

FINDING THE MAGIC GARDEN

By Fran Cappelletti

The Ross Historical Society/Jose Moya del Pino Library is located on the grounds of the Marin Art and Garden Center in Ross, California. Many use the convenient acronym of MAGC for this beautiful place, well deserved for over 70 years. But this is the story of another 'magic' garden, or perhaps we should say THE magic garden.

This story starts with a tragic ending, the accidental death of author Gene Stratton-Porter. Her own life could have been written as a Hollywood story. Born in Wabash County, Indiana in 1863, she grew up, married a local businessman and had a daughter. After moving to a house near the Limberlost Swamp in Northeast Indiana, she began to study nature and shared her experiences through writing and photography. In time, her work was published in outdoor and recreation magazines. This led to additional success as a novelist in the early 20th Century. Novels included Freckles, A Girl of the Limberlost and Laddie. Her popularity grew and she became famous across the world. This critical and financial success allowed her to build a beautiful home on the shores of Sylvan Lake in Rome City, Indiana. It was a special place, but fame and fortune also resulted in a significant loss of privacy. With the growth of the silent film industry, she moved to Los Angeles to take control over adaptations of her books and continue her work. Living in fast growing Los Angeles, she enjoyed the social scene and natural environment. She even built a custom mansion on a large estate in the new Bel Air development. Tragically, before she could move into her dream home, she was mortally wounded in 1924 when her chauffeur driven automobile was struck by a streetcar.

An Unfinished Story

Sometime later her nearly finished novel, The Magic Garden, was completed and published by her daughter, Jeannette Porter Meehan. As with many of her stories, it was adapted into a film, directed by son-in-law Leo J. Meehan. A large set was built in Hollywood for many scenes, with one resembling the canals of Venice. Another location, an actual garden, was sought by the crew. Despite much searching, no suitable locations were found in Southern California. Industry publications note that the producers succeeded in finding a Northern California location, the Town of Ross in Marin County.

Local newspapers, such as the Sausalito News and Mill Valley Record, covered the story, specifying the exact outdoor location as the Ross estate of George and Frances Young.

For the proper filming of the scenes of "The Magic Garden," the right kind of a country estate had to be located, and those in charge of the production toured the state from San Diego northward before they could find what they desired on the Young estate at Ross.

"Most of the gardens in the Southland, while beautiful, looked too geometrical and stilted and lacked the real beauty of a garden," Frank Sturken, secretary of Marvelous Marin, declared. "The two gentlemen in charge of the company said the Young gardens were ideal for their purposes and promised to give Marvelous Marin publicity in the motion picture magazines."

"Marin Scenery Recognized", Mill Valley Record, November 6, 1926

Marin County was a beautiful place, and the estates nestled in the heart of the Ross Valley were known for their many trees and plants from across the world and the care taken in the design and maintenance of their landscapes. Several estates were known by name, such as Fern Hill and Sunnyside.

George and Frances Young



Grounds of Young Estate, 1916, Ross Historical Society

The Young estate had the fitting name of Orchard Lawn. Purchased in 1907, the estate became a showplace for social and charitable events. One party to raise funds for playgrounds accommodated over two hundred guests. The well-manicured grounds included ponds and bridges with Asian themes and statuary from the Panama-Pacific International Exposition of 1915.

George Young made his fortune in the shoe industry, from owning his own company to joining with the George E. Keith Company of Walk-Over Shoe fame. After George died in 1933 during a trip to Paris, Frances remained on the estate until her death in 1959. She continued to support many civic and philanthropic causes at Orchard Lawn, such as a 1940 event to support the British War Relief Fund. Harkening back to the Magic Garden, this event had the support and presence of Hollywood actors Richard Greene, Blanche Yurka and Vince Barnett. Locally, she supported the Red Cross, her church and theater groups.

She also dedicated the locally famous magnolia tree at the Marin Art and Garden Center to her husband. The tree remains a centerpiece on the grounds. Frances further provided much needed funding to complete the Art Gallery at the Center. Named in her honor, this Gardner Dailey designed building opened in 1948 and served the Marin Society of Artists for several decades. While the building was recently renovated and the name changed, it still serves as a gallery and exhibition space.



Ross Historical Society Photo Archive

Without heirs, the Youngs were largely forgotten, but their contributions to their community are lasting.

Production and Promotion of The Magic Garden



Exhibitors Herald December 1926-March 1927, Courtesy of the Media History Digital Library, (<http://mediahistoryproject.org>)

The film is a love story in two parts. When a young girl with divorced parents runs away from her chauffeur, she soon meets a boy in a beautiful garden. Apart for many years, they somehow reunited in the Magic Garden once more.

Two experienced child actors, Joyce Coad and Phillippe De Lacy, played the boy and girl. Joyce appeared in *The Devil's Circus* with Norma Shearer and in *The Scarlet Letter* as Pearl to Lillian Gish's Hester. Phillippe appeared in many films, notably with Mary Pickford in *Rosita* and as Michael in the 1924 version of *Peter Pan*.



Moving Picture World, December 18, 1926. Courtesy of the Media History Digital Library, (<http://mediahistoryproject.org>)

Margaret Morris and Raymond Keane played the couple as grownups. Other cast members included Hedda Hopper and Charles Clary. Director J. Leo Meehan made his

name with adaptations of many Stratton-Porter novels and cameraman Al Siegler already had many years of experience in film.

A young Carroll Clark is credited with art direction for the ambitious and expansive studio sets. This was at the start of a long and celebrated career that includes work on King Kong, The Gay Divorcee and Mary Poppins among many others.

The studio, Film Booking Office of America, promoted the film in industry publications and newspapers. At the time, the head of the studio was Joseph P. Kennedy. This was one of many careers for him, not yet known as the father of a U.S. President, Attorney General and Senator.

Critical Reception

When it opened at the Figueroa Theater on April 2, 1927, the Los Angeles Times critic noted the improbable plot and overly literal subtitles but was impressed with the excellent cast. Other reviews for the film were generally positive, with those interested in family friendly subjects the most receptive.

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THE EDUCATIONAL SCREEN

Film Estimates — Continued

Titles of Films (Actors) (Producers and Distributors)	For Intelligent Adults	For Youth (15 to 20 yrs.)	For Children (under 15 yrs)
KISS IN A TAXI, THE (Bebe Daniels) F. P.-L. A shade better than Bebe's previous stories.	Ordinary	Amusing	Hardly
LONG LOOP ON THE PECOS, THE (Leo Maloney) Pathe A shooty western—hard fighting, fast riding, etc.	Hardly	Perhaps	No
LOVE'S GREATEST MISTAKE (Evelyn Brent) F. P.-L. Synthetic jazz—millionaire villain—improper proposals—penniless architect—"love" wins. Quite unwholesome. (See Review No. 102)	Hardly	Decidedly not	Bad
MAGIC GARDEN, THE (Margaret Morris) F. B. O. Wholesome story with notable child acting. Very sentimental. Perhaps "too namby-pamby for adults," says one judge.	Good	Excellent	Wholesome

The Educational Screen, 1926-27. Courtesy of the Media History Digital Library, (<http://mediahistoryproject.org>)

THE MAGIC GARDEN: Special cast—January 6. Seemed to please my patrons. It does not have the usual modern touch of so many pictures, but it is the story of two children separated in childhood who later meet in the Magic Garden. The name and author are the chief things that put the picture over.—Guy B. Amis, Princess theatre, Lexington, Tenn.—Small town patronage.

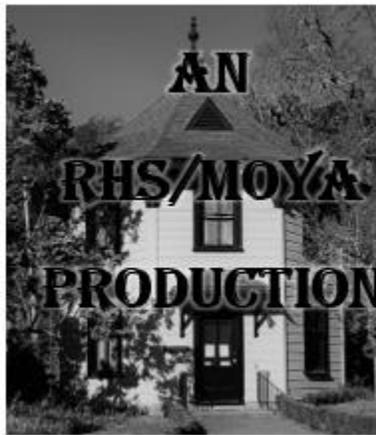
Exhibitors World, 1928. Courtesy of the Media History Digital Library (<http://mediahistoryproject.org>)

Conclusion

You can visit the homes of Gene Stratton-Porter today. Her Sylvan Lake cabin is open to the public at the Gene Stratton-Porter Historic Site in Rome City, Indiana, www.genestratton-porter.com/. Another home is at the Limberlost State Historic Site, www.indianamuseum.org/limberlost-state-historic-site. In Los Angeles, her house at 356 South Serrano Avenue is still standing and the Bel Air estate can still be glimpsed from a nearby road.

Many other silent films were made in Marin County in the first decades of the 20th Century, but the era of silent films was nearing an end. The Magic Garden slipped into obscurity as technology, tastes and expectations changed. Some of the actors and actresses, such as star Margaret Morris, would not play a part in the talking age. Others in the cast, such as Hedda Hopper, would continue to make their mark in Hollywood for many years. The physical film itself is considered lost, but perhaps it will be found once again.

The End?



Thanks to the Following Sources of Information and Inspiration

Gene Stratton-Porter Historic Site, www.genestratton-porter.com/

[Media History Digital Library](http://mediahistoryproject.org/), <http://mediahistoryproject.org/>

California Digital Newspaper Collection, Center for Bibliographic Studies and Research,
University of California, Riverside, <<http://cdnc.ucr.edu>>

Ross Historical Society/Jose Moya del Pino Library, moya-rhs.org

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