



Harold Lloyd — Master Comedian & Good Citizen

Harold Lloyd was born in Burchard, Nebraska on April 20, 1893. He always wanted to be an actor. Stage roles in school productions led to work in stock theatrical productions and a move to Los Angeles.

While working on the Universal lot, Harold met Hal Roach (who would later produce the films of Laurel and Hardy and the Our Gang comedies). When Roach formed his own company, Lloyd joined him. When Harold created a screen character more like himself his career took off. Harold was the first film comedian to portray a character that looked and acted like someone sitting in the audience – an average guy, the boy-next-door, an everyman, but with a trademark pair of horn-rimmed glasses.

As his new character grew more popular, the one-reel comedies became two-reels. It was during a photo shoot to promote his million-dollar two-reelers that Harold's promising career came to an abrupt halt. In 1919,

Harold posed for a photographer. The set-up called for him to light a cigarette with a prop bomb (the round, black type you might see in the cartoons). The bomb wasn't a prop at all; it exploded in his hand. It ripped open the sixteen-foot ceiling and left Harold blind and with most of his right hand missing. Doctors told him he would never see again. His career was over.

But the doctors were wrong. Eventually, his sight did return, the scars healed, and a glove was crafted to hide his handicap from his public. The comedian, known for doing all his own daredevil stunts, felt his audience would be concerned for his safety and not laugh at the movie if they knew about his injury. So he wore the glove in every movie he ever made after the accident.

By 1922, the two reelers had become five reels and Harold Lloyd was making feature-length comedies. The thrill comedy "Safety Last!" was the story of an industrious fellow who climbed a skyscraper to win his girl. It's the ultimate thrill comedy. Harold performed the hair-raising comedic stunt all by himself with only one complete hand. There were no fake backgrounds or computer graphics back in 1923. Strategic camera angles created the dizzy drops. At no time in filming could Harold have fallen more than three stories. After filming "Safety Last!" Harold married his leading lady, Mildred Davis, and constructed an elaborate movie star home in Beverly Hills and called it "Greenacres."



By the mid 1920's, Harold had left Roach and was producing all the films in which he starred. Of all the silent film comedians, Harold Lloyd was the most profitable. His films outgrossed the movies of Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton, and he made more films than both of them put together. With hits like "The Freshman," "The Kid Brother," and "Speedy," Harold Lloyd was the number one box office star two years in a row. In 1928, Variety proclaimed him the highest paid film star.

Harold Lloyd was an innovator in the movie business. He pioneered new camera techniques and was one of the first filmmakers to preview his comedies to a test audience, and then re-shoot, re-cut and preview them again. At a time before unions, Harold paid his crew year-round, even when they weren't shooting a film.

When talking pictures came along, Lloyd was one of the first filmmakers to embrace the new medium. "Welcome Danger" opened in 1929 and was Lloyd's highest grossing film. Twelve days later the stock market crashed and the country changed. Lloyd's All-American go-getter no longer seemed in fashion to an audience struggling to survive the Depression. His sound films in the 1930s lacked the success of his earlier silent work.

In 1947 Harold made his last movie, "The Sin of Harold Diddlebock." It was produced by Howard Hughes. As an actor-for-hire, Harold no longer had total control as he had back in the 1920s and didn't find the experience very rewarding.

In 1949, Harold's face graced the cover of TIME Magazine as the Imperial Potentate of the Ancient Arabic Order of the Nobles of the Mystic Shrine, their highest-ranking position. He devoted an entire year to visiting 130 temples across the country giving speeches for over 700,000 Shriners. The last twenty years of his life he worked tirelessly for the twenty-two Shriner Hospitals for Children and in the 1960s, he was named President and Chairman of the Board.

In addition to the Shrine, Harold had his hobbies. Whatever he put his mind to, he mastered: chess, bowling, microscopy, painting -- Harold became a color expert and developed a color palette for artists. In the late '40s, Harold developed an interest in 3-D photography and traveled the world taking pictures. In the last twenty years of his life he amassed close to 300,000 stereo slides.

Throughout his long career, Harold received many tributes. He was the fifth film star to immortalize his hand and footprints in the pavement outside Grauman's Chinese Theatre in Hollywood, and he has two stars on the "Walk of Fame." The George Eastman House honored him twice for his work in movies and, in 1953, Harold received an honorary Academy Award for being a "Master Comedian and Good Citizen." Over twenty years after his death, his bespectacled face appeared on a U.S postage stamp. Harold Lloyd died in 1971 at his home in Beverly Hills at the age of 77. After his death, his magnificent estate was run as a museum but the property was eventually auctioned off and subdivided. The house and six acres still remain. In 1984, Greenacres was placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

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