



Helen Holmes

Also Known As:

Mrs. J.P. McGowan, Mrs. Lloyd Saunders

Lived:

July 7, 1892 - July 9, 1950

Worked as:

animal trainer, co-producer, director, film actress, screenwriter, stunt person

Worked In:

United States

by Karen Ward Mahar

Helen Holmes became a star playing the part of the fearless railroad telegrapher “Helen” in the Kalem Company’s long-running, stunt-driven serial *The Hazards of Helen* (1914–1917), and continued to make action films through the decade as an independent writer and producer. Not only were her films successful at the box office, but they featured some of the most heroic female images in silent cinema as she leapt to the top of speeding trains and handled pistols with ease. Did these images—at least some of them—originate with Holmes? Certainly Helen Holmes needs to be situated within a tradition that included the American branch of Pathé Frères Company’s [Pearl White](#), Selig Polyscope Company’s [Kathlyn Williams](#), and Universal Film Manufacturing Company’s [Grace Cunard](#). Some would argue that Holmes carried on at Kalem in the tradition of [Gene Gauntier](#), who had physically risked so much in the Girl Spy series. But Gauntier’s memoir gives far more information about how she wrote scenarios and set up stunts for her character while at Kalem. With few sources other than extant films and popular and trade magazine discourse, it is difficult to discern the exact role Helen Holmes played behind the camera.

Holmes’s well-publicized status as the daughter of a railroad engineer implicitly suggests that she shaped the character of “Helen.” Holmes told *Green Book* in 1916 that since men were loathe to put a woman in danger, “if a photoplay actress wants to achieve real thrills, she must write them into the scenario herself” (741). The 1915 Signal serial *The Girl and the Game*, which she co-produced with director-husband J. P. McGowan, was full of what she called “real thrilly action”: the intrepid “Helen” saves her boyfriend and father from a train wreck, saves the former again, this time from a burning locomotive, saves the railroad from financial ruin, recovers the payroll from thieves, saves her boyfriend and another male friend from another train wreck, rescues a male character from a lynching, captures more thieves, saves two men from a mine cave-in,

recovers more stolen money, and uncouples a freight train to prevent a “terrible wreck.” All this she does in *The Girl and the Game*, according to the “Story to Date,” from extant Episode 15, “Driving the Last Spike.” Contemporary audiences can see for themselves exactly how many thrilling chances the Helen character takes in Episode 13, “Escape on a Fast Freight,” and Episode 26, “The Wild Engine,” of *The Hazards of Helen* series, both available on DVD from the National Film Preservation Foundation. We have reason to believe that at least some of the breathtaking stunts were Holmes’s invention, as she told the *New York Telegraph* in 1915 that while Frank Hamilton Spearman authored the script, she had to adapt his story to make “the thrills cascade throughout.” In an unpublished typescript from 1916, “by” Holmes, she is made to say that “the thrills are director McGowan’s inventions,” and that she followed his direction. This last account, although credited to Helen Holmes, was written by Terry Ramsaye, then the director of publicity for the Mutual Film Corporation, who would later write the earliest history of the American film industry, *A Million and One Nights* (Ramsaye 1926). Holmes did appear physically able to execute her own stunts. In 1917, the *Moving Picture World* reported that Holmes staged a head-on railroad collision for the California State Fair, jumping from a moving train to a moving car in front of a live audience (257), and in 1919, arrangements were made for Holmes to “loop the loop” in an airplane over Broadway and 42nd Street to promote *The Fatal Fortune*, a stunt “which will establish her as an ‘ace’ among serial stars” (871).

It was when the Mutual Film Corporation offered Holmes and McGowan financing and distribution that they left Kalem and created the Signal Film Corporation in 1915, starring Holmes in similar, action-centered roles. According to a later *Moving Picture World* account, the only serial produced under this arrangement, *The Girl and the Game*, grossed \$2,253,000 (298). When Mutual dissolved in 1918, so too did Signal. McGowan went back to Universal, but independent producer S. L. Krellberg created the S.L.K. Serial Corporation for Holmes and made a highbrow mystery serial, *The Fatal Fortune* (1919), which was not popular. In 1919, Holmes signed a contract with producers Harry and Albert Warner (of the not-yet-famous Warner Brothers) to make serials under the Helen Holmes Production Corporation, according to *Variety* in 1920. However, the Warners made her first film, *The Danger Trail* (1920), into a feature, hoping it would finance later serial production. Ultimately Holmes herself loaned the Warners \$5,000 to finish the jungle-themed serial *The Tiger Band* (1920), and then sued them after receiving only partial repayment, as *Variety* reported. With distribution agreements tied up in court, *The Tiger Band* was released on a states-rights basis with little advertising or promotion, and did not do well at the box office. The importance of advertising and distribution in the case of the serial queens cannot be emphasized enough, and could be dramatized by a comparison between the careers of Holmes and that of the more widely known White, whose international renown was made possible by French Pathé Frères’s worldwide distribution outlets and Hearst paper promotion. Also, while White was safely ensconced at an established company, Helen Holmes, after leaving the Kalem Company, was buffeted around as an independent producer between 1915 and 1920. After *The Tiger Band*, Helen Holmes retired as a producer. She continued to act in character roles under the direction of McGowan. They divorced in the early-to-mid-1920s, and Holmes retired from the screen after marrying cowboy stuntman Lloyd Saunders in

1926 (1950, n.p.). She returned to Hollywood when their cattle business failed and played a small role in *Poppy*, a 1936 W. C. Fields film (Carroll n.p.). After working as a Hollywood animal trainer in 1945, she ran an antiques business out of her home (“Star of ‘Silents’ Now Trains Dogs” n.p.). When Holmes died of a heart attack at age fifty-eight, Rose “Helen” Gibson, the actress-producer who replaced her on the *Hazards of Helen* after episode 48, was by her side (1950, n.p.).

Bibliography

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“Helen Holmes Sues.” *Variety* (3 July 1920). n. p. Helen Holmes clippings file, New York Public Library, Billy Rose Theatre Division.

“Helen Holmes, the Money Getter.” *Moving Picture World* (14 Apr. 1917): 298.

Holmes, Helen. “Action is the Spice of Life, Says Miss Holmes.” *New York Telegraph* (21 Nov. 1915). n.p. Helen Holmes clippings file, New York Public Library, Billy Rose Theatre Division.

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Mahar, Karen Ward. “The Girls Who Play: The Short Film and the New Woman” in *Women Filmmakers in Early Hollywood*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006.

Paramount Publicity Department. “Star of ‘Silents’ Now Trains Dogs” (19 Feb. 1945) n.p. Helen Holmes biography file, Helen Holmes biography file, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Margaret Herrick Library.

Parsons, Louella. “Helen Holmes Dies at 58.” *Los Angeles Examiner* (10 Aug. 1950): n.p. Helen Holmes biography file, Helen Holmes biography file, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Margaret Herrick Library.

Sewell, C.S. “Among the Independent Producers.” *Motion Picture World* (12 July 1919): 100.

Archival Paper Collections:

Robinson Locke Collection. Helen Holmes clippings file. [New York Public Library, Billy Rose Theatre Division](#).

Helen Holmes biography file. [Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Margaret Herrick Library](#).

Filmography

A. Archival Filmography: Extant Film Titles:

1. Helen Holmes as Actress and Co-Producer

The Girl and the Game chapters: Dir: J. P. McGowan, sc.: Frank H. Spearman (Signal Film Corporation US 1915-1916), cas: Helen Holmes, J. P. McGowan, Leo Maloney, George McDaniel.

- Chap. 1, “Helen’s Race with Death,” si, b&w, 2 reels. Archive: [Library of Congress \[USW\]](#).
- Chap. 10, “A Dash Through the Flames,” si, b&w, 2 reels. Archive: [Library of Congress \[USW\]](#)
- Chap. 13, “A Fight for a Fortune,” si, b&w, 2 reels. Archive: [Library of Congress \[USW\]](#).
- Chap. 15, “Driving the Last Spike,” si, b&w, 2 reels. Archive: [Library of Congress \[USW\]](#).

The Manager of the B&A. Dir.: J. P. McGowan (Signal Film Co. US 1916) cas.: Helen Holmes, Leo D. Maloney, Thomas Lingham, si, b&w, 35mm. Archive: [Library of Congress \[USW\]](#).

Lost Express. Dir.: J. P. McGowan (Signal Film Co. US 1917) cas.: Helen Holmes, Leo D. Maloney.

- Unidentified episode, si, b&w. Archive: [Museum of Modern Art \[USM\]](#).

The Railroad Raiders. Dir.: J. P. McGowan (Signal Film Co. US 1917) cas.: Helen Holmes, Thomas Lingham.

- Chap. 1, “The Circumstantial Evidence,” si, b&w, 35mm. Archive: [Library of Congress \[USW\]](#).
- Chap. 2, “A Double Steal,” si, b&w, 35mm. Archive: [Library of Congress \[USW\]](#), [National Film and Sound Archive of Australia \[AUC\]](#).

Whispering Smith. Dir.: Dir.: J. P. McGowan (Signal Film Co. US 1917) cas.: Helen Holmes, Thomas Lingham, si, b&w, 35mm. Archive: [UCLA Film and Television Archive \[USL\]](#).

2. Helen Holmes as Actress, Director and Screenwriter

The Hazards of Helen chapters: Dir: J. P. McGowan, Leo Maloney, Helen Holmes, sc.: J. P. McGowan, Helen Holmes (Kalem US 1915) cas.: Helen Holmes, Leo Maloney.

- Chap. 3, “The Girl at the Throttle,” si, b&w, 1 reel. Archive: [BFI National Archive \[GBB\]](#).
- Chap. 9, “Leap From the Water Tower,” si, b&w, 1 reel. Archive: [BFI National Archive \[GBB\]](#), [George Eastman Museum \[USR\]](#), [Library of Congress \[USW\]](#), [Academy Film Archive \[USF\]](#).
- Chap. 13, “Escape on a Fast Freight,” si, b&w, 1 reel. Archive: [Academy Film Archive \[USF\]](#), [Library of Congress \[USW\]](#), [UCLA Film and Television Archive \[USL\]](#).
- Chap. 20, “The Girl at Lone Point,” si, b&w, 1 reel. Archive: [BFI National Archive \[GBB\]](#)
- Chap. 26, “The Wild Engine,” si, b&w, 1 reel. Archive: [George Eastman Museum \[USR\]](#), [Library of Congress \[USW\]](#), [Academy Film Archive \[USF\]](#).
- Unidentified episode, si, b&w. Archive: [Museum of Modern Art \[USM\]](#).

3. Helen Holmes as Actress

Barney Oldfield's Race for a Life. Dir.: Mack Sennett (Mutual Film Corporation US 1913) cas: Mabel Normand, Mack Sennett, Ford Sterling, Helen Holmes, si, b&w, 35mm. Archive: [Cinema Museum \[GBC\]](#), [Cineteca del Friuli \[ITG\]](#), [George Eastman Museum \[USR\]](#), [Library of Congress \[USW\]](#), [Museum of Modern Art \[USM\]](#), [Library and Archives Canada \[CAO\]](#), [UCLA Film and Television Archive \[USL\]](#), [Academy Film Archive \[USF\]](#), [UC Berkeley Art Museum & Pacific Film Archive \[USB\]](#), [National Film and Sound Archive of Australia \[AUC\]](#).

The Flying Switch. Dir. J. P. McGowan (Kalem US 1913) cas.: Helen Holmes, G. A. Williams, si, b&w. Archive: [BFI National Archive \[GBB\]](#).

Hide and Seek. Dir: George Nichols. (Mutual US 1913) cas.: Mabel Normand, Nick Cogley, Ford Sterling, Helen Holmes, si, b&w, 35mm. Archive: [Library of Congress \[USW\]](#), [Lobster Films \[FRL\]](#).

The Smuggler's Last Deal. (Kalem US 1913) cas.: Helen Holmes, Charles Wells, si, b&w. Archive: [BFI National Archive \[GBB\]](#).

The Car of Death. Dir. J. P. McGowan (Kalem US 1914) cas.: Helen Holmes, Hart Hoxie, si, b&w. Archive: [George Eastman Museum \[USR\]](#).

Demon of the Rails. Dir.: J. P. McGowan (Kalem US 1914) cas.: Helen Holmes, J. P. McGowan, Charles Wells, si, b&w, 35mm. Archive: [Library of Congress \[USW\]](#), [Library and Archives Canada \[CAO\]](#).

Grouch, The Engineer. Dir. J. P. McGowan (Kalem US 1914) cas.: Helen Holmes, J. P. McGowan, si, b&w, 35mm. Archive: [BFI National Archive \[GBB\]](#).

The Lost Mail Sack. Dir. J. P. McGowan (Kalem US 1914) cas.: Helen Holmes, J. P. McGowan, si, b&w, 35mm. Archive: [George Eastman Museum \[USR\]](#).

A String of Pearls. Dir. J. P. McGowan (Kalem US 1914) cas.: Helen Holmes, William Brunton, si, b&w, 35mm. Archive: [George Eastman Museum \[USR\]](#).

Conductor's Courtship. Dir. J. P. McGowan [unconfirmed] (Kalem US 1914) cas.: Helen Holmes, si, b&w, 9.5mm. Archive: Private Collection [**Note:** this may be an episode of *The Hazards of Helen*].

The Fatal Fortune. Dir.: Donald MacKenzie (S. L. K. Serial Corp. US 1919) cas.: Helen Holmes, Jack Levering, Frank Wonderlee

- Chap. 14, “The Hidden Treasure,” si, b&w, 35mm. Archive: [George Eastman Museum \[USR\]](#).

Fighting Fury. Dir.: Clifford Smith (Universal Pictures US 1924) cas.: Jack Hoxie, Helen Holmes, Fred Kohler, si, b&w, 35mm. Archive: [Library of Congress \[USW\]](#).

Outwitted. Dir.: J. P. McGowan (Independent Pictures US 1925) cas.: Helen Holmes, William Desmond, J. P. McGowan, si, b&w, 35mm. Archive: [Library of Congress \[USW\]](#), [BFI National Archive \[GBB\]](#).

Barriers of the Law. Dir.: J. P. McGowan (Independent Pictures US 1925) cas.: Helen Holmes, William Desmond, J. P. McGowan, si, b&w, 35mm. Archive: [EYE Filmmuseum \[NLA\]](#), [UCLA Film and Television Archive \[USL\]](#), [George Eastman Museum \[USR\]](#).

Blood and Steel. Dir.: J. P. McGowan (Independent Pictures US 1925) cas.: Helen Holmes, William Desmond, Robert Edeson, si, b&w, 35mm. Archive: [Library of Congress \[USW\]](#).

Crossed Signals. Dir.: J. P. McGowan (Morris R. Schlank Productions US 1926) cas.: Helen Holmes, Henry Victor, Georgie Chapman, si, b&w. Archive: [Centre National du Cinéma et de l'Image Animée \[FRB\]](#), [Library of Congress \[USW\]](#).

The Lost Express. Dir.: J. P. McGowan (Morris R. Schlank Productions US 1926) cas.: Helen Holmes, Jack Mower, Henry Barrows, si, b&w, 35mm. Archive: [Library of Congress \[USW\]](#), [Academy Film Archive \[USF\]](#), [UC Berkeley Art Museum & Pacific Film Archive \[USB\]](#).

Mistaken Orders. Dir.: J. P. McGowan (Larry Wheeler Productions US 1926) cas.: Helen Holmes, Henry Barrows, si, b&w, 35mm. Archive: [Library of Congress \[USW\]](#), [Academy Film Archive \[USF\]](#), [BFI National Archive \[GBB\]](#).

The Open Switch. Dir.: J. P. McGowan (Larry Wheeler Productions US 1926) cas.: Charles Whittaker, Mack V. Wright, Helen Holmes, si, b&w. Archive: [Library of Congress \[USW\]](#).

Webs of Steel. Dir.: J. P. McGowan (Morris R. Schlank Productions US 1926) cas.: Helen Holmes, Andrew Waldron, si, b&w, 35mm. Archive: [Centre National du Cinéma et de l'Image Animée \[FRB\]](#), [Lobster Films \[FRL\]](#).

B. Filmography: Non-Extant Film Titles:

1. Helen Homes as Actress, Screenwriter and Co-Producer (Signal Film Co.)

Diamond Runner, 1916; *Judith of the Cumberland*s, 1916; *Lass of the Lumberlands*, 1916; *Medicine Bend*, 1916.

2. Helen Holmes as Actress and Co-Producer (Holmes Producing Corp.)

The Tiger Band (serial), 1920; *Ghost City*, 1921.

3. Helen Holmes as Actress and Screenwriter

A Desperate Leap, 1914; *The Hazards of Helen*, ep. 1,2, 4-8, 10-12, 14-19, 21-25, 26-48, 1914-1915; *The Girl and the Game*, ep. 1-15, 1915; *When Rogues Fall Out*, 1915; *The Mettle of Jerry McGuire*, 1916.

4. Helen Holmes as Screenwriter

A Fight to a Finish, 1915; *The Yellow Star*, 1915.

5. Helen Holmes as Actress

The Alibi, 1913; *Baffled, Not Beaten*, 1913; *Battle at Fort Laramie*, 1913; *Birds of Prey*, 1913; *Brought to Bay*, 1913; *A Demand for Justice*, 1913; *Express Car Mystery*, 1913; *Foot Print Clue*, 1913; *Gilt Edge Stocks*, 1913; *Hermit's Ruse*, 1913; *In Peril of His Life*, 1913; *The Monogrammed Cigarette*, 1913; *The Runaway Freight*, 1913; *The Silent Warning*, 1913; *Substitute Engineer*, 1913; *Stolen Tapestries*, 1913; *Treachery of a Scar*, 1913; *The County Seat War*, 1914; *The Delayed Special*, 1914; *Explosive "D"*, 1914; *Express Messenger*, 1914; *Fast Freight 3205*, 1914; *Flaw in the Alibi*, 1914; *From Peril to Peril*, 1914; *His Nemesis*, 1914; *Identification*, 1914; *Into the Depths*, 1914; *Kaintucky Bill*, 1914; *A Man's Soul*, 1914; *A Million in Jewels*, 1914; *Near Death's Door*, 1914; *Oil Well Conspicacy*, 1914; *Operator at Black Rock*, 1914; *Playing for a Fortune*, 1914; *The Rajah's Jewels*, 1914; *Refrigerator Car's Captive*, 1914; *Rival Railroad's Plot*, 1914; *The Stolen Rembrandt*, 1914; *A String of Pearls*, 1914; *Under Desperation's Spur*, 1914; *Crook's Romance*, 1921; *Hills of Missing Men*, 1922; *One Million in Jewels*, 1923; *Stormy Seas*, 1923; 40-

Horse Hawkins, 1924; *Battling Brewster*, 1924; *Riddle Rider*, 1924; *Duped*, 1925; *The Sign of the Cactus*, 1925; *Train Wreckers*, 1925; *Fast Freight*, 1926; *Perils of the Rail*, 1926.

C. DVD Sources:

Pioneers: First Women Filmmakers. DVD/Blu-ray. (Kino Lorber US 2018) - contains episodes of *The Hazards of Helen* (ep. 9, 13, and 26)

Treasures III: Social Issues in American Film, 1900-1934. DVD. (Image Entertainment US, 2007) (*The Hazards of Helen*, chapter 13).

More Treasures From American Film Archive, 1894-1931. DVD (Image Entertainment US, 2004) (*The Hazards of Helen*, chapter 26).

Hazards of Helen. DVD (Alpha Video US, 2016) Contains: *The Leap from the Water Tower* (1915), *The Wrong Train Order* (1915), *The Pay Train* (1915), *In Danger's Path* (1915), *The Open Track* (1916) [starring Helen Gibson], *The Governor's Special* (1916) [starring Helen Gibson].

D. Streamed Media:

Excerpt of *The Hazards of Helen* episode 13 (1915): <http://www.filmpreservation.org/dvds-and-books/clips/the-hazards-of-helen-episode-13-1915-clip>

Credit Report

Credits for Helen Holmes were collected from Paul Spehr, AFI, Richard E. Braff, FIAF, and *J. P. McGowan, a Biography* by John J. McGowan. There are a few titles that can't be confirmed, and a good third to half of the films do not appear in Spehr, but do appear in Braff. The Helen Holmes version of *The Lone Hand* is listed in AFI as being released in 1922. FIAF's entry for *The Lone Hand* is a mixture of cast from both the 1922 and 1919 versions of the film. It is therefore very uncertain what is actually held by the Library of Congress and UCLA. The film *Kaintucky Bill* is listed in Braff as *Kentucky Bill*. Two films are not listed in any of the standard sources, but appear in other references books. *Conductor's Courtship*, which is attributed to McGowan and Holmes, as is listed in Spehr as a Kalem film and mentioned in the McGowan bio. However, both entries are listed with question marks as to whether they both worked on the film. *Hide and Seek* is also not listed in any standard source, however there are stills from the film, where she appears alongside Mabel Normand and Nick Cogley. The author states that Helen Holmes appeared in the *Danger Trail* for Warner Bros. However, AFI, Braff, FIAF, and IMDB do not list this title. The site www.silentera.com suggests that the film was directed by Gilbert P. Hamilton, but it does not confirm this. It is possible that *The Danger Trail* is one of the titles of *The Tiger Band* series, which was directed by Hamilton.

Citation

Mahar, Karen Ward. "Helen Holmes." In Jane Gaines, Radha Vatsal, and Monica Dall'Asta, eds. *Women Film Pioneers Project*. New York, NY: Columbia University Libraries, 2013. <<https://wfpp-test.cul.columbia.edu/pioneer/ccp-helen-holmes/>>