

## London film pioneer played key role in shaping Hollywood

By Mark Kearney

With the upcoming Oscar nominations and last year's mostly silent Oscar-winning film, *The Artist*, there's good reason to revisit the beginning of the Hollywood movie industry and the role one director from here in London played in changing Hollywood into the cinema capital of the world.

Al Christie remembered Hollywood in those early days as "sleepy. Hot, sleepy little town. There were no restaurants. We had to get a Chinese (cook) to serve the company – sandwiches and a piece of pie to keep them here."

In those early days of silent films, costs were almost unimaginably low compared to today's industry. Extras would work for car fare while good parts could be had for five dollars a day.

But Hollywood had the climate as well as open streets with little traffic, beautiful trees that could serve as props and background and sunshine that allowed for year-round filming.

It may be a stretch to call London "Hollywood North," but looking back just over 100 years ago to Hollywood's start in the movie business, it's worth noting the key role that Christie, who was born in the Forest City in 1886, played in that community's transformation.

Christie's claim to fame is that in the fall of 1911 he made the first studio film ever in what is Hollywood. Some sources cite the acclaimed director D.W. Griffith as having shot the first film there a year before, but note that Christie's was the first *studio* film. Christie, on the other hand, always contended he was first.

There is a plaque at the current site of CBS studios acknowledging that Christie was the first to have a permanent studio in Hollywood. And there's a chapter devoted to Christie and his brother Charles from the 2000 book *Stardust and Shadows* by New Brunswick author Charles Foster, but Christie's achievements have all been ignored here in his hometown and in Canada in general. Canada's Walk of Fame in Toronto has recognized Mary Pickford for her role in Hollywood's development but so far no star for this successful director.

In the summer of 2010, I travelled to the University of Wyoming in Laramie to pore over Christies' archival material. Sorting through various articles, studio newsletters, shooting schedules and scripts, I've pieced together a portion of that historic undertaking from a century ago.

Like every other filmmaker of the time, Christie, who left London as a young adult, was based primarily around New York. But “the East was so very bad in winter,” he told a writer once. The winter before he headed west, Christie had gone to Baltimore, lured by stories that described it as “the Gateway of the South.” He quickly learned it wasn’t.

“After a winter in Baltimore we knew we had to go somewhere else.”

Christie, who as a young man first caught the show business bug working at the old London Opera House, headed west in 1911 with about \$500. He arrived late one night and his first thoughts were “it wasn’t a very impressive sight. I never heard of Hollywood.”

A few other filmmakers had tried out different parts of southern California before Christie arrived. D.W. Griffith had scouted around Los Angeles the previous year while others worked in Edendale and Glendale. “But we were the first in Hollywood,” Christie insisted in an interview from the early 1920s.

In 1911, Christie set up in a tavern/hotel at the corner of Sunset Boulevard and Gower Street. “It was about 100 feet long in the front end -- the barber shop was in the corner. The bar ...made an ideal carpenter shop,” Christie remembered. Some actors dressed in the little dining rooms while others less fortunate changed clothes in an old barn where the horses used to be. “We found this place late (one) Saturday night, got it painted and on Tuesday we started our first picture.”

“We must have made close to fifty films just outside the hotel’s back door,” he once said in an interview. “They charged us \$30 a month and threw in the interior of the tavern, including the bedrooms.”

This corner of southern California was a boon to Christie and others, full of picturesque scenery and close to different kinds of topography that could serve as backdrops to both comedies and dramas. “We had everything we wanted here,” he said in one the archive’s articles. “We had canyons—we had all the Los Feliz road. Griffith Park was our big studio. Those winding roads where the stage coaches came around—they were made to order for Westerns.”

Christie was mostly known for his comedies -- his most popular films from the 1920s were *So Long Letty* and the 1925 version of *Charley’s Aunt*. In his time Christie was the clear rival of the more celebrated comedy directors (fellow Canadian) Mack Sennett and Hal Roach.

Christie recalls every actor in those days being handy with tools, and they would chip in and build sets once shooting was done for the day. “We would say ‘all right boys, now we’ll put up the house for tomorrow.’ And everyone would take up their hammer and saw (because) they nearly all started as carpenters anyway.

“But the actors didn’t mind. They weren’t actors then. You just took someone and made him an actor. The legitimate actor was more or less ashamed to be seen in pictures.”

Even Christie’s mother, who had accompanied him to California, made all the curtains for the sets in her spare time. And the thinking in those early years was that if you could do that kind of job, then you could certainly appear in front of the camera too.

“Everybody worked. I have a picture of myself in a dress suit and everyone but the painter was in dress suits,” Christie recalled. “We all had our faces made up and we all worked in dress suits. Carpenters and everybody – no one was excused from working in front of that camera. Even the cameraman. Someone would turn (the crank) for him for awhile.”

Christie thrived during the silent films days and survived big losses from the 1929 stock market crash to continue making a name for himself in movies with sound, working with many stars along the way, including Bing Crosby. A letter from Crosby noting “I remembered them (Christie and his brother) as two fine gentlemen” is in the London Room of the Central library here.

Christie died of a heart attack in April 1951, and perhaps the upcoming 62nd anniversary of his death this year may spur Londoners or other Canadians interested in cinematic heritage to finally acknowledge this true film pioneer in some kind of lasting way.