



THE MUSEUM OF WESTERN FILM HISTORY

William A. Wellman

Born: February 29, 1896 – Died: December 9, 1975



William Augustus Wellman worked on over 80 films, primarily as a director. Notable for his work in crime, adventure and action genre films, often focusing on aviation themes, a particular passion. He also directed several well regarded satirical comedies. Wellman, the Oscar-winning screenwriter-director of the original *A Star Is Born* (1937), was called "Wild Bill" during his World War I service as an aviator, a nickname that persisted in Hollywood due to his larger-than-life personality and lifestyle.

Wellman directed the 1927 film *Wings*, which became the first film to win an Academy Award for Best Picture at the 1st Academy Awards ceremony.

A hell-raiser when young, Wellman was expelled from Newton High School in Newton Highlands, Massachusetts, for dropping a stink bomb on the principal's head. Wellman made a living as a candy salesman and a cotton salesman and then at a lumber yard but was fired after losing control of a truck and driving it through the side of a barn. Eventually he wound up playing professional ice hockey in Massachusetts.

When he was 19 years old, WW I had begun in Europe. Through the intercession of his uncle, Wellman enlisted in the Norton-Harjes Ambulance Corps as an ambulance driver. While in Paris, Wellman joined the French Foreign Legion and was assigned on December 3, 1917 as a fighter pilot and the first American to join N.87 *escadrille* in the Lafayette Flying Corps where he earned himself the nickname "Wild Bill" due to his devil-may-care style in the air and received the Croix de Guerre with two palms.

Film Career

Upon returning to the U.S, he was stationed in San Diego, Wellman would fly to Hollywood for the weekends in his Spad fighter, using Douglas Fairbanks' polo field in Bel Air as a landing strip. Fairbanks, fascinated with the true-life adventures of "Wild Bill" told the returning hero that he would help him break into the movies when the war was over, and he was as good as his word.

His first assignment as an assistant director for Bernie Durning provided him with a work ethic that he adopted for future film work. One strict rule that Durning enforced was no fraternization with screen femme fatales, which almost immediately Wellman broke, leading to a confrontation and a thrashing from the director. Despite his transgression, both men became lifelong friends, and Wellman steadily progressed to more difficult first unit assignments.

Wellman made his uncredited directorial debut later that year at Fox with *The Twins of Suffering Creek* (1920) starring Dustin Farnum (the silent film B-Western star whom Dustin Hoffman's star-struck mother named the future double-Oscar winner after). Wellman later remembered the film as awful, along with such other B-Westerns as *Cupid's Fireman* (1923), starring Buck Jones, whose westerns he began directing in 1923 after serving his apprenticeship.

Fox Films gave Wellman his first directing credit in 1923 with the Buck Jones western *Second Hand Love* (1923) and, other than the Dustin Farnum picture *The Man Who Won* (1923), he turned out Jones pictures for the rest of his time at Fox. The studio fired him in 1924 after he asked for a raise after completing *The Circus Cowboy* (1924), another Buck Jones film. Moving to Columbia, he helmed *When Husbands Flirt* (1925), then went over to MGM for the slapstick comedy *The Boob* (1926) before landing at Famous Players-Lasky (now known as Paramount Pictures after its distribution unit)

where he directed *You Never Know Women* (1926) and *The Cat's Pajamas* (1926). It was as a contract director at the now renamed Paramount-Famous Players-Lasky Corp. that he had his breakout hit, due to his flying background.

After directing a dozen low-budget 'horse opera' films (some of which he would rather forget), Paramount entrusted its epic WW I flying epic *Wings* (1927) for Wellman to direct. *Wings*, a major war drama dealing with fighter pilots during World War I was highlighted by air combat and flight sequences. The film culminates with the epic Battle of Saint-Mihiel. In the 1st Academy Awards it was one of two films to win Best Picture (the other was *Sunrise*).

He married five women, including a Ziegfeld Follies showgirl, before settling down with Dorothy Coonan Wellman, a former Busby Berkeley dancer. Wellman believed that Dorothy saved him from becoming a caricature of himself. She appeared as a tomboy in *Wild Boys of the Road* (1933), a Depression-era social commentary picture made for the progressive Warner Bros. studio (and which is a favorite of Martin Scorsese). It came two years after Wellman's masterpiece, *The Public Enemy* (1931), one of the great early talkies, one of the great gangster pictures and the film that made James Cagney a superstar. Scorsese says that Wellman's use of music in the film influenced his own first gangster picture, *Mean Streets* (1973).

Wellman was as adept at comedy as he was at macho material, helming the original *A Star Is Born* (1937) (for which he won his only Oscar, for best original story) and the biting satire *Nothing Sacred* (1937), both of which starred Fredric March, for producer David O. Selznick. Both movies were dissections of the fame game, as was his satire *Roxie Hart* (1942), which reportedly was one of Stanley Kubrick's favorite films.

During World War II Wellman continued to make outstanding films, including *The Ox-Bow Incident* (1943), *Lady of Burlesque* (1943) and *Story of G.I. Joe* (1945), and after the war he turned out another war classic, *Battleground* (1949). In the 1950s Wellman's best later films were co-produced by and starred John Wayne; *Island in the Sky* (1953) and *The High and the Mighty* (1954), for which he received his third and last best director Oscar nomination. His final film hearkened back to his World War I service, *Lafayette Escadrille* (1958), which featured the unit in which Wellman had flown. He retired as a director after making the film, reportedly enraged at Warner Bros.' post-production tampering with a film that meant so much to him.

While he was primarily a director, Wellman also produced ten films, one of them uncredited, all of which he also directed. His last film was *Lafayette Escadrille* (1958), which he produced, directed, wrote the story for and narrated.

In his career, Wellman won a single Academy Award, for the story of *A Star Is Born*. He was nominated as best director three times, for *A Star Is Born*, *Battleground* and *The High and the Mighty*, for which he was also nominated by the Directors Guild of America as best director. In 1973, the DGA honored him with a Lifetime Achievement Award. Wellman also has a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, at 6125 Hollywood Blvd.

Several filmmakers have examined Wellman's career. Richard Schickel devoted an episode of his PBS series *The Men Who Made the Movies* to Wellman in 1973, and in 1996, Todd Robinson made the feature-length documentary *Wild Bill: Hollywood Maverick*.