

The first performance of *THE GENERAL* with Marion Mack appearing in person with Raymond Rohauer and talking to the audience took place in Toronto, Canada, on December 18, 1972. With the ovations still ringing in our ears, we recorded the following reminiscences:



Raymond Rohauer:

Well, Marion, how do you feel now that you've heard the people out there?

Marion Mack:

I still can't believe it. They treated me as if I was Gloria Swanson. I'm really glad now that you found me and brought me out here, although to tell you the truth, at first I thought you were some kind of nut. But only for a little while!

RR: I'm glad we did it, too. But I must say you were one of the most elusive ladies I ever had to pursue.

MM: You know, I still wonder how you actually tracked me down. I wasn't listed anywhere, and practically nobody had my address.

RR: Yes, I know, I tried everything: *Variety*, the Screen Actors Guild, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences—nothing! At MGM, they only knew that up to 1940, your husband was pro-

ducing shorts for them. This made me realize you might be traceable under your husband's name, but what threw me there is that I was looking for Marion, and you were using your real first name, Joey.

MM: Yes, I thought that would be safe enough. And it was, for all these years. You know when you finally got me on the phone and asked me if I was Marion Mack, I was so shocked I couldn't answer you for a while. And when I'm at a loss for words, that's something!

RR: Do you know how I finally got to you? I just simply looked up the name Lewyn in the Los Angeles phone book. Of course, there was neither Marion nor Louis listed, but there was another Lewyn, and I called up and they said they didn't know themselves, but that a member of their family who happened to be living in Switzerland was a

distant relative of yours. So, as I was just then on my way to France to attend the Avignon film festival, I contacted the lady in Switzerland while I was there, and once she said you lived in Costa Mesa I called you up at once.

MM: Yes, that was part of what threw me. All these years no one knew about me, and then you call me from Paris and right off the bat say: "Are you Marion Mack?" I thought someone was playing a practical joke on me again, as Buster used to do.

RR: Marion, I wonder if you would mind going over some of the things you were just talking about with your fans out there, so that we could get it on the record, so to speak. By the way, is this the first time you made a personal appearance with the film?

MM: Oh yes, it is. You know back in 1927 neither Buster nor the producers thought much of the pic-

ture. It was a routine comedy, and they didn't make any big fuss about opening it, no personal appearances or anything. And also, by that time I had other interests, and in fact I was practically out of the picture business when the film opened—at least out of the acting stage of the business. So tonight is my very first personal promotion with the film. In fact, this is the first time I ever saw THE GENERAL and didn't have to pay!

RR: You mean you had to buy a ticket to see your own performance?

MM: And not just once, either. My husband and I attended the opening of the picture, but purely as spectators. We both liked it, of course, but we were surprised when it took off as it did. It was the audiences that made it such a hit, the studio never realized what a gem they had on their hands until the money started rolling in. And in later years, every once in a while I used to go to one of the revival theaters when THE GENERAL was showing. At first I used to tell them I was the co-star, but I think they either didn't believe me, or it meant nothing to them. I was

sort of hoping one of the managers would let me in free, but they used to say something like "Oh, really?" or "That's nice," and then they would politely show me where the box office was. You see what fun it is to be a famous movie star!

RR: Don't give it a second thought, Marion. Back in the early fifties, when I ran a theater in Los Angeles, Buster Keaton himself used to come and buy a ticket like anyone else, because none of my ticket takers recognized him. Anyway, Marion, could we have a little of your background—such as, how did you ever come to Hollywood in the first place?

MM: Well, Raymond, believe it or not, I just wrote a letter to Mack Sennett, and that's all there was to it. I was just a high school girl from Mammoth, Utah, and I said I wanted to be in the movies and enclosed a few snapshots, and they were real polite and Sennett's manager wrote back they would be happy to interview me if I ever came to Hollywood. It sounds like fiction but it's true. You see, this was in 1920 and it could still happen like this.

RR: Did they just say you should

come right out to Hollywood?

MM: Not just like that, I had to be properly chaperoned. Now it so happened my father was married for the second time, and my step-mother was only about 24, and I was 18. So she agreed to help me, and we went to Hollywood.

RR: So you went in and just got a job at the first studio you contacted?

MM: Would you believe it, Raymond, that I got not one but two offers? You see, at about the same time, there was a beauty contest at the Ince Studio, and so I entered it, too. That is, I sent in my picture and that was it. They would let me know, one of those things. So naturally, I thought nothing more of it, and went over to Sennett's Studio and saw Jack Waldron, that was Sennett's manager, and I got hired at \$25 a week. And then about a week later, there was my picture in the paper that I won the contest at Ince's. Now they wanted me, and I told them I was already working for Sennett, and Ince's publicity man got a little mad at me. Hans Sternberg, I think his name was.

RR: So how did you finally solve the problem?

MM: Well, I didn't want to work for Ince because I already had a job with Sennett, and in those days Sennett was the king. But Sternberg insisted that I must at least pose for some Ince publicity, at the Billion Dollar Theater I believe, and so I thought that's the least I could do. And the funny thing is, when those publicity pictures got back to Sternberg, he showed them to Louis Lewyn, who later became my husband, and Lou said: "What a lemon! How did you ever pick her?"

RR: Oh, really? Then how did you and Mr. Lewyn get together?

MM: Well, some time later Lou came over to the Sennett lot to take some publicity pictures of some of the girls. And all of a sudden he saw me, and either I looked better in make-up or those Ince photos must have been really bad, because now he didn't recognize me as a lemon but actually asked me to pose for some pictures for him separately from the other girls. And after the posing, he kept asking me if he could bring me home. I told him my father wouldn't let me date, but he insisted and so I let him take me to my house and on the way he asked how I got in the

movies. So I said: "There was this contest at the Ince Studio and I won it," and he nearly fainted. And then I learned the whole story of what he thought of me at first, but I finally married him, anyway, and it worked out fine.

RR: That's quite a story, Marion. But tell me, what did you think of Mack Sennett?

MM: I was a little scared of him at first. He sounded a little rough, you know. But in those days I looked a little like Mabel Normand, who was Sennett's sweetheart, so I guess he liked me.

RR: How did you get your screen name? Did Sennett give it to you?

MM: No. At Sennett's, they called me Joanne McGuire. Later, when I went to work for the Little Mermaid and Sunshine Comedies, they wanted me to take another name, so I just took the middle part of my real name. I was born Joey Marion McCreery, so I clipped off Joey on one side and Creery on the other, and what was left was Marion Mc. All I had to do was spell out the "Mc." Marion Mack.

RR: All right, you say you left Sennett. Why was that?

MM: Well, I wanted to do a little more

than just stand around in a bathing suit, so I took the first good offer that came along. By about 1922 I was making feature films, and then in 1923 Lou and I were married, and as you know he became later quite a big producer, and right from the start he let me write some of the scripts for the films he was doing, and I liked that. In this way, I made MARY OF THE MOVIES with my husband in 1923, and then THE CARNIVAL GIRL in 1926.

RR: Now tell me, Marion, how did you get to work with Keaton on his most important film?

MM: Buster was looking for an old-fashioned girl, with long curly hair, for the character of Annabelle Lee, because they wanted everything to look just right for the Civil War period. Well, Percy Westmore, who was making up Norma Talmadge for some picture, heard this from her, and of course she knew it because her sister, Natalie, was married to Keaton. And Percy mentioned that he knew a girl with just the right hair, because he had been my make-up man on CARNIVAL GIRL. And Norma said to Percy he should try to find out if I was available, and he called me and first thing he said was: "I hope

you still have those long curls you had in CARNIVAL GIRL!" Well, Raymond, this was the year everyone was bobbing their hair, and so only about a couple of days before I cut my hair short, too, and I told it to Percy and he said, "Don't worry, we'll give you a fall or something."

RR: A what?

MM: A fall, you know, a wig. So that's what I wore to the interview with Buster Keaton.

RR: Who was present there? Was Keaton personally in on the interview?

MM: Yes, he was there, but he didn't say much. The guys who really talked to me were Lou Anger, the studio manager, and Clyde Bruckman. And then they sort of looked at Buster, and Buster said he thought I would do, and so I was hired right then and there.

RR: Up to this time, had you ever met Keaton?

MM: No, this was the first time. But, of course, everybody in town knew about him, he was well known, but he didn't get around to many of the smart parties and places, and stuck pretty much to his own pals.

RR: Now, let's take up the story of THE GENERAL. How long did it

take to shoot the picture?

MM: We were six months on it. Actually, we went up to Oregon twice. First in the spring, around April, we stayed for about four months. Then we went back to Hollywood in September to do the studio scenes, and in October we went back to Cottage Grove for some more outdoor shooting.

RR: How was it set up on location?

MM: We all stayed at the Cottage Grove Hotel, and every morning we took that little train which you can see in the picture, and we rode out to location. It took about an hour. Buster had his own chef with him, Willy his name was, and he prepared hot lunch on location so that we could stay there all day.

RR: How did they shoot the picture? Was there a script?

MM: They used what I think today would be called just an outline. Not a real script as we now know it. I mean, they told you what the scene was, but you were expected to make up your own bits of business, and if anybody had an idea they would try it and see how it played. Like when I have the scene where I'm getting on the train Buster is driving, and I'm still supposed to be

mad at him for not enlisting, I made a big business out of admiring the medal my brother was wearing, and polishing his uniform buttons, just to show how much I admired him, because of course I know that Buster is looking at me. And this was not in any script, but they said it looked cute and so it stayed in.

RR: Can you think of other incidents like that where you improvised right on camera?

MM: Oh yes, we did that all the time. You know the scene on the engine where I'm supposed to feed the fire, I'm supposed to be a little dumb about it. So somebody said I should get hold of a log with a knothole in it, and throw it away. I did that, but I didn't think the audience would understand it, and then I saw a very small piece of wood, and I picked it up and threw it in. Buster liked it, so right away he built it up; I mean he picked up an even smaller piece, just a splinter really, to see if I would be dumb enough to use that, too. And of course I did, and so he jumped on me as if he was going to choke me, but at the last moment he really gave me a little peck on the cheek. I think I got that kiss more for thinking

of the gag than for anything else. And none of this was in written form at all.

RR: Did you get to know Keaton very well as a person?

MM: Buster was really a shy person. Some people said he was aloof, but his aloofness was mostly just shyness, I think. He wasn't easy to know very closely. Off screen, he always had his friends to play baseball with; why, sometimes they stopped the train when they saw a place to play baseball, and everything would be delayed by a couple of hours. And also, he had Natalie with him there, so there wasn't much socializing, actually. I had never worked with a leading man like that before, I can tell you, usually they were outgoing and chummy, but Buster just stuck to the job and to his little clique, and that was all. At first I felt a little bit, I'd say, ignored or slighted, but then he got a bit more friendly as he lost some of his shyness, and he turned out to be a very nice and warm person. And a very humble one, too, that's the surprising part.

RR: When did you feel that the ice was broken?

MM: I guess when he started playing jokes on me. In his book, when

he made you the butt of some practical joke, that meant you were OK. Funny you should mention breaking ice, one of the first gags he ever played on me was to have a couple of the guys grab me from behind and hang me upside down over a cake of ice as we were on the way to location on the train. I already had my make-up on, which took about an hour to do, and all of it got ruined and I was very uncomfortable, so as soon as they put me down again I went and punched Buster in the eye. It gave him such a shiner they had to stop shooting for a week. This was before I understood that he meant no harm. He'd go to any length to get a laugh, but there was no malice in his practical jokes.

RR: So he kept it up even after you hit him in the eye?

MM: Oh boy, he sure did. Like the time he found out that sometimes I used to like to take my bike and go up about three miles from Cottage Grove to a spot on the river that was nice and secluded, and there I would swim. So he and a couple of his buddies sneaked up after me one day, and found where I left my clothes and tied them up in

such knots that I couldn't unravel them. And so I had to pedal back to Cottage Grove in my bathing suit, and this was quite a shocking thing to do in 1926, you simply didn't ride a bike in your bathing suit in those days, and a wet one at that!

RR: Did Buster play any tricks on you in front of the camera?

MM: Yes, he did. You know, I was told at the beginning that there would be a double to do all the stunts, and a girl was actually hired and was standing by, so I was satisfied. But then, as Buster got to know me better I guess he decided I was a good sport, and would you believe it, they never used that girl once as far as I know. Like in the scene where I'm in the sack and Buster is supposed to step all over me. He told me to get in the sack, and then they would cut and let the other girl replace me for the rough stuff. But next thing I knew, he was stepping all over me, and the cameras were grinding. But I didn't get mad at him that time, I must say he knew just how to do it so it wouldn't hurt me. I guess it was his vaudeville training.

RR: Is that you in the scene on top of the box car where you are

drenched from the water tank?

MM: That was another time when Buster said all I had to do was help set up the scene, and then they would cut and the extra would get the soaking. Now, as soon as we're up there Buster grabs the big spout and it comes off accidentally the wrong way, and we get all wet. Right away, Buster realized it was probably funny, and so now he puts the spout in the right way but also pulls the wire that releases the water, and I got soaked the second time. So I got it twice, and both times I didn't know it was coming, so the surprise you see on my face up there is for real. Boy, I sure was as wet as a drowned rat that time. But it would never have looked so good if it hadn't really happened by accident the first time, and if Buster hadn't helped a little the second time. He had all his crew trained to keep the cameras running even if something unexpected happened, you never knew what was going to turn out good when you saw it on the screen.

RR: Do you remember the scene where you're climbing through a small opening in one of the cars? Was it really as hard as it looked?

MM: Buster wanted it to look as if we were having a hard time, so I

had to put out one leg first and pretend I couldn't quite make it, and then try it the other way. Actually, with those long skirts it was a bit awkward, and also the train was actually moving, so there was some danger. I'm sure they would never do it today with the real stars, they'd have stunt men or they'd fake the train motion in some way by back projection. But in those days we never gave it a second thought, we just did it.

RR: When you get into the sack the first time, there in the woods when Buster is supposed to pick you up, was that really you in there when he lifts it?

MM: Yes, again, like I told you, he was supposed to let the other girl get in, she was about ten pounds lighter, anyway, and so I didn't think Buster would be too anxious to lug me around. But, as I told you, by now I think he got used to me, and so he always found a way to keep me in the scene. But you know, in this scene another accident happened which they left in; he is supposed to empty the sack which is full of Army boots, and when he did it his own shoes came off and for a while he couldn't find the right ones among all the other shoes. It was never planned

but since it looked funny, they kept it in the picture. And then he gets me in the sack and all of a sudden I feel he's picking me up, but he was stronger than I thought, and it never fazed him a bit. And that's really my hand you see uncoupling the wagons from inside the sack later.

RR: Which scenes were done in the studio in Hollywood?

MM: Very few, really. The one that gave us the most trouble was the night scene when Buster and I are running away from the cottage. We were three weeks doing that, and even here in the studio he wanted to do it as true to life as possible, and so we did it on the back lot at night, with rain and wind machines. We came in every night at about 7, and stayed until maybe one a.m., and this went on for three weeks, and each night we got soaked to the skin, it's a wonder we didn't catch pneumonia. But as I said, we just never thought much about it. It had to be done, so we did it.

RR: What other scenes did you do in Hollywood?

MM: The indoor scenes, but as you know there were only a few. Some of the supposed indoor scenes, like the one with Buster in the recruiting office, these

were actually done in Cottage Grove outdoors, with fake walls but no ceiling. Also the scene at the beginning, where Buster comes to call on me and I sort of play a trick on him and follow him to my house, that was all done up on location.

RR: How many times did you usually run through a scene?

MM: Most of them Buster okayed after one or two takes. The only ones that had to be timed to precision were the gags, and they sometimes took five or six tries. But they also shot quite a few whole scenes which were never used in the finished picture, because Buster was a perfectionist and he only used the best scenes. That's why the whole film is so tightly edited, he took out all the scenes which would have dragged it out.

RR: Well, now, I hope you don't mind telling us, Marion, why is it that you never made another picture after *THE GENERAL*. Surely, with the film being such an enormous success, you could have had your pick of directors and films?

MM: Well, Raymond, I was really an old-fashioned girl at heart. And when Lou told me he didn't like me to be away on location so long, I realized we would always

have friction if I stayed in the business. Besides, he needed me to help him write the short films he was now producing for Paramount, and I truly enjoyed that side of it even more than I liked acting. Since my marriage meant more to me than anything else, I just refused all offers, and finally they stopped asking me. And you see, it worked, Lou and I stayed married even when everyone in Hollywood was always getting divorced, and we were only about two years away from our golden anniversary when he passed away.

RR: Did you see Keaton anymore after the filming?

MM: Yes, we remained friends and saw him off and on. I remember one time, right after we finished *THE GENERAL*, we were invited to a New Year's Eve party in Caliente, at a night club owned by Joe Schenck, and Buster was there, and he did one of his famous slides. As I told you, he would go anywhere for a laugh, and he did one of the bits he learned on stage, slid on his stomach right across the whole dance floor. And the reason he did it, he saw Peggy Joyce, she was one of the supposed glamor girls with more jewelry than anyone in the world, sitting there across the floor, so he did the

slide and pretended to get all mixed up and accidentally on purpose he tipped over her chair and spilled her all over the floor. I guess he just wanted to take her down a peg.

RR: There was a lot of publicity about Buster's drinking problem. Did you ever witness any excessive drinking?

MM: No, that all came later. He certainly never drank while working, at least not so that it would affect him, or I'm sure I would have noticed. This was still when he was in top form. Later, his marriage went on the rocks, and they wouldn't let him make films the way he wanted to make them, and I felt really sorry for him. That's what I think drove him to drink. But by then we had drifted apart, anyway, and we saw him very seldom. I prefer to remember him when he was at his best, when we were playing little jokes on each other up in Cottage Grove on our little train. That was the real Buster: Funny as hell on the screen and a true friend off the screen. They just don't make them like that anymore.

RR: They never did even then, Marion. He was unique.

MM: You said it, Raymond. He was the best of them all.