

Famous New Yorker Eugenie Besserer

Eugenie Besserer's name might be forgotten if she hadn't played the hero's mother in *The Jazz Singer*. By the time she made Hollywood's first hit talking picture, Besserer had made history herself as one of Hollywood's first movie stars.

After becoming a star, Besserer claimed that she was born in Paris. She was actually born in Watertown, Jefferson County, on Christmas Day, 1868. Her family moved to Canada, but Eugenie was soon orphaned. By her own account, she ran away from her guardians at age 12 and traveled to New York City, where she lived with an uncle.

Eugenie attended the National Conservatory of Music. Founded in 1885 by Jeannette Thurber, the Conservatory taught musical and dramatic skills to aspiring opera singers. Surprisingly, Eugenie was most successful at fencing. Trained by the former fencing master of the French army, she claimed the ladies' fencing championship and dueling with men in public exhibitions.

Besserer became an actor instead of an opera star. She wrote plays to showcase her skills, but mostly took supporting roles in other people's plays. When she wasn't acting, she taught fencing at the National Conservatory and the Berkeley Ladies Athletic Club in Manhattan. The Berkeley club was a pioneer physical fitness center for women. Reputedly the only female fencing instructor in the U.S., Besserer was a perfect fit.

Acting took Eugenie Besserer across the country and around the world. By age forty she was a respected character actor but not a star in her own right. That changed in 1910, when she visited a sick relative in California. She visited the Selig Polyscope studio in Edendale, the first motion-picture studio to operate full-time in California. Many stage actors still looked down on silent movies, but Besserer "became interested as a professional in the artistic possibilities of the motion picture," as she wrote later. She signed a contract with Selig, starting with the role of Aunt Em in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. Due to her stage experience, she instantly became the company's highest-paid actress.

During her eight years at Selig, Eugenie Besserer became one of the first generation of movie stars. Until the 1910s, movie actors were rarely identified on screen. Eventually, early movie fans wanted to know the names of their favorite performers. Studios found they could make more money by promoting their star performers. Movie magazines told fans more about Besserer and her peers, even if not everything written about "the French emotional actress" was true.

Besserer paid a price for her new fame. To meet a grueling production schedule, Besserer had to shuttle between studios in Edendale and Chicago. Still proud of her athletic ability, she did her own stunts but broke a leg when a horse threw her.

"A majority of the artists say that motion picture acting is the hardest kind of work," she wrote, but "I never deemed it so," despite her injuries.

After leaving Selig in 1918, Besserer worked regularly for other studios until her death on May 28, 1934. *The Jazz Singer* was just one of six films she made in 1927. Most of her movies were lost before the age of film preservation. People may remember her as tongue-tied by Al Jolson's improvised lines, but Eugenie Besserer was a much more versatile and interesting performer than one film clip can suggest.



Eugenie Besserer with Al Jolson in
The Jazz Singer, 1927



Watertown is located approximately 70 miles north of Syracuse and got its name because of the many falls located on the Black River.

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