Biography of Bessie (Harrison) (Eyton) (Coffey) McDonald



BESSIE HARRISON was born 05 July 1890 in Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara County, California and died, 22 January 1965 at the age of 74 in Thousand Oaks, Ventura County, California. Her Cause of Death was Congestive Heart Failure. She is buried at Ivy Lawn Memorial Park, Ventura, Ventura County, California on January 29, 1965 in Section E, Plot 26, Grave 6E with the name of BESSIE MCDONALD. Her parents were EDGAR THOMAS HARRISON and CLARIBEL MEAD. She married 1st CHARLES F. EYTON (1871-1941), Selig producer, about 1909 and divorced between 1912 and 1915. She married 2nd CLARK BREWER COFFEY (1885 -) 29 September 1916 and divorced 29 June 1923. She married 3rd a <unknown> McDonald.

In the 1900 U.S. Census at the age of nine, Bessie lived along with her parents and brother Elbert, on South Hope Street in Los Angeles. By the 1910 U.S. Census as indicated on the census, she was married to Charles F. Eyton for a year and living on

North 49th Street in Los Angeles. In the 1920 U.S. Census, she is married but apparently separated from her second husband, Clark Coffey. She is living on Hillcrest Road in Los Angeles with her mother, who was also remarried and divorced from her second husband, Henry Brightly. Also living with her was brother, Elbert; and her half brother and sister, Henry and Claribel.

Bessie got into show business by way of her father Edgar, who was a musician. The 1917 "Lincoln Daily Star" stated "she was visiting the Selig studios with a party of friends, when a director saw and liked her red hair because he said it would photograph a beautiful black, so he offered her a minor role." As was common during that period, she married quite young and used her married name Eyton throughout her career, even after her divorce. Although she had no formal training on the stage, as did many early film actors, she was talented and soon rose to be one of Selig's most popular performers. Most of the films she appeared in were melodramas, but she made sure that each film had enough action and stunts to keep the viewers' interest. Stated in an article found in the 1916 Logansport Pharos-Reporter, Bessie "is proud of the fact that she began her motion picture career as an "extra girl". Devoid of theatrical experience, she went on with the mob and by dint of hard work and determination to succeed, coupled with an unusual personality, was soon cast for "bits." From small parts, she rapidly advanced, and today is considered one of the most talented leading women in motion pictures. Miss Eyton is a striking example of what an American girl can accomplish, if she is content to begin at the bottom and work their way, step by step, to the goal of their ambition."

An auburn haired, blue eyed, and pioneering screen actress Bessie Eyton (née Harrison) an actor / screenwriter was always popular with the audience. It was her portrayal of Virginia Carvel in the 1916 Civil War movie, *The Crisis*, based on Winston Churchill's sprawling novel that won her critical acclaim. At 12 reels, this story of a willful Southern belle was in many ways the *Gone With the Wind* of its day and it was at the height of her popularity. She appeared opposite such virile matinee idols as Thomas Santschi, Tom Mix, and Wheeler Oakman.

She signed with the Selig Company's Los Angeles branch in 1910 and came to the screen in 1911 as Hobart Bosworth's leading lady and remained with the Selig Company until it went out of business in 1918, she never regained her former popularity. Her period was decidedly the 1910s prior to America's involvement in World War I, but she made sporadic screen appearances until 1925, returning in the 1930s in bit parts and as a supporting actor.

Bessie in her childhood, to her credit, was famous on the west coast for the swimming championship. Some had thought that her entry to acting was through



17 group portrait of Bessie Eyton, Thomas Sarschi and Eugenie Beseserer, movi ors, posing in a room in Chicago, Illinois N-0088730, Chicago Daily News negatives collection, Chicago History Museum)

her "marvelous swimming ability" and that this notoriety very quickly exploited her talent in becoming an actress. She continued this athleticism into her acting career as she did all her own stunts. "She was unique in that she was not only a pretty, dainty actress, but in pictures that required daring rides on racing horses, before a herd of stampeding buffalo, dives from decks of ocean liners or dangerous drives over mountain roads at the wheel of a car she refused to have anyone double for her. She was clever in her soft work and glorious in her outdoor daring. Those who watch "The Spoilers" will see her dive from the deck of the Alaskan vessel. She played the leading feminine role in this picture and really made the dive as pictured" as stated in the 1915 San Francisco Chronicle newspaper.



In April 1916, Bessie appeared in the "Popular Science Monthly" for her devising a way to turn her automobile into a dressing room. As stated in this monthly "Her wheel dressing room is a triumph of ingenuity over space. She has taken her small car and so carefully calculated every inch of volume that she has made a commodious dressing-room out of it. She has a place to make-up and a place for the costumes that will be needed during one day's work. The dressing-room is curtained, so that it is as private as the dressing-room of any theater." The article goes on to say "But best of all she can have hot water and heat. A pipe with a drum and plate is connected with the exhaust-pipe, which runs through the car. Whenever she wants hot water or heat she has only to turn a valve and start the engine. This throws the exhaust through the drum, and less than a minute the car is warm." This transformed serviceable dressing room was a Maxwell cabriolet automobile which was her everyday vehicle that she would drive to the studio each morning. As stated by her press agent for a 1915 article for "The Salt Lake Tribune" newspaper, "It is the cutest thing you ever saw. Curtains are hung on brass rods over all the windows; inside of the doors are pockets to hold shoes,

riding boots and other small articles. A take-down makeup table is arranged beside the steering wheel and over this is hung a three-way mirror. Hooks are fastened all around the inside at the edge of the top to hang her garments on. Miss Eyton's work calls her up to some of the canyons or at the seashore, where there are no dressing room facilities, consequently the idea to use her car for a dressing room was forced upon her. Now she says she don't see how she could get along without it."

In the latter part of the 1930s, Bessie reportedly had a tremendous argument with her mother, walked out of her Hollywood home, and was never seen or heard from again. Her brother spent a minor fortune searching for her but was unsuccessful until they were notified of her death.

Film Credits:

1911	The Totem Mark with Hobart Bosworth	Western Actor
	George Washington's Escape	
	The Sheriff of Tuolomne	Western Actor
	Saved from the Snow	Actor
	In the Shadow of the Pines	Western Actor
	Kit Carson's Wooing	
	McKee Rankin's '49' with Hobart Bosworth	Western Actor
	An Indian Vestal	
	Coals of Fire with Hobart Bosworth	Actor
	A Painter's Idyl	
	Blackbeard with Francis Boggs	Actor
Town!	The Right Name, but the Wrong Man	
	An Evil Power	
	A Diamond in the Rough	
Married Street	The Chief's Daughter with Hobart Bosworth	Actor
	Mate of the Alden Besse	Actor
	Captain Brand's Wife with Francis Boggs	Western Actor
	For His Pal's Sake	
1912	A Waif of the Sea	
	The Hobo	Actor
a Plan	The End of the Romance with Frank E. Montgomery	Actor
	The Price of Art;	
	Sammy Orpheous or The Pied Piper of Animaldom with Colin Campbell	Actor
	The Lake of Dreams;	
B T Y 1	The Indelible Stain	Actor
	Monte Cristo with Colin Campbell	Actor
	Ones Who Suffer	Actor
	Child of the Wilderness with Hobart Bosworth	Western Actor
	Me and Bill with Colin Campbell	Actor

W 1 1	Fisherboy's Faith with Colin Campbell	Actor
	Coming of Columbus with Colin Campbell	Actor
	In the Tents of the Asra	Actor
	Great Draught with Colin Campbell	Actor
	When Edith Played Judge and Jury with Hobart Bosworth	Actor
	Legend of the Lost Arrow with Hobart Bosworth	Western Actor
	Love of an Island Maid	Actor
	Euchred	Actor
171	Shrinking Rawhide with Frank E. Montgomery	Western Actor
1/10		Actor
1100	Triangle Bits of the with Colin Common line	Western Actor
	Pity of It with Colin Campbell	Western Actor
	Opitsah – Apache for Sweetheart with Colin Campbell	
100	Shanghaied with Colin Campbell	Actor
	Atala	Actor
	Greater Wealth with Colin Campbell	Actor
	Peacemaker with Francis Boggs	Western Actor
- 19.	Bessie's Dream	Actor
Tellips	God of Gold with Colin Campbell	Western Actor
THE REAL PROPERTY.	Carmen of the Isles with Colin Campbell	Actor
Carl	Miss Aubry's Love Affair	Actor
000	Little Organ Player of San Juan with Colin Campbell	Actor
77	John Colter's Escape	Western Actor
	The Last of Her Tribe with Colin Campbell	Western Actor
1913	When the Circus Came to Town	
1713	Until the Sea	1 1 1 1 1
		Actor
THE PARCET	The Three Wise Men with Colin Campbell	Actor
THE PURPLE	The Hopeless Dawn with Colin Campbell	
	A Wild Ride with Colin Campbell	Western Actor
2 I A M I	The Wordless Message with Colin Campbell	Actor
<i>)</i> L M M U	Alone in the Jungle with Colin Campbell	Actor
	Dancer's Redemption with Colin Campbell	Actor
AUTOR	Story of Lavinia with Colin Campbell	Actor
SWILL	Hiram Buys an Auto with Colin Campbell	Actor
UTTLL	Vengeance is Mine with Colin Campbell	Western Actor
	In The Long Ago with Colin Campbell	Western Actor
	Little Hero with Colin Campbell	Western Actor
	Prisoner of Cabanas with Colin Campbell	Western Actor
	Western Romance with Lem B. Parker	Western Actor
	Revolutionary Romance	Actor
The same	Whose Wife is This?	Actor
ine t	Terrors of the Jungle	Actor
	Buster and Sunshine	Actor
of Bec	Budd Doble Comes Back with Colin Campbell	Actor
	Wamba, A Child of the Jungle with Colin Campbell	Actor
	Noisy Six with Colin Campbell	Western Actor
Released March		
	Plain Girl's Love	Actor
	When Lillian was Little Red Riding Hood Colin Campbell	Actor
	Sally in Our Alley with Colin Campbell	Actor
ECCE 1	Hope	Actor
COOK L. L.	Old Actor with Colin Campbell	Actor
1914	The Uphill Climb with Colin Campbell	Western Actor
	Smuggler's Sister with Colin Campbell	Actor
SI-CIA, Mardese	The Salvation of Nancy O'Shaughnessy with Colin Campbell	Actor
	The Spoilers with Colin Campbell	Western Actor
THE RESERVE	In the Days of the Thundering Herd with Colin Campbell	Western Actor
100	The Abyss with Thomas Santschi	Actor
	Playing with Fire with Thomas Santschi	Actor
	Shotgun Jones with Colin Campbell	Western Actor
	Shorgan Johns With Conn Campbell	TT CSCCIII TICLUI

	The Wilderness Mail with Colin Campbell	Western Actor
	Etienne of the Glad Heart with Colin Campbell	Western Actor
	The White Mouse with Colin Campbell	Actor
	When the West Was Young with Colin Campbell	Western Actor
	The Gang of the White Swan with Colin Campbell	Western Actor
	The Dream Girl with Thomas Santschi	Actor
	The Test with Thomas Santschi	Western Actor
	Dawn with Edward J. LeSaint	Actor
6/1	Tragedy of Ambition with Colin Campbell	Actor
1/10	Old Letter with Thomas Santschi	Actor
2100	Lily of the Valley with Colin Campbell	Actor
	Fire Jugglers	Actor
	At the Risk of His Life with Thomas Santschi	Actor
	When His Ship Comes with Thomas Santschi	
		Actor
	Mother Heart with Colin Campbell	Actor
	Unrest with Thomas Santschi	Actor
1200	Cherry Pickers with Colin Campbell	Actor
137	Baby Spy with Edward J. LeSaint	Actor
Committee of Section 1	Butterfly's Wings with Thomas Santschi	Actor
1015	The Fifth Man with Francis J. Grandon	Western Actor
1915	The Adventure Hunter with E.A. Martin	Actor
	The Man from Texas	
	The Jungle Lovers with Lloyd B. Carleton	Actor
JESSE L. L/	His Fighting Blood with Thomas Santschi	Actor
	Red Blood of Courage with Thomas Santschi	Actor
	The Great Experiment with Thomas Santschi	Actor
THE POPULAR	Their Sinful Influence with Lloyd B. Carleton	Actor
	Love Finds a Way with Thomas Santschi	Actor
DIANC	Primitive Way	Actor
DLANU	In the Midst of African Wilds with Lloyd B. Carleton	Actor
	Fork in the Road with Thomas Santschi	Actor
AN 111 PM 10	Motherhood with Lloyd B. Carleton	Actor
STATE I	Further Adventures of Sammy Orpheus	Actor
OHLL	Girl with the Red Feather with Lloyd B. Carleton	Actor
	Golden Spurs with Lloyd B. Carleton	Western Actor
	Two Natures Within Him with Thomas Santschi	Actor
	Love of Loti San with Lloyd B. Carleton	Actor
an annual a	Missing Ruby with Thomas Santschi	Actor
	Studio Escapade with Lloyd B. Carleton	Actor
Markey C	War O' Dreams with E.A. Martin	Actor
. I He C	White Light of Publicity with Lloyd B. Carleton	Actor
at Deal	Aunt Mary with Thomas Santschi	Actor
OT DEC	Arizona Wooing with Tom Mix	Western Actor
	The Flashlight with Lloyd B. Carleton	Actor
1916	The Prince Chap with Marshall Neilan	Drama Actor
THE RESERVE	Twisted Trails with Tom Mix	Western Actor
	The Crisis with Colin Campbell	Drama Actor
Produced to	The Cycle of Fate with Marshall Neilan	Drama Actor
100000 1 11	Regeneration of Jim Halsey with Colin Campbell	Western Actor
JESSE L. LI	Three Wise Men with Colin Campbell	Actor
1917	The Heart of Texas Ryan with E.A. Martin	Western Actor
1917	Little Lost Sister with Alfred E. Green	Drama Actor
Miletille, Mardens	Her Perilous Ride with Colin Campbell	Western Actor
	Between Man and Beast with Colin Campbell	Actor
	Who Shall Take My Life? with Colin Campbell	Drama Actor
THE BESTE	Sole Survivor with Francis J. Grandon	Actor
	Victor of the Plot with Colin Campbell	Actor
	Her Heart's Desire with Colin Campbell	Actor
	Strange Adventure with Marshall Neilan	Actor

	Love of Madge O'Hara with Colin Campbell	Actor
	Law, North of 65 with Colin Campbell	Actor
	Smoldering Spark with Colin Campbell	Actor
	Witness for the State with Colin Campbell	Actor
	Angel of Poverty Row with Colin Campbell	Actor
	Her Salvation	Actor
1918	The City of Purple Dreams with Colin Campbell	Drama Actor
-	Lend Me Your Name with Fred J. Balshofer	Comedy Actor
	The Way of a Man with a Maid with Donald Crisp	Comedy Actor
	Beware of Strangers with Colin Campbell	Crime Actor
	The Still Alarm with Colin Campbell	Drama Actor
1919	The Usurper with James Young	Drama Actor
	A Man of Honor with Fred J. Balshofer	Adventure Actor
	Children of Banishment with Norval MacGregor	Drama Actor
1924	Cheap Kisses with John Ince	Comedy Drama
1925	The Girl of Gold with John Ince	Drama Actor

Sources

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"The Case of Becky."

JESSE L. LASKY

SS-CS, Wardeor St., W

BESSIE EYTON

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