

# ***The Making of an American***

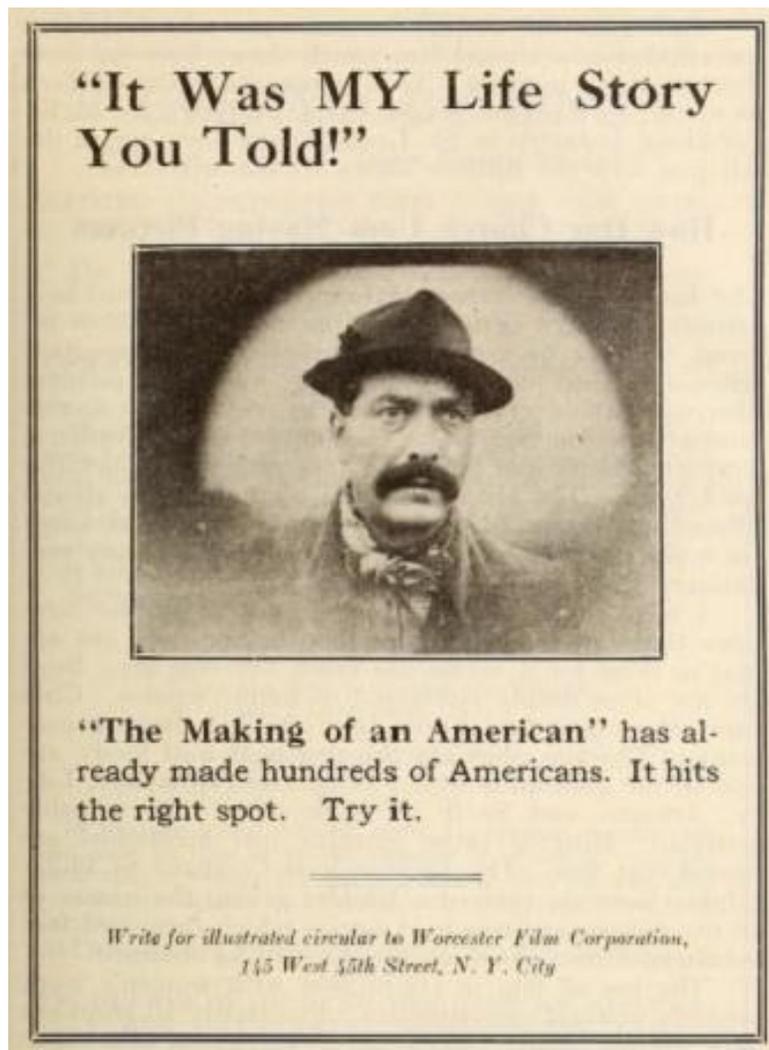
By Charles "Buckey" Grimm

With the great influx of immigrants into the United States in the early part of the twentieth century, the country was faced with many issues beyond just how to accommodate these future citizens.

They were faced with a myriad of socioeconomic changes to the populace. The immigrant had now become a vital part of the workforce. But many questions remained. How best to assimilate them into the culture of the U.S. The prevailing thought of the country was that we needed to determine a method to "Americanize" the new workers. The most important part of this "Americanization" was deemed to be the need to become proficient in the use of the English language. In February 1919, the Bureau of Education released Bulletin, 1919 No 77 titled "State Americanization." Prepared through the auspices of Fred Clayton Butler (Director of Americanization, Bureau of Education), the pamphlet suggested that the onus of assimilation of the Immigrant into society be placed on the state. As part of this effort many state governments formed committees to ostensibly assist the Immigrant with this process. The main effort was focused on making sure our new residents became proficient in the use of the English language.

For many of the immigrant population their first knowledge of American customs and language came from the nickelodeons beginning at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The motion picture from its earliest public presentations served as an outlet in many ways to the immigrant population. Since so many were picking up some rudimentary understanding of the English language it made sense that by tailoring a film focusing on this Americanization effort could certainly have a very positive result.

As part of this Americanization effort, the Connecticut Bureau of Americanization contracted the Worcester Film Corporation in 1919 to produce a film to extoll the virtues of Americanization, specifically aimed at the importance of learning and understanding the English language as a purveyor to success in the new country. The resulting film "The Making of An American" was one of the earliest filmic efforts to tackle this issue of immigrant assimilation.



*This ad for the film appeared in Moving Picture Age, February 1921. Courtesy [Media History Digital Library](#).*

The film opens with a statement of purpose "An Appeal to all foreigners to learn English," in multiple languages. We then see Pete (as portrayed by Emile De Verry), a new immigrant, is shown wide eyed, getting his first real look at his new country. Upon his arrival, he meets his friend Tony, who it is obvious has successfully transitioned from into a bona fide U.S. citizen. Tony attempts to help Pete find work, but due to his inability to understand English, his employment options are limited. He is able to find work as a laborer, the work exhausting, the pay low. Again, the importance of knowing the language is shown as Pete is unable to understand the warning posted in front of an elevator and he falls and is injured. After his recuperation from the hospital he sees an advertisement for a night school teaching the English language. Pete at first hesitant, shortly picks up the new language and his fortunes and confidence grow. Because of his new understanding of the English language Pete is now given a better job, one that matches his abilities. He takes a much

more prominent place in the operations of the company, and is now an integral part of the community. Pete's position at the company is now to the point where he is evaluating new potential hires. He meets an immigrant looking for work, much like himself in the past, and he flashes back to his efforts upon his arrival in the country and then recommends the man attend night school and learn English as he did. Pete now has his own family, and is shown discussing business with the company's management, he is now truly a success and a valued citizen, with much of the credit due to his learning the English language.

One of the interesting aspects of the film is that while it begins by showing Pete the Immigrant in typical stereotypical fashion, (as shown by his mode of dress along with the bushy mustache), it delves a bit deeper. It is one of the early images showing an Immigrant in a positive light. Once he is assimilated into U.S. culture, mainly by learning and understanding the English language he is shown rising to success, no longer a standard foreign character, but he becomes a community leader, is well dressed and an important contributor at his employer and in the community. It is an interesting dynamic to see the development of his character in the film. So it seems to have a twofold result, the obvious message of our future citizens of the need to learn and understand the language to properly communicate. But it also had to be uplifting to see "one of their own" rising in stature to be the same as every other American.

It was received quite well as shown by a review from "Educational Film Magazine," which wrote, "The theme is handled most successfully. It is, of course, purely a work-a-day film made simply to carry a message to the newcomer. But it must also appeal

to anyone interested in the welfare of Americans new and old and suggests, not in words, a practical way of securing that welfare — support the cause of EDUCATION."<sup>1</sup> A 1921 report of the Connecticut Bureau of Americanization noted that the department's motion picture "The Making of An American" provided "great assistance in stimulating Americanization. It has been shown throughout the state to 112,540 persons. Many other states have purchased this film of the producing company."<sup>2</sup> "Film Daily" felt Emile De Verry's portrayal of Pete was "credible and this was a wise selection for a film." As late as 1924 the film was still being shown at various venues, and it continued to play well with reports in the trades still mentioning the importance of its lessons in Americanization.

This film was considered lost for a number of years, until 1999 when home movie enthusiast and film historian Alan Kattelle donated a 28mm print to the moving image archive Northeast Historic Film in Bucksport, Maine.

<sup>1</sup> Educational Film Magazine, Vol III, Feb 1920

<sup>2</sup> Report of the Board of Education of the State of Connecticut to the Governor, 1921

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.*

*Charles "Buckey" Grimm is an independent film researcher who has written for Film History and Moving Image. He is currently at work on documenting the life and careers of pioneering moving picture cameramen. He is employed as a manufacturing engineer and resides in Mt. Airy, MD.*