

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 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.



1917 group portrait of Bessie Eyton, Thomas Santschi and Eugene Bessenes, movie actors, posing in a room in Chicago, Illinois (DN-0068730, Chicago Daily News's negatives collection, Chicago History Museum)



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	<i>The Totem Mark</i> with Hobart Bosworth	<i>Western Actor</i>
	<i>George Washington's Escape</i>	
	<i>The Sheriff of Tuolomne</i>	<i>Western Actor</i>
	<i>Saved from the Snow</i>	<i>Actor</i>
	<i>In the Shadow of the Pines</i>	<i>Western Actor</i>
	<i>Kit Carson's Wooing</i>	
	<i>McKee Rankin's '49'</i> with Hobart Bosworth	<i>Western Actor</i>
	<i>An Indian Vestal</i>	
	<i>Coals of Fire</i> with Hobart Bosworth	<i>Actor</i>
	<i>A Painter's Idyl</i>	
	<i>Blackbeard</i> with Francis Boggs	<i>Actor</i>
	<i>The Right Name, but the Wrong Man</i>	
	<i>An Evil Power</i>	
	<i>A Diamond in the Rough</i>	
	<i>The Chief's Daughter</i> with Hobart Bosworth	<i>Actor</i>
	<i>Mate of the Alden Besse</i>	<i>Actor</i>
	<i>Captain Brand's Wife</i> with Francis Boggs	<i>Western Actor</i>
	<i>For His Pal's Sake</i>	
1912	<i>A Waif of the Sea</i>	
	<i>The Hobo</i>	<i>Actor</i>
	<i>The End of the Romance</i> with Frank E. Montgomery	<i>Actor</i>
	<i>The Price of Art;</i>	
	<i>Sammy Orpheus or The Pied Piper of Animaldom</i> with Colin Campbell	<i>Actor</i>
	<i>The Lake of Dreams;</i>	
	<i>The Indelible Stain</i>	<i>Actor</i>
	<i>Monte Cristo</i> with Colin Campbell	<i>Actor</i>
	<i>Ones Who Suffer</i>	<i>Actor</i>
	<i>Child of the Wilderness</i> with Hobart Bosworth	<i>Western Actor</i>
	<i>Me and Bill</i> with Colin Campbell	<i>Actor</i>

	<i>The Wilderness Mail</i> with Colin Campbell <i>Etienne of the Glad Heart</i> with Colin Campbell <i>The White Mouse</i> with Colin Campbell <i>When the West Was Young</i> with Colin Campbell <i>The Gang of the White Swan</i> with Colin Campbell <i>The Dream Girl</i> with Thomas Santschi <i>The Test</i> with Thomas Santschi <i>Dawn</i> with Edward J. LeSaint <i>Tragedy of Ambition</i> with Colin Campbell <i>Old Letter</i> with Thomas Santschi <i>Lily of the Valley</i> with Colin Campbell <i>Fire Jugglers</i> <i>At the Risk of His Life</i> with Thomas Santschi <i>When His Ship Comes</i> with Thomas Santschi <i>Mother Heart</i> with Colin Campbell <i>Unrest</i> with Thomas Santschi <i>Cherry Pickers</i> with Colin Campbell <i>Baby Spy</i> with Edward J. LeSaint <i>Butterfly's Wings</i> with Thomas Santschi <i>The Fifth Man</i> with Francis J. Grandon	<i>Western Actor</i> <i>Western Actor</i> <i>Actor</i> <i>Western Actor</i> <i>Western Actor</i> <i>Actor</i> <i>Western Actor</i> <i>Actor</i> <i>Actor</i> <i>Actor</i> <i>Actor</i> <i>Actor</i> <i>Actor</i> <i>Actor</i> <i>Actor</i> <i>Actor</i> <i>Actor</i> <i>Actor</i> <i>Western Actor</i>
1915	<i>The Adventure Hunter</i> with E.A. Martin <i>The Man from Texas</i> <i>The Jungle Lovers</i> with Lloyd B. Carleton <i>His Fighting Blood</i> with Thomas Santschi <i>Red Blood of Courage</i> with Thomas Santschi <i>The Great Experiment</i> with Thomas Santschi <i>Their Sinful Influence</i> with Lloyd B. Carleton <i>Love Finds a Way</i> with Thomas Santschi <i>Primitive Way</i> <i>In the Midst of African Wilds</i> with Lloyd B. Carleton <i>Fork in the Road</i> with Thomas Santschi <i>Motherhood</i> with Lloyd B. Carleton <i>Further Adventures of Sammy Orpheus</i> <i>Girl with the Red Feather</i> with Lloyd B. Carleton <i>Golden Spurs</i> with Lloyd B. Carleton <i>Two Natures Within Him</i> with Thomas Santschi <i>Love of Loti San</i> with Lloyd B. Carleton <i>Missing Ruby</i> with Thomas Santschi <i>Studio Escapade</i> with Lloyd B. Carleton <i>War O' Dreams</i> with E.A. Martin <i>White Light of Publicity</i> with Lloyd B. Carleton <i>Aunt Mary</i> with Thomas Santschi <i>Arizona Wooing</i> with Tom Mix <i>The Flashlight</i> with Lloyd B. Carleton	<i>Actor</i> <i>Actor</i> <i>Actor</i> <i>Actor</i> <i>Actor</i> <i>Actor</i> <i>Actor</i> <i>Actor</i> <i>Actor</i> <i>Actor</i> <i>Actor</i> <i>Actor</i> <i>Western Actor</i> <i>Actor</i> <i>Actor</i> <i>Actor</i> <i>Actor</i> <i>Actor</i> <i>Western Actor</i> <i>Actor</i>
1916	<i>The Prince Chap</i> with Marshall Neilan <i>Twisted Trails</i> with Tom Mix <i>The Crisis</i> with Colin Campbell <i>The Cycle of Fate</i> with Marshall Neilan <i>Regeneration of Jim Halsey</i> with Colin Campbell <i>Three Wise Men</i> with Colin Campbell	<i>Drama Actor</i> <i>Western Actor</i> <i>Drama Actor</i> <i>Drama Actor</i> <i>Western Actor</i> <i>Actor</i>
1917	<i>The Heart of Texas</i> Ryan with E.A. Martin <i>Little Lost Sister</i> with Alfred E. Green <i>Her Perilous Ride</i> with Colin Campbell <i>Between Man and Beast</i> with Colin Campbell <i>Who Shall Take My Life?</i> with Colin Campbell <i>Sole Survivor</i> with Francis J. Grandon <i>Victor of the Plot</i> with Colin Campbell <i>Her Heart's Desire</i> with Colin Campbell <i>Strange Adventure</i> with Marshall Neilan	<i>Western Actor</i> <i>Drama Actor</i> <i>Western Actor</i> <i>Actor</i> <i>Drama Actor</i> <i>Actor</i> <i>Actor</i> <i>Actor</i> <i>Actor</i>

Sources:

An Encyclopedic Dictionary of Women in Early American Films 1995-1930 by Denise Lowe