



## EPISODE 4 2004 - FIRST MOVIE STUDIO LINCOLN HEIGHTS, LOS ANGELES

Gwen: Our last story reveals a little known story from the earliest days of movie making. The film industry movie stars, film studios and spectacle. It all began in the famous areas of Los Angeles like Hollywood, Burbank and Studio City. Or did it? Some 10 miles south west of the glitter, glamour and fame of Hollywood is a neighborhood you won't find mentioned in the popular history of Hollywood. Lincoln Heights. Today's it's a largely Latino, residential neighborhood. But one woman has heard a legend that her local park was where LA's movie industry really began. It's a story that - if true - could rewrite the popular version of events. 33-year old Anita Martinez is a fourth-generation Angeleno whose family originally came from Mexico. She's lived near the park for over 10 years.

Anita Martinez: This park is Lincoln Park which is named for Lincoln Heights. I've been coming to this park since I was a little girl.

Gwen: Just recently, Anita heard that these old park gates once formed the entrance to LA's first movie studio.

Anita: There are rumors in the neighborhood from different people that have lived here for awhile, old-timers, that there actually is probably more to the history of this park than just what we see today.

Gwen: I'm Gwen Wright and I've come to Lincoln Heights to investigate. So Anita, what would you like to know?

Anita: Um, I'm interested in finding out if this gateway is the entrance to the first movie studio in Los Angeles.

Gwen: Well, we think about Hollywood as the mecca for movies but it doesn't mean that it all began there.

Anita: Yes, it would be really exciting, not just for me but I think for our community. There's a lot of history that goes unrecognized, not only by the people who live here, but by the people in Los Angeles and all over the world.

Gwen: So, I'll see what I can find out for you.

Anita: Great.

Gwen: If this park was the site of the first movie studio, then Lincoln Heights played a key role, not only in the founding of the film industry, but in the development of the whole of Los Angeles. 100 years ago, before the movie industry arrived, LA was a midsize town of only 100,000 people. Dirt roads, open land and agriculture were the norm. By the 1930s however, Los Angeles had exploded into a metropolis of 2 million people. But did all this really begin in Lincoln Heights? I know the film industry first started on the East Coast with Thomas Edison. But why did it move it to L.A.? I'm meeting film historian, Bob Birchard.

Bob Birchard: There was a boom in film-making in, in 1906, 1907 and there was a need for pictures. Theatres would run three short films a day and they'd change the program every day. The demand for films was insatiable – they needed films year round and they couldn't shoot them year round in the East with the snow and the weather. And so they started sending out expeditions to places like Florida, New Orleans, Colorado, Arizona and finally, Los Angeles.

Gwen: Well, I can understand why in many ways. According to Bob, these scouts weren't just attracted by LA's climate. Los Angeles also offered a wide range of backdrops, like oceans, deserts and mountains, all within a short driving distance.

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Bob: Among the earliest filmmakers here were Mack Sennett who made the Keystone comedies, Thomas Ince who made westerns in the Santa Monica Hills, Carl Laemmle established Universal Studio in Hollywood in 1912, the Selig Polyscope Company was out here early on too. A little later, Cecil B DeMille and Louis B Mayer, among others, were making pictures here.

Gwen: I've heard of most of these men – apart from Selig.

Bob: Well, the Selig Polyscope Company was established by Colonel Williams Selig. The 'colonel' was a self-appointed title. He was a traveling magician who got interested in films in 1896 and established one of the earliest film companies.

Gwen: Thank you very much, Bob.

Bob: It was my pleasure.

Gwen: I've come back to Lincoln Park to find out if it was even around when those first film pioneers arrived. If there really was a studio here, there might be some structural clues. The boathouse looks like it was built to evoke the style of the 1930s but my guess is that it was built later. Even the statues in the park are from the 20s and 30s. I need to find something earlier. Now this is interesting - the layout of the paths are in a style that was common in public parks at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century - which suggests the park does date from the right period. But what about Anita's gateway? It's very grandiose and monumental, suggesting it was more than just the entrance to your average city park. And judging from the designs on the tiles and the gateway's shape, I'd say it does date from late 19<sup>th</sup> or early 20<sup>th</sup> century. But was it the entrance to a movie studio? I need to try a different approach. So I've sought out local historian, Alexis Moreno. Perhaps she'll know if there was ever a movie studio here. But first I ask her about the history of Lincoln Park and the surrounding neighborhood.

Alexis: Well, Lincoln Heights, as we call it now, has always been a part of the city of Los Angeles. These lands were part of the original Spanish land grant that founded the pueblo of Los Angeles so when you're in Lincoln Heights, you're in one of the oldest neighborhoods in Los Angeles. Lincoln Park was developed in the 1880s and it's one of the oldest parks in Los Angeles.

Gwen: Well, I'm especially interested in the date around 1900, 1910. What can you tell me about Lincoln Park then? What was happening here?

Alexis: This park was really a bustling center of activity for the whole city. The grounds of the park itself had a carousel, a conservatory. There was an alligator farm where there was alligator wrestling, an ostrich farm where there were ostrich races. It was a tourist attraction of sorts.

Gwen: Have you heard anything about there being a movie studio here in the park?

Alexis: That's something that you see hinted at in some of the historical records but to tell you honestly, I'm not aware of all the details.

Gwen: So Alexis has heard the same legend as Anita but where's the proof? I've asked the Los Angeles public library to pull some early 20<sup>th</sup> century photos of Lincoln Park in the hopes that I can find evidence that this studio really existed. Here you can see what Alexis was talking about. Lincoln Park does seem to be a major center of activity, with lots of different kinds of people coming to enjoy the park. Perhaps this explains Anita's gateway. It must have been part of the tourist attraction once built here. But there's still no movie studio.

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Just as I'm about to give up, I find another picture that could answer our question. There aren't only ostrich races and alligator farms here, there's also a zoo. But there's something strange about it. It's not organized around various cages and environments for the animals for people to walk around. It's large spaces and a number of strange buildings ... and a sign. Here we have "the largest collection of wild animals in the world, over 700 specimens of animals and birds, Entrance!" Oh my. Entrance to the Selig zoo. Could this be THE Colonel Selig, the movie pioneer? And could this be our Lincoln Heights movie studio? To find out, I need to talk to a man who knows everything about Colonel William Selig – Marc Wannamaker of Bison Archives.

Mark Wannamaker: It all started of course, when he was doing jungle films and then he bought animals and then had to move them to a place and he chose a beautiful property north of East Lake Park which later became Lincoln Park and opened up a studio and a zoo.

Gwen: So there was a movie studio in Lincoln Heights. Just not where Anita thought. What kinds of movies did Selig make?

Mark: He started in the early days when he really, early, we're talking 1905 to by say, 1910. He made these more naturalistic pictures, sort of travelogue, newsreel type of things. Then of course he started to make more dramatic films, for example, he, he wanted to do the, one of the earliest serials about animals and that's "The Adventures of Kathlyn." Here's an actual ad and even down here, it shows the animal, how she's imperiled by these cats, you see.

Gwen: She looks like she's totally in charge.

Mark: But all of this was shot in this jungle land atmosphere. Here's an advertisement 1913 – the Selig originality devising and producing plays in jungleland.

Gwen: According to Marc – these animals became the stars of many of Selig's films. People loved seeing them. And not just on screen.

Mark: The studio/zoo concept became a great publicity tool, as you can imagine, for Selig.

Gwen: Well, was part of it a zoo in the conventional sense that parents could bring their children and show them what a zebra looked like?

Mark: Absolutely, they had the, the lower section was a regular zoo, in other words, people could come into a beautiful park-like atmosphere. They could picnic there, there were benches, there were little ponds. Adjacent to all of this was the studio, as I said, and I have some very interesting shots which show, um, the making of these films. And the cameramen were either inside the arena with the animals or, if the animal's too dangerous, the cameraman was actually in his own cage. He's really creating a very special um, area for him in the whole world.

Gwen: Well, Marc, these pictures make me want to see a picture of Selig.

Mark: That's easily done.

Gwen: Okay. So here he is, William Selig and Mayer. This is Louis B Mayer.

Mark: Exactly. And this is a very rare shot because this shows them together because Louis B Mayer was going to now lease studio space from Mr. Selig.



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Gwen: So Colonel Selig, a film pioneer like his contemporary, Thomas Edison, was opening the door for the second generation of movie moguls like Louis B Mayer. So Selig leased part of his studio space to the young Louis B Mayer.

Mark: Yes

Gwen: Who goes on to help form Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.

Mark: Absolutely. Of course, that is the studio that made "Gone with the Wind," "The Wizard of Oz" and many other famous films. This was a special place, a special kind of a studio – Selig was expanding his horizons and leasing it to a very important company.

Gwen: But there is still one more thing I need to know. Was Selig's movie studio in Lincoln Heights the first in Los Angeles?

And here I think I've found Anita's answer.

The first thing I want to do is take Anita to the spot where the entrance of the Selig zoo was, just up the street from her gateway.

Gwen: Here is a picture of the entryway to the Lincoln Heights movie studio.

Anita: Wow, that's beautiful.

Gwen: This was early but it wasn't the first. The same man who built this studio in Lincoln Heights, Colonel Selig, just before had built the first permanent movie studio in all of Los Angeles.

Anita: Wow, it's really great to hear that and it's another thing that we can brag about to other people about our community but it's also really sad that it's not there anymore. It would be great if it was still standing and we can go around and show people actually what was here.

Gwen: Well, it's not quite true that there's nothing left anywhere.

Anita: Oh.

Gwen: I took Anita across town to Van Nuys where Griswold Conservation Associates are restoring some very special sculptures. You can open your eyes, Anita.

Anita: Oh.

Gwen: These animals are all that remain of the grand entry to the Selig studio in Lincoln Heights.

Anita: Wow. I'm glad they're still around. That's great.

Gwen: They're quite magnificent. They were lost for 50 years and in the last period of time they've been rediscovered in different parts of the city and restored. The plan is for these statues to stand on a plaza, named after Colonel Selig as part of a new entrance to the LA Zoo.

Anita: Gosh, too bad they're not going back to Lincoln Heights.

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