



Lenore Coffee

Also Known As:

Lenore Jackson Coffee, Lenore Cowen, Lenore Coffee Cowen, Lenore Joyce-Cowen

Lived:

July 13, 1896 - July 2, 1984

Worked as:

continuity girl, novelist, playwright, screenwriter, title writer

Worked In:

United States

by Robin Blaetz

Lenore Coffee was a screenwriter in Hollywood from the late silent period through the end of the studio system. Although she wrote original stories, titles, and scenarios and was known for her adaptations of popular women's fiction, she specialized in repairing the work of others. As a writer called upon to correct and reformulate the work of such well-known figures as Cecil B. DeMille and Irving Thalberg, her often unacknowledged and remarkably long-lived voice is worth examining more closely.

Information about Coffee comes largely from a Patrick McGilligan's interview, carried out at the end of her life, and *Storyline*, her own detailed memoir of the silent period. Coffee grew up in San Francisco and began her career in 1919, after responding successfully to a Garson Studio advertisement in the *Motion Pictures Exchange Herald* for a story for the actress [Clara Kimball Young](#), which was produced as *The Better Wife* (1919). After selling her first scenario to the first producer who saw it and moving to Hollywood in 1919, Coffee worked for Louis B. Mayer for a short time before beginning her actual employment with director-producer Harry Garson, for whom she was, at one time, as she tells us in *Storyline*, "the only girl assistant director in the business" (55). For Mayer, Coffee's first job was to tell and to sell the producer's favorite stories to potential actors; for Garson, Coffee also performed the duties of what was later called a continuity girl, reading manuscripts, making cutting notes, and writing titles (Coffee 1973, 17–18). Although Coffee had been offered a job "tightening and editing and titling" by Irving Thalberg when he was first brought to Hollywood by Carl Laemmle to work at Universal, she preferred working with writers rather than producers, she says in her interview with McGilligan (140). Coffee spent two years working with the playwright Bayard Veiller at Metro, considering it her apprenticeship as a

dramatic writer. While working on DeMille's *The Volga Boatman* in 1924, she married the British novelist and director William Joyce Cowen, whose surname she sometimes used.

In *Storyline*, Lenore Coffee calls herself a “fixer-upper” and recalls that she received \$1,000 for a week to ten days of labor per project (62). She describes her ability to see what was wrong with a film or a first cut as “instinct, like having an ear for music” (McGilligan 1986, 142). Perhaps her strict convent education, in which she specialized in Latin, provided both a unique body of knowledge and a keen critical eye. For example, when asked by Samuel Goldwyn to make sense of a film in production under George Fitzmaurice, Coffee came up with the notion of *le droit de seigneur* to explain why bandits were kidnapping a girl in a wedding dress (McGilligan 1986, 142). Coffee wrote in her biography that she admired the creative naiveté and enormous raw talent of the early, often uneducated film pioneers, and tried to approach her work with the same uncluttered sense of wonder (33). The degree to which she was at home in Hollywood is evident in a story that she told about receiving a call one afternoon from Thalberg, who had two hundred extras standing by and wanted her to write a speech for his star—a request she fulfilled in half an hour's time (Coffee 1973, 124). However, Coffee's own stories about women's experiences were less well received. For instance, *Daytime Wives* (1923), which was, to quote Coffee, “a very modern idea for that time, the oddly intimate relationship between a man and his secretary,” received an inordinately long and scathing notice in *Variety* (Coffee 1973, 86). *Daytime Wives* (1923), still extant, is a domestic melodrama with a twist, its title a reference to the secretary of the husband in the story who efficiently runs his life and, in this case, steps in when a crisis ensues, in place of the errant wife who spends the money that the husband and secretary work to earn. The secretary helps to reconcile the husband and his repentant wife, even though she is in love with the husband. The difference between *Daytime Wives* and a film like the also surviving *For Alimony Only* (1926), which Coffee wrote for Cecil B. DeMille, is in the type of the female characters. While *Daytime Wives* features a positive, intelligent, altruistic woman who is finally rewarded with marriage, *For Alimony* features a greedy, scheming wife who is tricked out of her alimony in the end, and who seems to deserve the gigolo who uses her for her money. We are led to wonder whether in this period a correlation can be found between negative reviews and the more challenging and disturbing films that dealt with the realities of women's lives.

Much of Coffee's later career was spent at Warner Brothers, starting in 1938, where Coffee recalled that she was the only woman writing (McGilligan 1986, 147). Her most notable achievement at Warner Brothers was the Oscar-nominated screenplay for *Four Daughters*, cowritten with Julius J. Epstein in 1938. Coffee wrote one play, “Family Portrait,” which had its Broadway debut in 1939 and one novel, *Another Time, Another Place*, in 1956, which, according to the *Los Angeles Times*, aimed “to show that a woman can be a career woman with lots of brains and have no sense.” In 1959, Coffee moved to England, but in 1981 returned to live in retirement in the Motion Picture Home in Woodland Hills, California. Two children, Sabina Thorne Johnson and Gary Cowen, survived her (F7). Looking back at her career, Coffee claimed that she felt “nothing but pleasure. If you can work forty years in Hollywood without getting your throat cut, you can count yourself lucky” (McGilligan 1986, 150). Coffee's unassuming attitude, evident in her biography, in which she says she was just grateful to be working, belies the influence that she

must have had in the industry. Although only seven of the eighty-five films on which Coffee claims to have worked in the silent period are extant, many more silent as well as sound era scripts may survive since Coffee wrote scenarios for twenty-two producing companies in the silent era, including the largest—Metro, Universal Pictures, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Pictures, and First National (which later became Warner Brothers)—as well as for the short-lived independent star-producer companies named for Kimball Young and [Anita Stewart](#).

See also: [Anita Stewart](#), [Clara Kimball Young](#)

Bibliography

“Another Time, Another Place.” Rev. *Los Angeles Times* (1959). n.p. Lenore Coffee clippings file. Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Margaret Herrick Library.

Coffee, Lenore. *Another Time, Another Place*. New York: Crown Publishers. 1956.

----- . *Storyline: Recollections of a Hollywood Screenwriter*. London: Cassels, 1973.

“Daytime Wives.” Rev. *Variety* (30 Aug. 1923): n.p. Lenore Coffee clippings file. Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Margaret Herrick Library.

“Lenore Coffee, Writer of Film Romances, Dies.” Obit. *Los Angeles Times* (5 July 1984): F7.

McGilligan, Patrick. “Lenore Coffee: Easy Smiler, Easy Weeper.” *Backstory: Interviews with Screenwriters of Hollywood’s Golden Age*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986. 133-150.

Archival Paper Collections:

Lenore Coffee clippings file. [Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Margaret Herrick Library](#).

Warner Bros. Archives. [University of Southern California, Cinematic Arts Library](#).

William DeMille papers, 1899-1940. [New York Public Library, Stephen A. Schwarzman Building](#).

Cecil B. DeMille Archives. [Brigham Young University, Harold B. Lee Library](#).

Filmography

A. Archival: Filmography: Extant Film Titles:

1. Lenore Coffee as Screenwriter

For the Soul of Rafael. Dir.: Harry Garson, sc.: Dorothy Yost, Lenore Coffee [uncredited], aut.: Marah Ellis Ryan (Garson Studios, Inc. US 1920) cas.: Clara Kimball Young, Bertram Grassby, si, b&w. Archive: [Cinémathèque Française \[FRC\]](#).

Hush. Dir.: Harry Garson, st.: Sada Cowan, sc.: Lenore Coffee [uncredited] (Equity Pictures US 1921) si, b&w, tinted, 35mm. [incomplete]. Archive: [UCLA Film and Television Archive \[USL\]](#).

Daytime Wives. Dir.: Emile Chutard, sc.: Lenore Coffee, John F. Goodrich, Wyndham Gittens, Helmer Walton Bergman (R-C Pictures Corp. US 1923) cas.: Derelys Perdue, Grace Darmond, Wyndham Standing, si, b&w. Archive: [Library of Congress \[USW\]](#).

The Rose of Paris. Dir.: Irving Cummings, adp.: Lenore Coffee (Universal Pictures US 1924) cas.: Mary Philbin, Robert Cain, si, b&w. Archive: [George Eastman Museum \[USR\]](#).

East Lynne. Dir.: Emmett Flynn, adp.: Lenore Coffee, Emmett Flynn (Fox Film Corp. US 1925) cas.: Ann Harding, Clive Brook, si, b&w. Archive: [Museum of Modern Art \[USM\]](#).

Graustark. Dir. Dimitri Buchowetzki, sc.: Lenore J. Coffee, Frances Marion, George Barr McCutcheon (Joseph M. Schenck Productions US 1925) cas.: Norma Talmadge, Eugene O'Brien, Lillian Lawrence, si. B&w. Archive: [Library of Congress \[USW\]](#).

The Swan. Dir.: Dimitri Buchowetzki, sc.: Dimitri Buchowetzki, Lenore Coffee [uncredited] (Famous Players-Lasky US 1925) cas.: Frances Howard, Adolphe Menjou, si, b&w. Archive: [Library and Archives Canada \[CAO\]](#), [George Eastman Museum \[USR\]](#).

For Alimony Only. Dir.: William DeMille, sc.: Lenore Coffee (DeMille Pictures US 1926) si, b&w [**Note:** end titles missing]. Archive: [UCLA Film and Television Archive \[USL\]](#).

The Winning of Barbara Worth. Dir.: Henry King, co-sc.: Lenore Coffee [uncredited] (Samuel Goldwyn Co. US 1926) si, b&w, 35mm. Archive: [UCLA Film and Television Archive \[USL\]](#).

The Volga Boatman. Dir.: Cecil DeMille, adp.: Lenore Coffee (De Mille Pictures Corp. US 1926) cas.: William Boyd, Elinor Fair, Robert Edeson, si, b&w, 35mm. Archive: [George Eastman Museum \[USR\]](#), [Cineteca Nazionale \[ITN\]](#), [UCLA Film and Television Archive \[USL\]](#), [BFI National Archive \[GBB\]](#), [Academy Film Archive \[USF\]](#), [Lobster Films \[FRL\]](#), [Danske Filminstitut \[DKK\]](#).

The Winning of Barbara Worth (Outtakes). Dir.: Henry King, sc.: Frances Marion, Lenore Coffee [uncredited] (Samuel Goldwyn Inc. US 1926) cas.: Ronald Colman, Charles Lane, si, b&w. Archive: [Cineteca del Friuli \[ITG\]](#), [Library of Congress \[USW\]](#).

Chicago. Dir.: Albert Parker, sc.: Lenore Coffee (DeMille Pictures, US 1927) si, b&w, 35mm. Archive: [UCLA Film and Television Archive \[USL\]](#), [Museum of Modern Art \[USM\]](#) (fragment).

The Love of Sunya. Dir.: Albert Parker, sc.: Lenore Coffee [uncredited] (Swanson Producing Corp. US 1927) cas.: Gloria Swanson, John Boles, si, b&w. Archive: [George Eastman Museum \[USR\]](#),

[BFI National Archive \[GBB\]](#).

The Night of Love. Dir.: George Fitzmaurice, sc./adp.: Lenore Coffee (Samuel Goldwyn Co., US 1927) cas.: Ronald Colman, Vilma Banky, si, b&w. Archive: [Museum of Modern Art \[USM\]](#).

2. Lenore Coffee as Continuity

Desert Nights. Dir. William Nigh. cont.: Lenore Coffee. (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer US 1929) cas.: John Gilbert, Ernest Torrence, Mary Nolan, si, b&w. Archive: [George Eastman Museum \[USR\]](#).

B. Filmography: Non-Extant Film Titles:

1. Lenore Coffee as Screenwriter or Title Writer

The Better Wife, 1919; *The Forbidden Woman*, 1920; *The Fighting Shepherdess*, 1920; *Alias Ladyfingers*, 1921; *Sherlock Brown*, 1922; *The Face Between*, 1922; *The Right That Failed*, 1922; *The Age of Desire*, 1923; *The Six-Fifty*, 1923; *Temptation*, 1923; *Thundering Dawn*, 1923; *Wandering Daughters*, 1923; *Strangers of the Night*, 1923; *Fools' Highway*, 1924; *Bread*, 1924; *Hell's Highroad*, 1925; *The Great Divide*, 1925; *Ned McCobb's Daughter*, 1929.

C. DVD Sources:

Desert Nights (Warner Home Video US 2010).

Credit Report

Much of Lenore Coffee's uncredited scenarios are compiled from her memoir, *Storyline: Recollections of a Hollywood Screenwriter*. FIAF does not credit Lenore Coffee for *Desert Nights* (1929), while IMDB does.

Citation

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<<https://wfpp-test.cul.columbia.edu/pioneer/ccp-lenore-coffee/>>