Brenlin Window Shades, Red Cross Shoes, Aunt Jemima, Swift hams, Pond's Vanishing Cream, and Lux soap (Resor 1916). Thus, by 1921 Resor was able to report that it was "customary to estimate an agency's volume of business by the volume it gives the *Saturday Evening Post* on men's accounts and the *Ladies' Home Journal* on women's accounts." J. Walter Thompson ranked fourth in the amount of space it purchased in the *Saturday Evening Post* and first among the eight agencies placing accounts with the *Ladies' Home Journal* (Resor 1921). Finally, also manifesting the value and trust placed in this particular women's magazine, Helen Lansdowne Resor, prominent in the Women's Editorial Department at J. Walter Thompson, and, as early as 1911, copywriter on many of its big accounts, noted in her

"Stockholder's Affidavit" with the company that she had written "the original advertisements on Woodbury's Facial Soap, Crisco, Yuban Coffee, Lux, and Cutex." (Lansdowne Resor 1921) Her work and that of her agency was different from other advertising of its time and Lansdowne Resor remarked that she was often asked by her clients to speak to their sales conventions and explain J. Walter Thompson's strategies. For the record she noted parenthetically, "(See issues of the Ladies' Home Journal for this period.)" (Lansdowne Resor 1924)

The history of testimonial advertising I have mined from the pages of the *Ladies' Home Journal* further entwines the fortunes of that magazine with the J. Walter Thompson Company. First, though, my claims are premised on a particular definition of the American Girl, and it is here that I will begin.

### An American Girl

**"She [the American Girl] incarnates the spirit of her nation; she is the living ideal, the only adornment of a country that, without her would be a veritable cave of Alberic, a black and smokey dollar-forge." (Bergeret 1915).**

There was a tradition, dating back to the American Revolution, of foreign writers describing and passing judgment upon the American character. Historian C. Vann Woodward pointed out that women were the "subject of at least a chapter and often more in almost every European book on America through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries." (1991, 122) The American Girl represented, to them, the American spirit, and she was a recognizable "type." French, British, German, Chinese, and Italian men visiting the United States observed the appearance and the behavior of the young women they met, and they published descriptions of the qualities they found (O'Rell 1889; Stead 1901 rpt 1972; Munsterberg 1902; Tingfang 1914; Bergeret 1915, 45, 86). Whether a journalist, a diplomat, or a professor of psychology sketched her, the image was remarkably consistent. The American Girl was independent and confident, talkative, well educated, energetic, cheerful, forthright, ambitious, athletic, and pretty. She was also white, and unmarried. Why was she so appealing? In what ways was she different from Asian, Latin, German, or British young women? While they noted that their examples of young American womanhood were drawn from the wealthy classes, they also found their subjects representative, perhaps even ideals, of American femininity. An Italian, writing under the pen name Bergeret spent a year in the United States studying "our younger and more fashionable women" and collected his thoughts for *Vanity Fair* in 1915 (45).

It is true, too, that the United States owe her all they possess of art, of good breeding, of humanity... she is the standard-bearer of American ideas and products over all Europe.

Still, there was never any doubt that the American Girl's aim was a "good marriage." "No matter how much of a butterfly she may be, she never loses sight of the future. She does not say, as she sits musing on marriage: 'What kind of man shall I suit?' but 'What kind of man shall I choose.'" (O'Rell 1889, 74) And the men writing about her never questioned her final role as wife either. The American Girl was not a "new girl" developing into a "New Woman," at least not in her political guise (Hunter 2002). She was not looking for a career, and the Girl was not a scholar although she was educated. Instead, she claimed kinship—perhaps as cousin to the "new girl." She did want freedom of movement; she prized her individuality and her ability to live outside of the traditional domestic sphere, but she enjoyed the company of men—how else could she dance after all. She also needed men, fathers and husbands, to support her in style, and she knew this.

### Fictional American Girls

**"You don't mind going fast, do you?" asked Mr. Black absently, his eye on the sharp rise beyond.**

**Betty's eyes sparkled with excitement. 'I never went fast enough yet.'"(Warde 1908)**

The American Girl also fascinated American novelists. In 1901 William Dean Howells published a two-volume analysis called *Heroines of Fiction*. (1901) He credited Henry James with the creation of the American Girl. James's version had much in common with the European assessment. For Howells, James's Daisy Miller was the essential type. "She knows no harm and she means none; she loves life and talking, and singing, and dancing, and 'attentions,' but she is no flirt...The girl is a little fool, of course, but while her youth lasts she is angelic, a divine fool, with caprices that have the quality of inspirations.(Howells 1901, 165-5) But Daisy was also different than her real-life counterparts as sketched by European observers: the consequences of her "lawless innocence...break her heart."(Howells 1901, 171). Daisy died of a fever contracted because she insisted, against all propriety, on going to the Roman Coliseum at night.

The American Girls who are the focus of my study do not die on account of bad manners and unconventional choices. Their youthful charm and fundamentally

traditional goals helped to inoculate them. Toward the end of his examination of literary heroines, Howells noted that fictional characters are subject to changing times (Howells 1901, 231). It was also the case that different sorts of heroines, and even different versions of the American Girl, co-existed. The American Girls portrayed by actresses like Billie Burke were more related to the March girls of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* than to Daisy Miller, Isabel Archer, Milly Theale, and Maggie Verver who lived in James's fictional world.

Louisa May Alcott's very popular novel for girls was first published in 1868-1869. Still popular in the 1910s, it opened as a play in October of 1912 and debuted as a film in November, 1918. Marmee and Mr. March raised their daughters to be "beautiful, accomplished and good; to be admired, loved, and respected, to have a happy youth, to be well and wisely married, and to lead useful pleasant lives."(Alcott 1868-9, 97) Alcott, like foreign commentators on the Girl, compared and contrasted her little women with those in Europe. When Amy, the youngest sister, went abroad, Alcott had an opportunity to distinguish her American Girl from Europeans. Amy exhibited a "strong will," a "native frankness," and a sort of sensible good taste that allowed her to fabricate flattering clothes for herself—to set her own style-- when she could not afford to buy new gowns (Alcott 1868-9, 380-1).

Amy and her older sister Jo resembled the American Girl of the early twentieth century who would become an important type in film narratives of the middle teens. Like Betty Wales (Warde 1908), Nan Sherwood (Carr 1916), and Pollyana (Porter, 1915), characters in girl's fiction in the 1910s, or Peggy Cameron (Triangle 1916), Gloria Stafford (George Kleine Co. 1916), or Ruth Sherwood (Famous Players Film Co. 1917), the characters Billie Burke played in her early films, Amy and Jo March ventured away from home and had experiences, if not adventures, in the world before they married. They took themselves seriously and cultivated their creative abilities in art and writing and, in fact, had ideas to express and stories to tell.

Whether she was described by foreigners or was made a heroine in her own country's juvenile fiction, this particular iteration of the American Girl was a familiar feature of our popular culture in the middle 1910s. The movie actresses who portrayed her and to some extent became coterminous with her were also very popular and figured among the brightest stars of their day. Like the American Girl, these actresses were ubiquitous. They were profiled in magazine articles, made the subject of popular songs, and they starred in motion pictures. Actresses like Billie Burke had many fans who admired their talent, surely, but who also fancied their clothes, hair styles, beauty regimens, interior decoration, and hobbies. It was this desire of their fans to emulate them that made these particularly fashionable actresses logical choices for advertisers looking to sell their products to women across the country.

## Billie Burke, Actress as American Girl

**“She is an American girl through and through...”(McKay 1903)**

**“I am now an ardent, enthusiastic—in fact, almost a shouting American.”(Burke 1910, 546)**

Assessing her career from the vantage point of the late 1940s, Billie Burke acknowledged that she was popular, that her fans were as interested in her as they were in her movies, and that her celebrity was, in part, founded in her sense of fashion. She wrote that she was “a new kind of actress, carefree, and red-headed, and I had beautiful clothes.”(Burke 1949, 79). Yet, the most bare bones chronology of her life up to 1920 belied an interpretation of such sheer effortlessness. Burke was born in 1884; she had her first professional success singing “My Little Canoe” in a musical, “The School Girl,” at London’s Prince of Wales Theater in 1903 when she was nineteen. Billie Burke came to the United States in 1907 playing opposite John Drew in “My Wife,” an English adaptation of a French play. Under contract to Charles Frohman, she starred in ten plays between 1907 and 1914—not all equally successful. Then, in 1914, Billie Burke married Florenz Ziegfeld, broke with Frohman, and soon after, in 1915, she began work on her first film, *Peggy* (Triangle 1916). Ziegfeld, an impresario noted for staging entertainments starring his own distinct brand of American Girl, became her manager. In 1916, she completed her second film, a twenty-part serial called *Gloria’s Romance*, which featured Burke as sixteen year old Gloria Stafford. By the final installment, when Gloria, the movies’ quintessential American Girl, turns twenty and recognizes her love for the worthy and patient, young doctor Royce, Billie Burke had just given birth to her only daughter Patricia.

Billie Burke worked non-stop between 1917 and 1920. In New York, she had roles in three plays, “The Rescuing Angel,” “A Marriage of Convenience,” and “Caesar’s Wife.” She also starred in eleven films all distributed by Famous Players Film Co. (Paramount): *Arms and the Girl*, *The Land of Promise*, and *The Mysterious Miss Terry* in 1917; *Eve’s Daughter*, *In Pursuit of Polly*, *Let’s Get a Divorce*, and *The Make-Believe Wife* in 1918, and *Good Gracious*, *Annabelle*, *The Misleading Widow*, *Sadie Love*, and *Wanted—A Husband* in 1919. Burke took a breather in 1920. No plays opened and only two films were released, *Away Goes Prudence* and *The Frisky Mrs. Johnson*. “Frisky” seems an apt, if understated, description of her career in the 1910s.

This straightforward accounting of Billie Burke’s life in the 1910s, shows that she worked steadily in both theater

and the film industry. She married only once, and she had one child. Hers is the biography of a well-paid, working woman. That she was even more productive after marriage and motherhood suggests she took her career very seriously. In addition to acting, she also may have actually written, or at least signed off on a series of beauty, fashion, and advice columns that appeared in newspapers around the country (Burke 1912, 3, Burke 1913, Burke 1917). Dabbling in fiction, Burke signed her name to a sentimental short story, “The Drama the Audience Did Not See, A Fictional Story,” which appeared in the May, 1912 issue of *The Green Book Album* (967-969). She was red-headed and beautifully dressed, but “carefree” is a misleading adjective. Billie Burke was a hard working, professional actress juggling home and career. Still, the “Billie Burke” who emerged from profiles and interviews with theater journalists and others was very much an American Girl.

As the journalists who interviewed her tried to fit Billie Burke into the conventional framework of a celebrity profile, they paralleled her own personality with the characters she played. They praised her youthfulness even as she approached the age of thirty, and they directly or implicitly found the source of her charm in the fact that she was an American Girl, even though she had spent much of her life to date in Europe. In one of the earliest profiles, a 1908 piece published in *The Theatre Magazine*, Ada Patterson welcomed her readers to “A Sunday Morning Chat with Billie Burke.” Patterson, and the other journalists who interviewed Burke functioned as privileged fans, and they also presented themselves as friends of Billie Burke (Patterson 1908, 300). Alan Dale described his 1912 interview this way.(Dale 1912, 412-418). “Miss Burke and yours truly are on very good terms, let me tell you, and my usual perspiring agony at the idea of a chat was lacking.” Rennold Wolf, visiting the newly married Burke at her mansion in Hastings-on-the-Hudson, New York, opened his piece by asking a rhetorical question, making common cause with his readers. “Are you a Billie Burke fan? I am.”(Wolf circa 1914, 843-854) Dorothy Nutting used the same strategy, but, by 1919, she felt even chummier (9-11).

When you run across the lawn or hallway, as the case may be, to chat with your next door neighbor of a morning it isn’t exactly the sort of thing to burst into print about, now is it? It’s merely one of those pleasant interludes that you take for granted and enjoy immensely but don’t say much about.

Calling on Billie Burke, at her home, Hastings-on-the-Hudson, the other morning was something like that. There was all of the simple, unaffected cordiality of the neighborly call in my visit .

Journalists reported how she lived, and they asked her questions about her private and her professional life. Their profiles were illustrated liberally with photographs of Burke

in costume as well as candid shots of her at home with her mother, her dogs, and later her husband and her child. They also showed garages, car, stables, and swimming pool.

One principle underlying these profiles was that readers were curious about the person who played the part; they were interested in the quotidian aspects of her life: where she bought her clothes, the colors of her bedroom, her leisure activities, how she met her husband, what she ate for breakfast, and her schedule. In other words, they were interested in the things they had in common, even though Burke's salary and celebrity made her daily life qualitatively different from their own. Wolf gave voice to an interpretation that was implicit in these articles—that Billie Burke was just like us, only more so (circa 1914, 850). He wrote "Democracy is the keynote of the Burke establishment. Although the house is exquisitely furnished and has all the suggestion of the aristocrat, the hospitality is genuine, easy, and unrestrained." In other words, the hostess dispensing this hospitality possessed fundamentally American traits, or as Alan Dale effused (1912, 412), "Miss Billie is such a typical American...There she is, teemingly American"

Burke's interviewers also based their profiles on a second principle: not only was she much like her audience, she had a great deal in common with the characters she played. When Burke herself wrote about her craft, she discussed how she learned from more experienced performers, how she exercised her voice, and which actors and actresses she admired. When Patterson, and other journalists, wrote about her, however, they reported that she simply played herself on the stage. These journalists may simply have been following conventional form in linking actress with character in their writing, still, in her own life and in the roles she played, readers learned, Billie Burke manifested the qualities of the American Girl. She was youthful, opinionated, pretty, confident, athletic, and ambitious. Her interviewers described these features, and then, like contemporary, well-published, and popular psychology professor Hugo Munsterberg when he wrote about real American girls, they worried about her marital status (Munsterberg, 1902). Wolf (circa 1914 853) described her "unceasing winsomeness and youthful charm," and the way that the "awkwardness of her stride, which involves a boyish swing of her shoulders becomes grace in this darling of the stage." He never once mentioned her age—another convention perhaps, but the clear implication was that she remained young and girlish even though she was now a thirty-year-old married woman. Wolf concluded his lengthy and profusely illustrated profile this way (circa 1914, 854):

In short, close contact with Billie Burke reveals no surprises. She is quite as she seems on the stage, a little more womanly and serious now, perhaps, but refreshingly natural and delightfully democratic.

Few popular idols improve on more intimate acquaintance than Miss Burke does. It is difficult to forgive Ziegfeld, but it is impossible not to congratulate him.

These two brief paragraphs reveal the paradoxical nature of Burke's American Girl: an idol yet democratic; married yet *Miss* Burke, natural yet acting a part. Like the fictional American Girl achieving a happy ending in the final act, she had married well and was thus "radiantly happy."(Wolf circa 1914, 848) Only the Frohman organization begrudged her this fitting state. Charles Frohman sent her on road in "Jerry" soon after her marriage, and, ending up in California, she met Thomas Ince and Jesse Lasky who both urged her to act for the movies. She did.

This same paradox made Burke an effective spokesperson in testimonial advertising. She was rich but she was neighborly. She was over thirty and a mother yet she appeared youthful. She worked long hours at a job in which she conveyed a traditional, appealing, and still fashionable set of American ideals about femininity. Appearing in advertisements, she seemed willing, as an open-hearted and democratic American Girl ought, to share her beauty secrets. Her first testimonial occurred soon after she came to the United States when the Printz-Biederman Company of Cleveland named a coat after her, "The star style in Spring Coats is named "Billie Burke" in honor of the famous New York actress, who describes it as the "Cutest she ever saw."(Advertisement circa 1909)

In 1916, the year she debuted in movies, Burke endorsed Knox hats in January (Advertisement 1916), Rogers & Thompson's Soiree Silk fabric in April (Advertisement 1916, 246), and she ended the year attesting to the benefits Crème Nerol (Advertisement 1916, 161). "It refines and beautifies the most sallow, rough or impaired complexion, and assures a natural freshness and clearness of the skin, and always an unflinching charm to the eye." She also wore pajamas in one scene of *Peggy* and it was the costume used to grace the cover of the sheet music associated with the film (Schertzinger 1915). Her fans in Philadelphia could buy "the Billie Burke Pajama" at the Novelty Shop, 1225 W. Girard Avenue (Advertising Brochure, circa 1916). In December 1917 she would go to work for the J. Walter Thompson Company and endorse Pond's Vanishing Cream.

### **A Brief History of Theater Actresses and Opera Singers in Testimonial Advertising**

**"There is every indication that human transactions when considered en masse are subject to very definite laws in which environment probably plays a very great**

**part. It is the hope of the company, by careful study of the reaction to different stimuli, gradually more and more nearly to approximate these laws, so that, at least in some of the phases, definite principles may serve to guide the work of influencing the public mind, just as mechanical laws govern the movement or control of physical objects.”(Resor 1916, 3)**

A survey of the advertising in the *Ladies' Home Journal* shows that in the 1890s spokespersons were usually women, mainly in their thirties or forties. They included actresses, like Julia Marlowe who was in her thirties and had gained prominence performing the respectable Shakespearean repertoire. She endorsed a shirt waist made by Schlesinger & Mayer (Advertisement 1898, 36), Freeman's Face Powder (Advertisement 1900, 37), a book, entitled “A Bride and a Bridle,” with its attendant engravings (Advertisement 1903, 43) and both “Julia Marlowe” shoes and oxfords made by the Rich Shoe Company of Milwaukee, Wisconsin.”(Advertisement 1897, 42). Opera singers with international reputations including American Madame Suzanne Adams and the French Madame Emma Calve lent their prestige to Lablache Face Powder in 1902 (Advertisement 1902, 29; Advertisement 1902, 34). Adams was thirty years old and Calve forty-four.

Still, despite this strong tradition of mature respectability signaled by the use of older actresses and opera singers performing a more serious repertoire, the testimonial tide began to turn in the early 1900s. Stage actress Ethel Barrymore was younger, at twenty-five, when she first appeared in an advertisement for Nonpareil Velvet in the March, 1904 *Ladies' Home Journal* (63). With her upswept hair, long neck and slender body, she resembled the fashionable Gibson Girl of the 1890s, and although she never posed for the illustrator, they were friends and Barrymore became linked with his Girl in the public's mind (Auster 1984, 131-2). Readers of the *Ladies' Home Journal* already knew her: she had been profiled in a two-page spread in 1903, part of a series describing popular actors and actresses. The article was accompanied by illustrative photographs of Barrymore “very fond of the water,” and “after her morning plunge;” “ready to ‘serve,’” at tennis, and playing piano, reading, posing dramatically between the curtains of a doorway, and sitting outside on a rocky perch above a vacation spot at Sippican Harbor in Marion, MA (Kobbe 1903, 3). The piece itself was entitled “The Girlishness of Ethel Barrymore” and it stressed her simplicity in dress, her hard work, her athleticism, and her “girlish enthusiasms.” All in all Gustav Kobbe wrote (1903, 4), “Ethel Barrymore is—sweet and wholesome.”(3-4) She

had also been the *Ladies' Home Journal's* cover girl in January of 1904.

This older sister of the movies' American Girl came on the scene before the American film industry was considered an industry characterized by a star system, and by the middle teens when movie stars *were* known by name, she no longer looked the part. Her film debut came in 1914 in a drama called *The Nightingale* where she played the daughter of an Italian organ grinder. Barrymore would perform on stage and occasionally on film until 1917 when she released seven movies. No longer a girl, she would again appear in an advertisement in 1916 while starring as Emma McChesney, a widow with a grown son, in Edna Ferber's play about a petticoat saleswoman. She was featured in character, and also by name, in an ad for Heatherbloom Petticoats in the *Ladies' Home Journal* (1916, 43). A. G. Hyde & Sons, manufacturers of Heatherbloom, was a client of the J. Walter Thompson Company.

### The Developing American Film Industry

**“The motion picture industry might be split into three great divisions—three monster organizations, who grind out 263,000,000 feet yearly, realizing therefrom a revenue greater than is returned to the steel interests.”(Bloeser 1915)**

In the ten years between Ethel Barrymore's 1904 appearance in a testimonial advertisement for Nonpareil Velvet and her 1914 film role, the American film industry grew, dramatically. Film exhibition moved from the fair grounds and vaudeville theaters into small but purpose-built nickelodeons, and in 1914 they shared exhibition space with larger, grander picture palaces in some cities. This architectural evolution testified to the place the movies had secured in the leisure time of Americans. In 1908, it took as many as 450 one-reelers a year to accommodate the managers in some 8,000 theaters who changed their film programs two or three times a week (Thompson, Bordwell 1994, 33,34). Movie-going was part of the weekly routine for many people in small towns and in big cities.

The movie-making business was also taking the shape it would hold until the end of the 1940s—like other American industries, it was consolidating. Thomas Edison organized selected film producers and importers in 1908, the year conventionally noted as the film industry's first year as an industry. His Motion Pictures Patents Company (MPPC) tried to increase its profits by charging fees to anyone who used cameras or projectors which incorporated patented parts. He had underestimated demand though, and immediately an independent opposition arose made of

producers and exhibitors using equipment from Europe. In 1910 Edison tried again, this time attempting to create a monopoly in the distribution of film. Demand again defeated him, and in 1912 the government instituted proceedings against the “Trust” as the MPPC had come to be known. This case was settled in 1915; the MPPC lost, but the Independents had, arguably, both learned Edison’s lessons and gone him one better laying the foundations of the Hollywood studio system, including the star system (Thompson, Bordwell 1994).

In 1912, Adolph Zukor, an Independent, formed Famous Players in Famous Plays and imported *Queen Elizabeth* starring Sarah Bernhardt, (featured in ads in *Ladies’ Home Journal* for the Victor Talking Machine Company since 1903. 44). Soon, Zukor partnered with other film producers, notably the Jesse L. Lasky Feature Play Company, and the company continued its horizontal integration absorbing smaller businesses. In 1916, Famous Players-Lasky took over Paramount, a film distributor, and within three years it owned a theater chain as well and was fully vertically integrated. As the name Famous Players suggested, Zukor banked on the drawing power of actors. (Edison had also invited well-known acts from vaudeville to perform in his Black Maria studio, and he advertised this asset as a selling point. (Bordwell, Staiger, Thompson 1985, 101.) Using established, well known actors was a conservative business strategy. Zukor distributed films starring men and women like Sarah Bernhardt who had gained their reputations on the stage. Then, in 1913 he hired Mary Pickford who had acted on stage for David Belasco and in film for D.W. Griffith and he paid her \$500.00 a week (Brownlow 1999, 83.).

Pickford was already a celebrity, and her ascendancy paralleled the rise of the American film industry. Film historian Anthony Slide discovered articles about Little Mary in 1909. Her image and name had been on the cover of the trade paper *The Moving Picture News* in October, 1911 (Thompson, Bordwell 1994, 38). By 1913, when the industry started producing feature length films able to tell more complex stories, established actors and actresses from the stage and vaudeville began to seek work in the movies. They brought the conventions of the stage with them to this new medium, including a hierarchy of actors, that created precedent for the star system developing in the film industry. By 1914, cinema goers knew their favorites by name, and might well know what their homes looked like, might sing along to sheet music bearing their names and images, might read beauty and advice columns appearing under their bylines, and as we saw with Billie Burke, might even peruse their short stories.

It is in this context in 1914 that the advertising industry added movie stars to its roster of actresses providing testimonials. Not surprisingly, Mary Pickford, twenty-two, was the first to appear in the *Ladies’ Home Journal* in an advertisement for Red Cross Shoes, another J. Walter Thompson account of long standing (Advertisement 1914,

41). The ad asked its readers, “Aren’t *you* seeking what Mary Pickford sought?” Then Mary explained her problem. “My photo-play work requires my standing for hours at a time.” In addition, she said that each day she went to work in front of “millions of critical eyes [and] my foot must be dressed in a fashionable, trimfitting shoe.” The following month, an advertisement for a facial cleansing bar called *Sempre Giovine* featured a testimonial by the Thanouser Company’s brightest star Florence La Badie (Advertisement 1914, 75). Manufactured by the Marietta Stanley Company in Grand Rapids Michigan, *Sempre Giovine* (“Forever Young”) produced a series of ads for its product with popular movie stars including Marguerite Snow, Kathlyn Williams, Pearl White, and Elsie Janis. (Advertisement 1915, 60, Advertisement 1915, 65, Advertisement 1916, 70, Advertisement 1916, 104). All of these actresses played American Girls; Williams and White were the athletic, vivacious heroines of serials *The Adventures of Kathlyn* and *The Perils of Pauline* (Stamp 2000).

By 1917 when Billie Burke joined the ranks of J. Walter Thompson’s testimonial actresses, the practice was familiar to readers of the *Ladies’ Home Journal*. Pompeian Night Cream, one of Pond’s competitors, offered posters of Mary Pickford along with samples of its product (Advertisement 1916, 50). A November 1916 ad for Pompeian Night Cream promised to tell “A Mary Pickford Secret.” Irene Castle, famous as a ballroom dancer and also a film actress endorsed Community Silver (Advertisement 1915, 73, Phillipsborn Styles clothing (Advertisement 1917, 35; and Corticelli Dress Silks (Advertisement 1917, 138).

### **Pond’s Two Creams and Billie Burke**

**“An endorsement written by a character, such as a moving picture actress, is at times effective...it expresses the opinion of one whose legions of admirers will follow her example—when they can.” (Kleppner 1926, 424)**

The Pond’s Extract Company was one of J. Walter Thompson’s oldest clients, having placed its first ads in 1886. In 1907 Pond’s had developed both its Cold Cream for cleaning the face and Vanishing Cream for moisturizing skin during the daytime. Advertising for Pond’s Vanishing Cream began in 1910. By 1913 the *Ladies’ Home Journal* ads cited authorities like Dr. William Allen Pusey who was a professor of Dermatology at the University of Illinois to tell women that the winter wind could cause their skin to chap and become like “dry leather.”(85) Soft skin was much more appealing and readers were offered a drawing, an image of a lovely, young girl as proof. In May, 1913 Dr. Pusey and the scientific rationale gave way to “A Beauty

Hint Every actress will tell you...” The villain this time was the powder and other makeup that actresses must use on the stage. Again, a drawing of a pretty girl applying Vanishing Cream occupied the upper third of the ad (Advertisement 1913, 93).

In April, 1914, several months before Mary Pickford endorsed Red Cross Shoes for its client the Krohn-Fechheimer Company of Cincinnati, J. Walter Thompson Company began to use testimonials to support its claims for Pond’s Vanishing Cream. Following established precedent in testimonials, images of the “great operatic singer” Madame Emmy Destinn and stage actress Jane Cowl (she would make her first film in 1915) endorsed Pond’s Vanishing Cream (Advertisement 1914, 85). In March 1915 ballerina Anna Pavlowa was pictured and stage actresses Constance Collier, Olga Nethersole, Rose Stahl, and Frances Starr joined the chorus advocating the benefits of Pond’s Cream (46).

The combined campaign for Pond’s Vanishing Cream and Pond’s Cold Cream began in 1916, and it was ingenious. J. Walter Thompson created a selling strategy that taught women they needed two different cream products to ensure healthy youthful-looking skin. The first of these new advertisements ran in the *Ladies’ Home Journal* in November with endorsements by Frances Starr, Pavlowa, and for the first time “the well loved motion picture star” Norma Talmadge (Advertisement 1916, 85). Billie Burke joined Talmadge in December, 1917 (93). The ad’s headline had been refined; now it read, “Every woman needs these two—Learn why every normal skin needs two creams.” Both actresses played American Girls in the movies.

The American Girl and actresses like Billie Burke who played her gave such good testimonials for a variety of reasons. They were well-known because their movies showed across the United States, and also, because, like Burke, they had been written about in a variety of magazines and newspapers for a number of years. An article in the 8 February 1917 issue of *Printers’ Ink* urged, “Making the Testimonial Earn Its Keep.”(73) Its author, C.B. McCuaig, was opposed to testimonials from enthusiastic but unknown users of a product, “some pleased customer out in Peoria.” He preferred a good word written over the “signature that is known the world over.”(74) Burke and her American Girl movie star sisters not only signed off on these products, their images added another level of redundancy to the product’s claim. Their lovely faces resulted, at least in the logic of the ad, from the use of Pond’s two creams. The public also knew, because both J. Walter Thompson and Billie Burke had told them, that soft, healthy, clear, and young-looking skin was a tool of the actresses’ trade.

The fact that Burke’s public image matched the fictional Girl’s in fundamental ways reinforced the traits they shared. These traits helped to sell products. A document charting Pond’s advertising and sales figures

showed a steady increase in sales beginning in 1910, the first year noted, but the increase was more substantial after the introduction of movie star testimonials. (Pond’s Advertising and Sales 1910-1960).

**TABLE 1**  
**Pond’s Net Sales**

1913	\$111,000
1914	\$132,000
1915	\$209,000
1916	\$307,000
1917	\$451,000
1918	\$680,000
1919	\$897,000
1920	\$1,309,000

While McCuaig discouraged using testimonials from the folk in Peoria, he did acknowledge that, *in Peoria*, those same testimonials worked very well. “The idea is to give the prospect the testimony of someone in his own town, or a nearby town—someone he is likely at least to know by name—and experience has shown that the results from his line of attack are most encouraging.”(1917, 75) Because her publicity stressed that she was the American Girl, and you could dash next door and chat with her over tea, Billie Burke tapped this advantage of the testimonial strategy. Her dual citizenship in the realms of the famous and the familiar also helped to counter a criticism that would become more prominent in the 1920s—that these testimonials were not sincere; the J. Walter Thompson Company would refer to this as “Genuineness.” (Special Production and Representatives’ Meeting 1928) American Girls in real life and in the movies were honest.

Lastly, the trait the fictional Girl lent to advertisers via stars like Billie Burke which made her different from other celebrities and crucial to the J. Walter Thompson Company was that she asserted democracy by challenging certain social conventions. Most apropos, American Girls like those Burke played in *Peggy* and *Gloria’s Romance* smashed social divisions of class, wealth, and even ethnicity. The plots of their films concluded when they changed the worlds they lived in to allow others to succeed by virtue of their talent, hard work, and goodness. Bringing this implicit meaning with her into testimonial advertising for Pond’s Cold Cream and Pond’s Vanishing Cream, Billie Burke told and showed women that they could look like she did if only they would mail in a coupon for a free sample or stop by their local drug store.



## CONCLUSION

**“People like to read about other people”  
(Resor 1929, 1)****“Fashions in girl change; they change  
radically...” (Dale 1915,122)**

By the late 1920s Stanley Resor, laid claim to developing the testimonial strategy at J. Walter Thompson. His company, notably its Women’s Department where Helen Lansdowne Resor worked, had continued to enlist movie stars to sell Pond’s, among other products. But, as the actress Cissy Fitzgerald said wistfully in 1915, times change and fashions change, even in girls (Dale 1915, 122). Competition also heats up and in 1924 J. Walter Thompson staged a coup, or said they did, when prominent American society women and international royalty were paid to endorse Pond’s Two Creams. Actually, that had been tried in the 1910s, too, and using some of the same prominent women, by the Oneida Community to sell its tableware (Advertisement 1916, 54-5).

The principle that Resor articulated: we like to read about and imitate people we admire held firm at J. Walter Thompson even in the face of criticism concerning the practice within the advertising industry and skepticism from the public about the “genuineness” of that testimony. (Marchand 1985, 96-100)

Still, I argue that the very first movie stars selected for testimonial work did not cause controversy within the advertising or film industries as they leased their names, images, and personas to sell products. Stars like Billie Burke were perceived as quintessentially American: youthful and opinionated and democratic. In narrative films, this opened the way for all manner of entertaining complications; for advertisements these traits showed that whatever idea was being sold along with the product, everyone with the price of purchase had access. The Girl and these actresses were comfortable authorities; people understood how they thought; readers of the *Ladies’ Home Journal* knew they worked hard. The Girl would get married; the actress, people knew, was not a girl at all. Pond’s Vanishing Cream must really work! After the Great War, the American boy, who had gone to Europe to save the old world became the repository of American ideals, and the American Girl I have described lost her place in the popular imagination to the flapper and later to real little girls like Shirley Temple. Billie Burke grew older. She continued to work mainly in film, and she continued to endorse a range of products including Lux Toilet Soap, Lucky Strike Cigarettes, Royal Gelatin, Ry-Krisp Crackers, Enna Jetticks Shoes, and Betty Crocker Pie Crust Mix. In 1939 as the Good Witch Glenda, she would help a different sort of American Girl get back home to Kansas.

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