"A Picture That Was No Picnic"

*Lillian Gish has something to say about the location tortures accompanying the filming of "The Wind"

by Katherine Albert

from Motion Picture Magazine, October, 1927

I went on a location trip to the Mojave Desert to see some movie weather in the making. I wonder if I can make you see that location. First, let me give you just a bit of the background. "The Wind," based on a novel by Dorothy Scarborough, is a story of the Texas plains, where the wind blows constantly. The role is a departure for Lillian Gish. As Letty, she is a gently reared Southern girl who comes to the wilds of Texas where cowboys, rattlesnakes and disorder flourish. The villain in this piece is not a man but an element, the wind. Miss Gish has been pursued by many bad men. Never before has the wind been her torturer.

From what Miss Gish told me, I fancy that the wind plays in this picture the same sort of role that the rain played in "Rain." The ceaselessness of the element so thoroughly gets on the nerves of the heroine that she finds herself doing all sorts of things, including murder, that she would never have dreamed possible when she was in her Southern home.

The wind billows constantly throughout the picture. It does not let up even in the interiors, for doors are swept open and windows blown shut. Outside there are not only sweeping wind storms, but tornadoes as well.

Making weather in a studio is more or less commonplace. Wind, rain, snow and hail have all been recreated on the large stages, but director Victor Seastrom and his staff made weather in the midst of the desert.

I left Hollywood gaily and drove one hundred and fifteen miles to the town of Mojave, a sprawly little settlement on the edge of the desert. The cast, including the star, made their home at a country hotel there. To reach the location one had to drive from the hotel over awful dirt roads into the sweltering heat - the thermometer was never lower than one hundred and fifteen degrees all the time the company was on location - into the blinding sun, into the bleak, barren waste that is the Mojave Desert.

Even the Joshua trees - those weird monsters that infest the desert - disappear, and only the scrubby grease plants hug the sand. Seventeen miles of desert. Blazing, hot, windless desert. And then all of a sudden the location bursts upon you.

That anyone could be active in that scorching heat is almost inconceivable, yet there were cameras, generators and other studio equipment planted in that broad expanse of wasteland.
A little shack had been built. To the left of it was an old well. To the right was a corral with twenty-five or thirty head of cattle. On all sides stretched the hot, flat desert.

Directly in front of the shack stood a little figure, and in front of her were the cameras. There was the usual number of workers, all wearing high boots in case they encountered rattlesnakes, and most of them had whitish-looking stuff smeared over their faces to keep off sunburn. Goggles, making them look like men from Mars, were worn to protect their eyes from the sand.

But there was Lillian Gish in little, low-heeled slippers, hatless and without any protection for her eyes. Banked along either side of the set, just outside the range of the cameras, were a number of weird machines made of steel and wire with airplane propellers attached in front, enormous contrivances that might have decorated an ancient torture chamber.

As I drove up I heard a frightful noise, and, in a second, the scene was clouded by enormous drifts of sand. The noise came from the giant machines used to created wind. The nine propellers seemed to lift the desert and blow it before the cameras. And then the cameras ground, in the midst of the terrific machine-made weather that little unprotected figure ran into the shack and out again.

In a moment someone came galloping into the scene on a bucking horse. For ten minutes the wind-machines did their dirtiest, and it was all recorded by the cameras. I was utterly exhausted by merely watching it, and I expected to see Lillian Gish carried out.

"It's a wonder you aren't dead," I said.

"It is, without any doubt, the most unpleasant picture I've ever made," she replied. "I mean by that, the most uncomfortable to do. I don't mind the heat so much, but working before the wind-machines all the time is never-racking. You see, it blows the sand, and we've put sawdust down, too, because that is light and sails along in the air, and then there are smoke-pots to make it all look even more dusty. I've been fortunate. The flying cinders haven't gotten into my eyes, although a few have burned my hands."

Lars Hanson came riding up to the car and dismounted to talk to us. Here is another incongruity. Hanson, born and reared in Sweden, the only member of his family who did not follow the sea as a profession, creator of Shakespearian roles in his native country, plays the part of a Texas cowboy. It is a never-ending source of wonder to me that these actors can look like anything. If you didn't hear his accent, you would imagine that he had followed the American plains all his life. Victor Seastrom, the director, is also a Scandinavian. And Montague Love is in the cast. He was born in Calcutta and reared in England. But when you begin listing paradoxes of the screen, there seems to be no end.

"You must see the sights of the desert," said Miss Gish. "Yonder in that box are two rattlesnakes that were caught yesterday, and on up the road is the camp where most of the people are housed."
A few miles up that flat dirt road several Pullman cars and a baggage car had been placed on a siding. The cameramen, assistant director, electricians and others lived there. The baggage car was turned into a dining room, and the meals were prepared from one of the famous chuck wagons that are shipped into service whenever there is a location trip. All of the film for the camera was kept in humidors to prevent it from melting in the heat.

At night the tables were cleared away in the baggage car, and a miniature theater was set up where star, director and cast watched the "rushes," the film which had been shot the day before, sent back to the studios, developed and returned to the company.

Then, once more, the same little figure in front of the wretched shack with the wind machines going full tilt. There was that beating sun. Hot. Hot. Hot. Fancy working in such conditions! Imagine mustering up the courage - for it really does take courage - to bring to the screen a story like "The Wind." Picture Miss Gish, Mr. Hanson and Mr. Seastrom reading the novel and then the script, knowing what they would have to go through to bring it to the screen.

I left Miss Gish burying the man she had "murdered" in the sand. The wind kept blowing the sand away. She covered him over again and again. I have never been happier to leave anywhere.