

# Portail de l'éducation de Historica Canada

## Nell Shipman

### Overview

This lesson is based on viewing the Nell Shipman biography from [The Canadians](#) series. Shipman was a silent screen legend who is credited with performing her own stunts, filming the first nude scene, and being a devoted animal rights activist.

### Aims

Students will explore the life and accomplishments of Shipman, paying particular attention to her concern for animal rights.

### Background

Filmmaking as we know it today began little more than a century ago with the birth of silent screen pictures. Born Helen Barham in Victoria, British Columbia in 1892, Nell Shipman was just three years old when films were first projected onto a screen in front of an audience. From the time she was a young girl, she dreamed of becoming an actress and at an early age saw her dream come true. A break with Vitagraph won her a role in Curwood's *Outdoor Adventure Stories*, a role that forever labeled her

"The Girl from God's Country."

A determined woman with an "independent spirit" Nell Shipman also wrote scripts. However, it was not always an easy lifestyle. She frequently faced economic and personal hardships and at the end of her career found herself alone and destitute. Having been refused lodgings within the Motion Picture Relief Fund's facility for the disadvantaged elders of the industry, Nell was allowed to stay on the ranch of an old friend. She remained there until her death in 1970 at the age of 77.

## **Activities**

**Time Allowance:** 1 - 4 hours

### **Procedures:**

1. Arrange students into groups of 4 or 5 to create a [Historica Canada Heritage Minute](#) about the life and accomplishments of Nell Shipman. Students must decide how and why Shipman is important to Canadian History and incorporate their view into their Minute. Ask students to compare their views on her importance to that of the other groups.
2. Arrange students into pairs to research filming laws/regulations surrounding treatment of animals. From their research, students are to create a report which discusses the following:
  - Are there any laws/regulations in place today to protect animals during filming of movies? If so, what do these include?
  - Why do you feel that this is an important issue?
  - How and why have the laws/regulations changed over time (particularly

since Nell Shipman was creating films)?

- Do you feel that these laws/regulations are enough? (i.e. is there room for improvement?) Why do you feel this way? How might these laws/regulations be improved?

- What sort of penalty should individuals face should harm come to an animal on the set?

Discuss the article [Free Willy star shuns freedom](#) and have students write a 1-page response to the article with reference to their research and topics discussed as a class.

3. Brainstorm a list of movies whose main characters include animals. Examples include *Free Willy*, *Dr. Dolittle (I and II)*, and *Ace Ventura Pet Detective*. Ask students whether or not they believe that these films (and films like them) have influenced society's attitude(s) toward animal protection? Why?

Arrange students into groups of 3 or 4 to create a short skit that discusses the use of animals in films and the factors that should be taken into consideration when using these animals. Following the presentation of the skit one student from the group will summarize the message of their skit and why they chose this particular message.

4. Discuss Nell Shipman's importance as a female Canadian icon/hero. As a class, brainstorm a list of Canadian female icons. These may include film stars, musicians, athletes, politicians, television personalities, artists, public figures, etc. In what ways can they be described as role models for today's youth? What qualities do they possess that cause them to be successful role models?

5. Toward the end of the movie the narrator states: "Some believe that

we could do with a little bit of the past in our present." Discuss this statement with the class by first asking them why they agree or disagree with this statement. Is there past in our present? If so, what elements of the past most influence daily life?

Have students write a brief 250-300 word response to the following question: Is history – the events, the people, and the ideas – an essential part of daily living? Why, or why not?

6. Design a poster on 8.5 x 11 paper for Curwood's *Outdoor Adventure Stories* starring "The Girl from God's Country," Nell Shipman. Your poster should be colourful and include text for the title and star of the film.

7. Who is your favourite actress? Prepare a brief 300-500 word biography on your favourite actress. When finished, attach a 100 word report on why you like this person and what qualities they possess which you respect. Finally, write a one-paragraph comparison between this actress and Nell Shipman.

## **Resources**

[Nell Shipman Worksheet](#)

[Nell Shipman - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

[Women Film Pioneers Project - Nell Shipman](#)

[Free Willy star shuns freedom](#)

[Collections Canada - Nell Shipman](#)

Everson, William K. "Rediscovery: The Films of Nell Shipman." *Films in Review* 40.4 (April 1989): 228-30.

Fulbright, Tom. "Queen of the Dog Sleds." *Classic Film Collector* (fall 1969): 31.

Foster, Gwendolyn. *Women Film Directors: An International Bio-Critical Dictionary*. Greenwood Press, Connecticut. 1995.

Morris, Peter. "The Taming of the Few: Nell Shipman in the Context of Her Times." *In The Silent Screen and My Talking Heart*, 195-205. Boise, ID; Boise State University Press, 1987.

Shipman, Nell. *The Silent Screen and My Talking Heart: An Autobiography*. Boise, ID: Hemingway Western Studies Series, Boise State University Press, 1987.

Slide, Anthony. *Early Women Directors*. New York: Da Capo, 1984.

Walker, Joseph, and Juanita Walker. "Danger in God's Country." *American Cinematographer* 66.5 (May 1985): 34-43.

Walker, Joseph and Juanita. *The Light on Her Face*. The ASC Press, 1984.