

**LILLIAN  
DIANA  
GISH**  
**1893-1993**



**FIRST  
LADY OF  
AMERICAN  
CINEMA**

Many famous actors have called Oklahoma home. One such person is Lillian Gish. She was the “first lady of the silent screen”, and a star of movies, television, and stage for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Her film “Birth of a Nation” is still causing controversy – a century after its release.

Lillian Gish was born in October 1893 in Springfield, Ohio. In 1910, while living in Massillon, Ohio, she learned her father James, who had abandoned the family, was institutionalized in the Oklahoma Hospital for the Insane in Norman. Gish moved to Shawnee to stay with her aunt and uncle while attending Shawnee High School. James often traveled to Shawnee to visit his brother so the two got reacquainted. In January 1912, in her senior year, he died at age 38, so she returned to Ohio.

Mother Mary, Lillian, and sister Dorothy moved to East St. Louis where Mary operated the Candy Kitchen, adjacent to the Majestic Theater. When it burned down, they moved to New York and befriended their neighbor Gladys Smith, a child actress, later known as Mary Pickford, who worked with D. W. Griffith. She introduced the sisters to Griffith. They joined Biograph Studios.

Gish starred in many of Griffith’s most acclaimed films, including Birth Of a Nation (1915), Intolerance (1916), Way Down East (1920) and Orphans of the Storm (1921). In the climax of “Way Down East”, her character floats unconscious on an ice floe towards a raging waterfall. Her realistic performance caused lasting nerve damage in several fingers. Gish never married or had children but some suspected a romantic connection with Griffith.

She made her favorite film The Wind (1928) at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. It was considered a commercial failure but today is recognized as one of the best films of the silent period. When talkies arrived, the innocent image of Gish was considered outdated because the “vamp” was popular. Louis Mayer wanted to stage a scandal to garner sympathy for Gish, but she refused.

Gish was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress in Duel in the Sun (1946). She performed in television from the 1950s to the 1980s. Her last film role – at age 93 – was in The Whales of August (1987) with Bette Davis. After the director complimented Gish for a perfect close-up, Davis remarked, “She should. She invented ‘em.” The National Board of Review selected her as Best Actress and she received a ten-minute standing ovation at the Cannes Festival but received no Oscar nomination.

In her later years, Gish became a dedicated advocate for the preservation of silent film. She received a special Academy Award in 1971 for “superlative artistry”, a 1984 American Film Institute Lifetime Achievement Award and was awarded Kennedy Center Honors. AFI named her 17<sup>th</sup> among the greatest female stars of cinema. Lillian Gish died in February 1993 at age 99 in New York City.

In May 2019, the trustees of Bowling Green State University voted 7-0 to remove Lillian’s name from the Gish Film Theater – dedicated back in 1976 to showcase her career – because of her role in D. W. Griffith’s racist film “Birth Of a Nation” back in 1915. Many artists – including Martin Scorsese, James Earl Jones and Helen Mirren – called it “insulting and disrespectful for singling out just one film in her legendary career”. The university has refused to reconsider its decision.