Above, First Cameraman James Wong Howe adjusts the parallax viewer while working on the United Artists lot, probably on *The Rescue*, in 1928.

ONE

It was just by accident that I discovered it.

I was born in 1899 on August 28th in China, on the mainland in Kwang-tung [Guangdong] province, and came to this country in 1904. My youth was spent in the state of Washington in a small town called Pasco. That's where I was raised. I left there when I was about thirteen or fourteen. I went to a farming town called Freewater, Oregon. When I was a young kid going to school, I'd box a little. But I didn't want to make a career of it. I boxed for a short time, a year or two.

I went to work for my uncle around 1915. I lived with him in Astoria, Oregon. I left there in 1916 and came down to San Francisco. What I wanted to do really was go to aviation school. There was a school in Redwood City, of which I can't remember the name now. I ran out of money, so I came down to Los Angeles. This was all during World War I. You know when you're a young kid, when you see these posters about aviation, about flying—it was quite a thing in those days.

I was walking down the street one day in L.A., and I saw a movie company out shooting. It was the Mack Sennett Company and the cameraman was Len Powers.[1] I knew him from Portland. He was a boxer up there, a professional. He had come down earlier


BOXING STAGED TONIGHT

At right a Portland newspaper from May 1915 features a photo of young "Jimmy Howe, Chinese Boxer" This was Howe's second fight as a 105-pound bantamweight and his first win.

and had boxed in L.A. In those days movie stars such as Charlie Chaplin and Roscoe Arbuckle liked to have a stable of prize-fighters; and so Len Powers got managed by one of these big stars and later went on to be a cameraman. They held boxing matches at an old club in Vernon. They had a bar there with thirty bartenders. It was called Jack Doyle's Place.[2] When I saw Len and went up to say hello to him, he told me, "Why don't you get into this business? It's wonderful." I Asked him how and he said go out to the studios and inquire about being a [camera] assistant. But I didn't at that time. Later I did get a job as a delivery boy for a commercial photographer, Raymond Stagg. He had a studio downtown near 8th and Hill Streets. There were quite a number of movie studios down there at the time. There was one down on Georgia Street near the car barns; there was one over on Flower Street, I think; and one up above Hill Street.[3] There was one over on the East side. They were scattered all over. One was over near the Selig Zoo[4] where L.B. Mayer had his studio. Mayer started with Schulberg. I think that's where they got their trademark. They had the lions there and they probably went over and took a picture, a close-up of this lion, and they used it for the MGM trademark.

Well, I worked for Raymond Stagg a few months. This was in late 1916 or early '17. I had a friend that wanted to go back to China and he needed some passport photos, so one evening I invited him up to the studio where I'd take the passport pictures for him. Mr. Stagg happened to come in at that time. He was going out to do a photographic job and was looking for a lens; and I happened to be using the lens that he wanted. It had finger marks all over it; and he wasn't happy about that. So he let me go, and I was out of a job again.

That time I saw Len Powers working still intrigued me. I thought photography would be a wonderful field. I always did think that about it. When I was a small boy going to school, I had one of those little box Brownies. They probably sold for a dollar back then. The Brownie didn't have a finder, so sometimes you'd take pictures that cut off the heads or legs. I used to take pictures of my brothers and sisters with it and show them to my dad, and some of the shots would have their heads cut off. He was the old-fashioned type. Chinese are like some American Indians: they don't like to have their pictures taken. They're superstitious. When I showed my father these pictures of my brother and sister with their heads off, he didn't like it at all. I told him, "The camera doesn't have a finder. If I had a few dollars I could get a better one, and I could take better pictures." Yes, the Brownie was quite something, and my father didn't give me money for anything better. I developed my own film because there was no local camera shop where one could have that done. I saw the owner of the drugstore Mr. Sullivan a few years ago, and we talked about those days when he taught me how to load a camera and then develop the film. He had a darkroom in the basement where he showed me how to mix the chemicals for the trays of developer and fixer. The first time, of course, I was developing something that had a yellow glow—I was trying to develop a wrapper. But finally when I got images to appear, that was magical to take this black negative and put it over some blank photo paper and to see the image come up. It

Above: the Famous Players-Lasky studio complex in 1913, from *Writing the Photoplay* by J. Berg Esenwein and Arthur Leeds, looking south-east with the intersection of Selma Avenue and Vine Street in the lower center. The Argyle-Avenue entrance is top left between the studio and the back lot was on the other (east) side of Argyle, which connects Sunset Boulevard (top right) to Selma Avenue.

Above, DeMille's *Male and Female* with Gloria Swanson (center) in the type of elaborate and upscale set on which Howe sometimes spent the night.

was really fascinating. This fascination helped me a great deal when I finally got into the motion picture studios as an assistant.

How did you actually get that first job?

Well, it was in 1917, June or July, I don't remember the exact month. I do remember it was in the summer, and I was standing there on Argyle [Avenue] by the gate that was right next to the laboratory[5] and waiting for Mr. [Alvin] Wyckoff. He was the head of the camera department and also Cecil B. DeMille's chief cameraman. I waited for a couple of hours until he came walking out and the gate man said, "That's Mr. Wyckoff." As I went up to him, he said, "Well, what do you want?" I said, "Can I get a job as an assistant cameraman?" He told me, "Unfortunately I just put a boy to work." "Ah, gee," I said, "I've been standing here waiting for two hours." So he said, "I'll give you a job. It's not as an assistant, but

later on you might work up to it." I asked him what it was. He said, "The assistant cameramen throw their waste film and paper away in the camera department, and I'd like to have someone to keep it clean. That'll be your job. When the time comes if I need another assistant, you'll have the first opportunity. It doesn't pay much money: only ten dollars a week." I took it and went to work. We didn't have any union obstacles to surmount back then.

After about six or seven months, Mr. DeMille needed an extra assistant to hold a slate and be the clapper boy. So Mr. Wyckoff called down to the lab and told them to send me up to the set. That's how I became an assistant. Mr. DeMille seemed to take a liking to me, or how I looked. I used to smoke a cigar while I held the slate, and he thought it was quite comical. "Get him," he told Wyckoff. "It gives me a laugh when I see him, so keep him with us." I became one of the third or fourth assistants. I was on several DeMille pictures including *Male and Female*, a picture with Thomas Meighan, Lila Lee, Gloria Swanson, and Bebe Daniels. This was 1919. But I never photographed any of Mr. DeMille's pictures.

Well you know, Alain, in silent movies we always had two cameras for every set-up, for every scene they photographed. The reason for that was that they needed two negatives, one for domestic and one for the European market. So they set up the second camera, and the person who ran it was called a second cameraman. The other or main one was called the first camera. They were not known as directors of photography in those days. That title was only devised later, after sound came in. Since they had the first and second cameras, you were promoted from an assistant to a second cameraman. From second camera, you

Right, on the set of *Something to Think About*: Gloria Swanson poses with Cecil B. DeMille while camera assistant James Wong Howe (in jockey cap at right rear) looks on.

Above, Bert Glennon (left) operates first camera and Wong Howe at center cranks the second. At left, a Bell & Howell Model 2709 with a side-mounted hand crank, 4-lens turret and parallax viewer, like the one Wong Howe is seen adjusting in the photograph on page 18.

became the first cameraman. That's the way it went. So after about two years as an assistant, I was promoted to second camera operator. When the first cameraman set up his camera, I would put my camera as close to it as possible to duplicate the shot that he had. If you saw a print from that negative, you'd be seeing my composition, my set-up, but it would only be a duplicate. You would see that and my hand-cranking because we hand cranked the cameras[6] in silent movie productions; but the lighting was all done by the first cameraman. The second cameraman usually had nothing to do with the lighting.

On which picture were you promoted to second cameraman?

It was a on picture with Harold Rosson as first cameraman, about 1919 or 1920, [called *Everything for Sale*].[7] But I mostly worked on pictures with Bert Glennon as the first cameraman.

How did you get promoted to first camera?

I had bought a five-by-seven view camera, which I used to take pictures for the actors. You see, back then they didn't have agents or managers to arrange that. Every actor or actress had to have pictures taken, which they could leave at the studio casting office. By making portraits I learned how to light close-ups. A portrait is really the same as a close-up. I would do it right in the studio using the lights and equipment. I'd take the still pictures right

Above, a diffused portrait of silent-film star Mary Miles Minter.

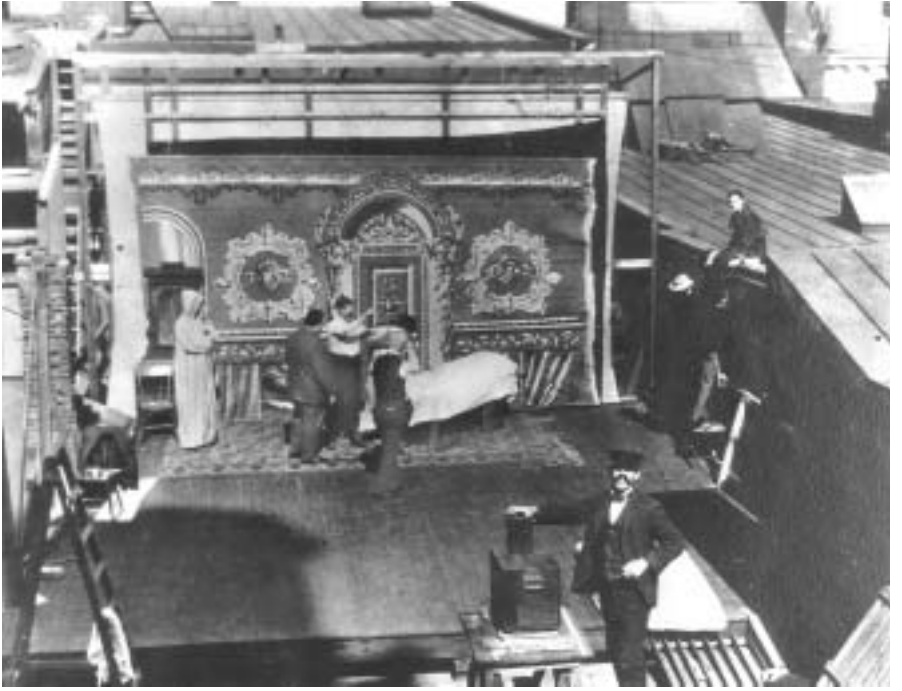
after these people got through work, when they were still in their make-up, or sometimes I'd come in on Sundays.[8] I made a good living with that extra work. It helped me a great deal. But more important, it kept me photographing and lighting faces. So one day Miss Mary Miles Minter walked by, and I asked her if I could make a portrait of her. She was very lovely, with curls, had a beautiful costume; and she agreed to pose for me. I made a portrait of her and enlarged it. I gave her some prints, and she liked them very much. She asked me if I could make her look like that in the movies. I said that I could. You see, Mary Miles Minter had beautiful, light, pale blue eyes. She had beautiful coloring, very blonde hair and lovely skin, only she had a little cat scratch up here on her forehead. She was concerned about that and always told [her cameramen to] be careful that the scratch didn't show. But she liked the pictures I made for her. A few months later I was called into the head office and told that I would be Miss Minter's

Left, extra players seated in a silent-era glass stage at the Selig Studios.

Opposite, a hooded performer stands in front on a back drop on a carpeted open-air set. In the foreground a cameraman waits to start shooting.

cameraman. She [had] asked for me to go down and see her. I went down, knocked on her dressing room door, and when I went in she had the pictures I had taken right there on the table by the dressing room mirror. She told me that she liked them so much because I made her eyes look dark. In those days, Alain, we were photographing on orthochromatic film. It was sensitive to the blue end of the spectrum, much more sensitive to blue than to the red at the other end of the spectrum. In other words, the film would not absorb as much of the light reflected of anything colored red, it would go "dark"; and the blue would go white or wash out.[9] That's why we could never get a white cloud against a blue sky, because the blue would go white and they'd all blend in. She had light blue eyes and they would wash out, but not in these still photos.

The only problem was that I didn't know what I had done to make her eyes go dark. I walked back there to where I took the pictures, and I stood where she had posed and looked around; and suddenly I found myself facing this big piece of black velvet that Mr. Wyckoff had been using to make double exposures for a DeMille picture.[10] We didn't have enclosed studios then. We had open stages with glass walls and ceilings. So if we wanted night scenes, we'd pull the black cloth over the glass to keep the daylight out; and if we wanted diffused light, we'd pull over a white canvas. I thought, "Well, it's that black velvet. That's the reason for her eyes going dark." I went and got a little hand mirror and held it up facing the black velvet. The reflection was dark. The velvet made it dark. I would tip it up to the white canvas and it went light. So I realized, "That's what it is. The reflection is what made her eyes go dark. Because she stood in front of this big piece of



black velvet." I immediately had a special one made up, not quite as large, of course, as the one on the wall. I had one made on a five-by-six frame. Then I cut a little hole in that and stuck my lens through; and that's how I made her close-ups. In lighting her close-ups, I used portraiture light, I always placed my lamps high, at about forty-five degrees, and that kept the light from going directly into her eyes. So with this black velvet in front they reflected darkness and her eyes became dark. They weren't black, but they were darker than they had ever been photographed before using orthochromatic film.

And no one had ever tried this before?

No, no one. It was just by accident that I discovered it. That's how I became first cameraman [on *Drums of Fate*]. That was in 1922. It took me five years, from 1917 to 1922 to become a chief cameraman. Today it takes fifteen, sometimes twenty years, sometimes more. Of course now, with union contracts for most of the jobs,[11] it's another story. It's tremendously difficult to get into the unions today. But I think that it's going to ease up a little. At least, I hope so; because there's so much talent coming out of the universities such as UCLA and USC. Conrad Hall, who is one of our new generation of cameramen, studied at USC. He photographed *The Professionals* and *In Cold Blood*. Those were both fine camerawork. A lot of people don't realize that back in the 1920s, a lot of those who came into movies did so without much prior experience and learned while they were working. Some had no experience at all really. A few cameramen had some, such as Arthur Edeson