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# The “Camera Maid” Conundrum

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## Introduction

The phrase “camera maid” seems to have originated in the late teens and early 1920s with the Fox Newsreels’ publicity department, who used it to announce the [hiring of female camera operators](#). Women cinematographers in the silent era remain an under-researched area, especially compared to what has been uncovered about the many women who worked as directors, producers, and screenwriters during the period.

### Challenges in Validating Data: The Conundrum

While many US trade journals and newspapers referenced the activities of these “camera-maids,” very little extant data exists today to confirm their efforts. Building a fuller picture of their work has thus proven to be a challenge. Many of these women had short careers, so official records tend to be spotty at best. US census records, another valuable resource, have been helpful to confirm the occupations for some women, but only represent a sliver of information captured every ten years. That so much early cinema is lost today also makes discovering more about these women

difficult, especially since, in many cases, camerawomen were working for smaller or independent companies and/or not credited in any formal way, which means there is very little known surviving material to reference. We know these women existed, but we also know that much remains unknown about them today.

In order to encourage further exploration, the following research uses this conundrum as a starting point, and presents what I have found in my research in trade journals, newspapers, census records, and other resources, as well as what remains unknown about a handful of confirmed and unconfirmed US-based “camera-maids.”

## Confirmed US-Based Camerawomen

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The following table includes names of camerawomen that have been confirmed through the various sources mentioned above. “Years Active” in the following table and individual slides refers specifically to each woman’s time as a camera operator, although many of these women were involved in the film industry for a longer period of time (noted in the slides as well). In both cases, these dates are best estimates, based upon available research.

<b>Name</b>	<b>Years Active</b>
Marguerita La Barnette Archambault	1919-1926
Francelia Billington	1914-1915
Katherine Russell Bleeker	1915-1920
Gladys Brockwell	1917-1918
Grace Davison	1915-1916
Maxine Dicks	1922-1927
Dorothy Dunn	1916-1917
Angela Murray Gibson	1919-1926
Louise Lowell	1919-1923
Margery Ordway	1915-1916

## What We Know vs. What We Don’t Know

## Unconfirmed US-Based Camerawomen

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There is much research still to do. US census records, for example, offer tantalizing clues about other women who may have also been camera operators during the 1910s and 1920s.

The following table includes names of women who may have worked as a camera operators, but whose work still needs to be verified by other sources. I found these names in both newspaper articles and by searching census records for 1900, 1910, and 1920, continually modifying the search fields and making sure all searches were for the female gender. I kept narrowing the focus in occupation: photographer, motion picture, moving picture, cinema, etc. Of course, since the census is every ten years, I am likely missing women in the time in between. It is very tedious work, but it has yielded some potential results. The next step is to research each person individually to see where it leads.

Name	Information
Vivian Adams	Listed in <i>The Statesman</i> (Nov 9, 1919) as a "Cameraman" and a "camera-correspondent" for the Fox Film Corp. during a trip to the Holy Land. Likely a one-off collaboration.
May C. Brotherton	Listed as "Photographer, Motion Pictures" in 1910 US Census. In the mid-teens, she was also listed as working in film lab at Balboa Studios, assembling prints.
Bessie M. David	Listed as "Photographer, Motion Pictures" in 1910 US Census (living in Chicago).
Josephine Harrigan	Listed as "Photographer, Biograph Co." in 1910 US Census.
Carrie Haynes	Listed as "Photographer, Pictures" in 1920 US Census (living in New York).
Mary Ida Leatherberry	Listed as "Photographer, Motion Picture Theater" in 1910 US Census (living in Philadelphia).
Mae E. Lewis	Listed as "Photographer, Motion Pictures" in 1920 U.S. Census (living in Los Angeles; husband has same occupation).
Mabelle Peters	Wife of cameraman Thomas Kimmwood "Doc" Peters and listed in trade press as reportedly filming an expedition with him in the 1920s.
Caroline Schenermeier	Listed as "Photographer, Motion Pictures" in 1910 US Census (living in Chicago).
Babe Stewart	Listed in <i>Motion Picture News</i> (Dec. 30, 1922) as working as a director and camerawoman capturing shots of audiences in a

	theater in Baltimore, Maryland.
Susan Sturmer	Listed as "Assistant Cameraman, Motion Pictures" in 1920 US Census (living in New York).

## Conclusion

These confirmed and unconfirmed names exemplify the "camera-maid conundrum": on the one hand, many women worked as camera operators during the early motion picture industry. However, on the other hand, with every new tidbit of information, we are made aware of the fact that much remains unknown about these women. We are certainly challenged not only by the paucity of extant material, but by the lack of verifiable personal data. Since, in general, the careers of "camera-maids" were limited in scope, and they worked during a period when credits for this work were not routinely published, the trail often goes cold quickly. While the results thus far have been uneven at best, my research continues. My focus will now shift to more regional sources in the hopes of excavating more details.

## Further Reading

Dixon, A.J. "The Only Camera Woman." *Picture-Play* (1 January 1916): 59.

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