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It Happened One Night... at MGM

When Patricia Douglas was raped by an MGM salesman at a 1937 studio party, the 20-year-old dancer filed charges, taking on Hollywood's most powerful institution. Today, as Douglas breaks a 65-year silence, the author exposes the perjury, bribes, and smear tactics used to destroy her.

BY DAVID STENN

APRIL 1, 2003



 **SAVE**

What," asked Jacqueline Onassis, "are we going to do next?" It was September 1993. She had just edited *Bombshell: The Life and Death of Jean Harlow*, in which I solved the long-standing mystery of how Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer's beloved Blonde Bombshell died suddenly and inexplicably at 26. (Unbeknownst even to herself, Harlow had been suffering from kidney failure since she was 15.) Now, over lunch at the Peninsula hotel in Manhattan, I told Jackie of an intriguing topic I'd stumbled onto in my Harlow research. A month before the star's death, in 1937, a dancer named Patricia Douglas had been raped at a wild MGM party thrown by Louis B. Mayer. Instead of bartering her silence for a studio contract or cash, Douglas went public with her story and filed a landmark lawsuit. One person I interviewed told me, "They had her killed."

I didn't believe that, I told Jackie, because, though MGM was then the world's most powerful movie studio, with its own railroad and in-house police force, it would never have gone to such an extreme. Jackie smiled and said, "Well, why don't you find out what *did* happen? You're the only person who can, David."

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It has taken a decade, but the story is astounding. Absent from all reference works, presumed by participants to be buried forever, the Patricia Douglas case is probably the biggest, best-suppressed scandal in Hollywood history. However, I managed to find old newspaper coverage, previously unseen photos, damning studio documentation, long-forgotten legal records, privately shot cinematographic evidence hidden in an MGM film vault, and, most amazing, Patricia Douglas herself. I tracked the reclusive invalid down and eventually persuaded her to break her 65-year silence.

In the spring of 1937, Patricia Douglas was a chunky, chestnut-haired 20-year-old with porcelain skin and perfect teeth. Born in Kansas City, Missouri, she had migrated to Hollywood with her mother, Mildred Mitchell, who was determined to design gowns for screen queens. Instead, she became a couturière for high-end call girls; in the meantime, she neglected her teenage daughter. Patricia dropped out of convent school at 14; she did not drink, date, or dream of film fame—an appealing rarity for the half-dozen male stars for whom she soon became a platonic mascot. She

had lemon Cokes at drive-ins with Dick Powell (“When the waitress saw him, she almost fainted”), barhopped with Bing Crosby and pre-*I Love Lucy* Bill Frawley (“The three of us used to go to this dive on Sunset Boulevard; Bing would sing, and the drunks didn’t even care”), dined at the Brown Derby with Jimmy Durante (“His daddy wanted him to marry me, and I was all of 15”), played kid-sister confessor to George Raft (“He couldn’t get it up, but he had to keep that manly reputation, so the studio manufactured a big romance with Betty Grable”), and learned “truckin’,” the Cotton Club’s latest hep step, from Larry Fine, one of the Three Stooges (“What a blue tongue! Even at the dinner table, you should’ve heard him: ‘Pass the fucking potatoes!’”). A natural-born dancer, Douglas drifted into movies “just for something to do.” By 15 she had already appeared in two classics: *So This Is Africa*, a pre-Production Code comedy that climaxed with the wedding of its two leading men, Bert Wheeler and Robert Woolsey, and *Gold Diggers of 1933*, a Busby Berkeley extravaganza, in which Douglas hoofed behind Ginger Rogers.

Since she was supported by her mother, Douglas had no need to work. So when a casting call came on the afternoon of Sunday, May 2, 1937, she demurred at first, but later agreed to show up. “They never mentioned it was for a party,” she recalls. “Ever. I wouldn’t have gone! Oh God, oh God, I wouldn’t have gone.”

MGM had much to celebrate that year. To battle the Depression, which had already sent rivals Fox, Paramount, and RKO into bankruptcy or receivership, MGM sales executives had devised a radical scheme to restructure film rentals: rather than charge exhibitors on a sliding-percentage scale of box-office receipts, which declined with each booking, the studio would set fees on a per-film basis, calculated on first-run grosses in 30 key cities. That way, a success in select, urban markets could command higher rentals once the film went into wide release.

The new sales formula relied on hits, and MGM quickly supplied three all-star blockbusters: *San Francisco*, with Clark Gable, Jeanette MacDonald, and Spencer Tracy; *Libeled Lady*, with Tracy, Jean Harlow, Myrna Loy, and William Powell; and *The Great Ziegfeld*, with Powell and Luise Rainer, which won an Oscar for best picture. (*San Francisco* and *Libeled Lady* were also nominated.) The combination of socko box office and adjusted film-rental fees spiked MGM's profits to \$14 million, almost double those of the prior year. While other studios struggled to stay solvent, MGM was in fiscal heaven.

Bowing to the sales force that had engineered this miracle, Louis B. Mayer decreed that MGM's annual five-day sales convention would, for the first time in a decade, be held in Culver City, on the studio's home turf. Mayer promised salesmen "a super-special production," and from its start that Sunday, as 282 conventioneers arrived in Pasadena by private railcar (and Patricia Douglas received her fateful casting call), a freewheeling and foreboding tone was set. Emboldened by three days of binge drinking, detraining delegates groped starlets assigned to pin carnations on their lapels. "The Santa Fe is not on the job," one salesman cracked. "We ran out of scotch last night!"



David Ross (circled) was one of the salesmen at a luncheon on the MGM lot with the studio's stars on May 3, 1937. FROM THE ACADEMY OF MOTION PICTURE ARTS AND SCIENCES

From a makeshift stage at the Pasadena station, which was festooned with red-white-and-blue MGM banners, Mayer welcomed his honored guests: "Our fine Chief of Police [James] Davis remarked to me a moment ago [that I] must think a lot of these men to have sent the beauty that he sees before him." The allusion was not to local sunshine or orange groves. "These lovely girls—and you have the finest of them—greet you," continued the purportedly puritanical Mayer. "And that's to show you

how we feel about you, and the kind of a good time that's ahead of you. . . . Anything you want."

That night there was a dinner at the Ambassador Hotel, and the next day, Monday, motorcycle police escorted the salesmen to Culver City, where cigar-chomping, bulldog-faced MGM general manager Eddie Mannix, known and feared as "a fucking gangster"—during one tantrum he broke his wife's back, and an ex-mistress, actress Mary Nolan, endured 15 abdominal surgeries after his beatings—presented Mayer with a key to ceremonially open the main gates of the 117-acre lot. As a marching band played "The Gang's All Here" and 4,000 MGM "family members" hurled confetti, dazzled delegates were paraded through the "world's greatest film studio" to a swank luncheon with some of Hollywood's biggest stars, including Clark Gable, Jean Harlow, Joan Crawford, Norma Shearer, Charles Boyer (in costume as Napoleon for *Conquest*, opposite Greta Garbo), Rosalind Russell, and Sophie Tucker.

To a bunch of starstruck Babbitts, hobnobbing with Hollywood royalty was a once-in-a-lifetime thrill, and MGM understood the effect it would have on them. "We want you to go back to your respective territories," a studio bulletin exhorted the salesmen, "firmly convinced that Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, under the leadership of Louis B. Mayer, is bending every effort to back up the men who provide the one connecting link with the exhibitor, and through him, the public."

Bending every effort. Anything you want.

After three days of "strenuous business activities," delegates were rewarded with a down-home respite. "Yippee! Get Set for Wild West Show at Roach's," announced the convention schedule for Wednesday, May 5, 1937. "It will be a stag affair, out in the wild and woolly West where 'men are men.'" This "typical California celebration" would be hosted by producer Hal Roach, whose *Laurel and Hardy* and *Our Gang* shorts were distributed by MGM.

At four P.M. that day, 120 young female dancers, plus several girls who had answered a small classified ad for MGM party hostesses, reported to the Hal Roach Studios on Washington Boulevard in Culver City, just up the block from MGM. Summoned by casting assistant Vincent Conniff, these fetching unknowns with marquee-friendly names—Teddie Blue, Dona Dax, Iris Gaye, Maren Marlin—were outfitted in felt cowboy hats, belted bolero jackets, leather-studded cuffs, short suedette skirts, and black boots. If the results seemed less Annie Oakley than Gypsy Rose Lee, to hungry hopefuls that was beside the point: here was not only their best shot at stardom but also a hot meal and \$7.50 for the day.

After applying thick camera makeup, the girls were bused to “Rancho Roachero,” a remote, eucalyptus-lined studio property several miles away. Herded into a large banquet hall, they were ordered to sit at tables and wait. Two hours passed, but Patricia Douglas stayed patient. Had she possessed a savvier nature, she might have noted a disturbing detail: though an orchestra and bar were being assembled, this “location set” lacked any sign of a crew, lights, or cameras.

At seven o’clock Mayer, Mannix, Roach, assorted MGM bigwigs and male stars, and almost 300 revved-up conventioneers appeared at the ranch. Given that they had been promised a stag affair, the salesmen’s lust-at-first-sight response to a bevy of young, over-made-up beauties makes sad and terrible sense. Delegates mistook the professional dancers for party favors and treated them accordingly; without telephones or transportation, the young women had no means of escape. Tricked into attendance, then trapped into service, they were left to fend for themselves.

When Douglas started to black out, Ross slapped her and snapped, “Cooperate! I want you awake.”

“You’d never think they’d pull anything like that,” says Douglas, seething as she recalls the scene. “You’re *trusting* with the studios. You’re not expecting anything except to work in a movie. That’s what you’re *there* for.” At first the Wild West party seemed tame. Though the open bar featured only scotch and champagne—500 cases for 300 men—other, inoffensive diversions existed: barbecue was served cafeteria-style in a large mess tent, and there were exhibition boxing matches to enjoy in an adjacent arena. Laurel and Hardy tipped off delegates on the upcoming Kentucky Derby (“Bet on Dellar!” said Hardy of the horse that would take the Trial Purse). The Dandridge Sisters, 13-year-old Dorothy included, performed in a live revue.

David Ross, a roly-poly, 36-year-old Catholic bachelor from the Chicago sales office, had eyes only for Patricia Douglas. When he saw her truckin’ on the dance floor, he approached her and demanded a lesson. Douglas obliged, but she says she found Ross “repulsive. He was slimy, with eyes that bulged like a frog.” Accustomed to her chivalrous star cronies, Douglas had no clue how to handle “an annoying creep doing his best to cop a feel.” After their dance, Douglas ducked into the ladies’ room. “I’ve got a man, and he’s really sticking,” she fretted to the attendant.

By 10 p.m. the party’s polite veneer had vanished. “The men all became intoxicated,” Oscar Buddin, a waiter, would later testify under oath. Buddin heard “filth in conversation” and saw “girls get up and move from the tables because the men were attempting to molest them.”



Ross in L.A. for a grand-jury inquiry, June 16, 1937. FROM THE HERALD EXAMINER COLLECTION/LOS ANGELES PUBLIC LIBRARY/CORBIS

"The party was the worst, the wildest, and the rottenest I have ever seen," said Henry Schulte, another waiter, in his affidavit. "The men's attitude was very rough. They were running their hands over the girls' bodies, and tried to force liquor on the girls." Ginger Wyatt, an 18-year-old ex-Miss Wichita, begged the actor Wallace Beery for help. "I'm tired of being mauled," she told him. Beery rushed her from the premises and "socked a couple of men" in the process.

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Patricia Douglas had no such luck. Spurned by a nobody who, he presumed, was there for his pleasure, David Ross decided to retaliate. "He and another man held me down," she says, shuddering. "One pinched my nose so I'd have to open my mouth to breathe. Then they poured a whole glassful of scotch *and* champagne down my throat. Oh, I fought! But they thought it was funny. I remember a lot of laughter." As soon as her tormentors released her, Douglas fled to the washroom and threw up.

Still woozy, she stepped outside the banquet hall to get some air. Before her lay a freshly tilled field, covered with studio Ford sedans; from behind, a hand clamped over her mouth. "Make a sound," hissed David Ross in her ear, "and you'll never breathe again." Ross dragged her to a parked car and pinned her onto the backseat. "I'm going to *destroy* you," he boasted. When Douglas started to black out, he slapped her with the back of his hand and snapped, "Cooperate! I want you awake."

A t approximately 11:30 P.M.—almost seven hours after the dancers' arrival at the ranch—parking attendant Clement Soth heard screams and then saw Douglas staggering toward him. "My god," she moaned, her eyes swollen

shut. “Isn’t anything sacred around here?” As Soth approached, he saw David Ross run away.

A hysterical Douglas was taken to Culver City Community Hospital, across the street from MGM, where she vomited again. Since childhood, Douglas says, she had not undressed “around *anyone*, not even my mother.” Intensely modest, she now suffered more torture: “I was given a cold-water douche. *Then* the doctor examined me. It’s no surprise he didn’t find anything. The douche had removed all evidence.”

Dr. Edward Lindquist, who treated Douglas, co-owned the hospital, and his practice was largely dependent on MGM. “For us, he was ‘the family doctor,’” one old studio employee explains. A botched exam gave Lindquist room to equivocate. He claimed that while he could not prove his point, he believed there had been no intercourse.

Douglas was driven home in a studio car. Despite the presence at the Wild West party of 11 officers from four different police departments (California, Los Angeles, Culver City, and MGM)—one of whom, Culver City motorcycle cop Tom Lindsay, accompanied Douglas to the hospital—no crime-scene report was ever filed.

Douglas was in a state of collapse for 14 hours. When she awoke, she recalls, “I was *so sore* down there, and my face was still swollen.” She did not seek medical aid. “I would’ve been too embarrassed,” she says. “Someone would’ve seen me naked.”

Delegates mistook the professional dancers for party favors and treated them accordingly

Two days later she returned to the Roach Studios. “You ought to know what happened to me,” Douglas said to the cashier, Maude Van Keuren, “so it doesn’t happen to anyone else.” Instead of receiving sympathy and compassion, Douglas was handed her \$7.50, just like everyone else, as if her nightmare had been a bona fide movie call.

Another victim might have exploited the cover-up for advancement, demanding hush money or an ironclad contract. Douglas had no desire for either. “I wasn’t trying to get anything,” she insists. “I just wanted somebody to believe me.” But she heard nothing from MGM, and her rapist returned to Chicago scot-free.

Douglas’s anger led her to make a momentous decision. Chaperoned by her mortified mother—“I don’t remember any words of comfort from her, no ‘Too bad this happened to you,’ *nothing*”—Douglas appeared at the Los Angeles County district attorney’s office to swear a complaint against David Ross. Since Douglas was still a minor, Mildred Mitchell signed the document as a court-appointed guardian.

In an era that branded rape victims as damaged goods, the Douglas complaint was unique and historic. No woman had ever dared to link a sexual assault to a Hollywood film studio, especially the almighty MGM. Even if a victim were to win her case in court, the stigma would wreck her name and her career. Patricia Douglas was undaunted. “I guess the Irish in me came out,” she says. “You knew you’d be blackballed. Me, I didn’t care. I just wanted to be vindicated, to hear someone say, ‘You can’t do that to a woman.’”

If she imagined the D.A. to be that special someone, Douglas could not have been more mistaken. Six months earlier, Buron Fitts had been elected to a third term in spite of an indictment for perjury in a rape case involving a 16-year-old girl (his acquittal caused a furor). Fitts counted Louis B. Mayer as a close friend; MGM had been the top contributor to his campaign. “There was a strong bond between them,” concedes Fitts’s daughter today.

Budd Schulberg is much more blunt. “Buron Fitts was completely in the pocket of the producers,” says the son of Mayer’s former partner B. P. Schulberg and the Oscar-winning screenwriter of *On the Waterfront*, his own rallying cry against organized

corruption. “The power MGM had is unimaginable today. They owned *everyone*—the D.A., the L.A.P.D. They *ran* this place.”

Patricia Douglas trusted the system and waited. Weeks passed without any word from Fitts. Most women would have given up, but Douglas was quickly proving to be unlike most women. She sought advice from a Mob-connected acquaintance (“He looked just like James Gandolfini”), who contacted attorney William J. F. Brown. Described by his son, Kelly, as “a larger-than-life character, the Johnnie Cochran of his day,” Brown wore double-breasted suits, drove custom Packards, and indulged in controversial but effective courtroom theatrics. When his ex-wife shot her next husband four times, Brown’s impassioned appeal saved her from the gallows. “He always went for the underdog,” says Kelly Brown, “and took cases no one else would touch.” After offering to represent Douglas pro bono, Brown fired off an ultimatum to Fitts: either the D.A.’s office would investigate his client’s complaint or she would share it with the press.

Fitts dismissed the threat as a bluff, but once again he was underestimating Patricia Douglas.

PROBE OF WILD FILM PARTY PRESSED, headlined the William Randolph Hearst-owned *L.A. Examiner* on June 4, 1937. Douglas’s sensational story pushed ahead of accounts of the Duke of Windsor and Wallis Simpson’s wedding and Jean Harlow’s mortal illness. Since “rape” was still ruled a four-letter word, reporters had to resort to prudish euphemisms: Douglas had been “attacked,” “outraged,” or “ravished” at a “studio orgy.” In an ominous sign of MGM’s clout, the studio went unnamed in the newspapers, which published not only Douglas’s name and photo but also her home address.

The unidentified studio released a brief statement. “We have read with astonishment the alleged charges of the girl,” it began. “It is difficult to make any real comment as to a situation which appears so impossible and as to which we know nothing.”

Behind its gates, MGM was in a panic. Except for Paul Bern's bizarre suicide (two months after his 1932 wedding to Jean Harlow, the revered producer had stood nude before a full-length mirror and put a .38 to his temple), the studio had managed to steer clear of scandal. Now a nobody had MGM at her mercy, for, even if her rape charge could be refuted, Douglas's disclosure of a "stag affair" costing \$35,000 (\$440,000 today), with free-flowing liquor and teenage girls, would not only horrify the stockholders of Loews Inc., the corporate parent of MGM, but also tarnish both the studio's squeaky-clean image and the moral sanctity of Louis B. Mayer himself.

So began a blame-the-victim smear campaign unparalleled in Hollywood to this day. Operatives of the Pinkerton Detective Agency, the nation's oldest and largest security-services company, were deployed to track down every girl on the "guest list" and strong-arm her into toeing the party line. In studio-sponsored interviews, 19-year-old Virginia Lee assured reporters that the alleged orgy was actually "a jolly affair, with lots of good clean fun." Grace Downs, a bottle blonde from Pittsburgh, portrayed Douglas as an "unrefined" lush who had swigged scotch "from a quart bottle" all night. Sugar Geise, a 27-year-old chorine whose stage mother socialized with Buron Fitts, described a prior sighting of Douglas "passed out" in the Knickerbocker Hotel bar.

"Anyone who knew me knew I didn't drink," counters an indignant Douglas. "And since when is getting raped 'good clean fun'?"

Pinkerton detectives also shadowed Douglas in order to dig up dirt. "Douglas must have attempted to proposition men," read an internal Roach Studios memo. "Many of them must have turned her down but can testify to her solicitation." When the Pinkerton men returned with the truth—that before her rape Douglas had been a teetotaling virgin—studio efforts to besmirch her grew desperate, especially after Dr. Wirt Dakin, a urologist who had previously treated a cyst on Douglas's bladder, stood

firm and declined a request from Hal Roach himself to re-diagnose it as a genital urinary infection, a discreet term at the time for gonorrhea.

Meanwhile, in the face of scandal, Douglas was abandoned by all her celebrity pals. “My name was mud, and they couldn’t get dirty,” she says without rancor. “They had their careers to think about.”

Front-page coverage of the Wild West party intensified when Buron Fitts showed Douglas photos of two dozen MGM salesmen and she—as the D.A. reluctantly told reporters—“without hesitation” identified David Ross. “That’s the man,” said Douglas. “I can never forget that face.” Left with no choice but to convene a grand jury, Fitts summoned Ross (who called the charge against him “absurd” and “ridiculous”) from Chicago on an overnight flight. Upon landing, Ross went into immediate conference with Mendel Silberberg, Louis B. Mayer’s personal attorney.

Held in the Los Angeles Hall of Justice on June 16, 1937, the grand-jury hearing traumatized Douglas all over again. Of the 120 dancers present at the party, only 2, Ginger Wyatt (whose rescue by Wallace Beery was now denied in the actor’s MGM-scripted statement) and Paula Bromley, dared to testify on her behalf. Forced to recount her rape in detail, Douglas had to watch Lester Roth, a Silberberg law partner representing Ross, point at her with withering scorn and say to the jurors, “*Look at her. Who would want her?*”

Exiting the courtroom, Douglas found herself face-to-face with her rapist. She froze. He calmly smoked a cigarette as photographers shoved them together, shouting to Douglas, “Look at Mr. Ross!”

“I can’t. I just *can’t*,” she cried, and ran down the hall to a window. “I was going to jump through the glass,” she confesses. “To get away from everything and everybody . . . so I couldn’t be hurt anymore.” Douglas was restrained by her mother and her lawyer as flashbulbs popped. Wire services picked up the photos, which ran nationwide the next day. Back in the grand-jury room, Lester Roth called Clement

Soth, the parking attendant who had discovered Douglas. Soth had originally said that he had seen David Ross flee the scene, but now he recanted that crucial detail. “The man was much thinner,” Soth said under oath. “Mr. Ross’s face is fat.” When I contacted Soth’s daughters, they confirmed that, in exchange for their father’s perjury, MGM offered him “any job he wanted.” Soth joined the studio “family” as a driver and remained there for the rest of his life.

The grand jury did not indict David Ross.

Douglas’s oppressors considered the case closed, but again they had misjudged her. A month later, with her mother still acting as guardian, Douglas filed suit in Los Angeles County Superior Court against David Ross, Eddie Mannix, Hal Roach, casting assistant Vincent Conniff, and “John Doe One To Fifty” for their “unlawful conspiracy to defile, debauch, and seduce” her and other dancers “for the immoral and sensual gratification of male guests.” She asked for \$500,000 in damages.

This salvo made even more headlines. Although MGM issued no public statement, in private memos the studio lawyers nicknamed Douglas “our girlfriend,” and they rewarded perjurers with jobs. “I just had another talk with [bit player and gossipmonger] Bobby Tracy, one of our star witnesses in the Douglas case,” reported Roach Studios attorney Victor Ford Collins to general manager S. S. Van Keuren. “He seems badly in need of work, and was very much in the hopes that somebody could phone Mr. Mannix direct about him getting a few days at M-G-M. . . . It is highly imperative that we keep these people in good humor, and get them some kind of work. May I again say—it is really important!”

When I contacted Clement Soth’s daughters, they confirmed that, in exchange for their father’s perjury, MGM had offered him “any job he wanted.”

It certainly was: the studio had just been notified by its insurer that it would be wholly liable for any damages awarded to Douglas. This made MGM lawyers stall the proceedings, and, although David Ross was the main defendant, process servers never contacted him. Finally, on February 9, 1938, a superior-court judge dismissed the case. Douglas seemed to have exhausted all options, yet just 24 hours after the judge's dismissal—again with her mother as guardian—she filed an identical suit in U.S. District Court. In an apparent legal first, a female plaintiff made rape a federal case, based on its violation of her civil rights.

The timing of Douglas's suit was most unfortunate for Mayer and Mannix. By then, as movie-theater attendance hit 85 million people per week—two-thirds of the entire U.S. population—and MGM remained first in grosses, Mayer's annual income had soared to \$1.2 million, making him the highest-paid executive in the United States. Only three weeks earlier, he and Mannix had signed new five-year contracts with Loews Inc. that guaranteed them both a percentage of MGM profits. A federal rape case would jeopardize their jobs. Patricia Douglas had to be stopped.

The best means to this end was her press-hungry attorney, and here MGM had a huge stroke of luck. Enraged by Buron Fitts's bungling of the Douglas case (the “subservient” D.A. had allowed rape “without reprisals to the rappers”), William J. F. Brown had vowed to challenge his nemesis in the next election. And since no campaign could be won by a candidate who was in litigation with MGM, the largest employer in L.A. County, Brown sacrificed Douglas to his political race, failing to appear in court three consecutive times, until a federal judge finally dismissed the case “for want of prosecution.” Since counsel for the defendants also skipped each hearing, Brown appears to have illegally apprised MGM of his plan.

Douglas had been betrayed yet again, this time by her lawyer and, worse yet, her mother. As court-appointed guardian to a minor, Mildred Mitchell had sworn to

protect her charge's best interests; had she done so by exposing Brown's brazen malpractice, another attorney could have taken the case. Instead, she ignored the flagrant misconduct of Brown.

Six decades later, one question lingers: Were Douglas's lawyer and mother bought off? No smoking gun survives to confirm it, but, if so, any ill-gotten gains became losses: Fitts trounced Brown in the 1940 primary election, and Mildred Mitchell married an alcoholic gambler who blew through her life savings and then disappeared.

Douglas's quest had been doomed from the start. "I never sued about money," she stresses. "That's not me. And it wasn't for glory; it was just to make them *stop having those parties*. . . . And, besides, money can't cure a broken heart."

Before Eddie Mannix died in 1963—six years after Louis B. Mayer succumbed to leukemia, 10 months after David Ross was ravaged by rectal cancer, and a decade before the gunshot suicide of Buron Fitts—he was asked what ever became of "that girlie" who took on MGM. "We had her killed," Mannix allegedly retorted. Though in hindsight his meaning was metaphorical, the insinuation remains chillingly clear: post–Patricia Douglas, no rape case on record would implicate MGM. And so successfully did the studio expunge its Wild West party from history that, though it was national news at the time, not a single published source since that I could find—on MGM, Mayer, Mannix, Hal Roach, or Hollywood—mentions the once notorious event.

A one-reel short commemorating the convention (complete with Mayer announcing the festivities, star cameos, and a glimpse of delegate-rapist David Ross), which MGM shelved in the ensuing scandal, now sits in a studio film vault, its historical importance unrealized. After requesting a screening (without revealing my motive), I stared slack-jawed at the on-camera, incontrovertible proof—Mayer pimping starlets, conventioneers consorting with Harlow and Gable, a brazen plug for the Wild West party. An archivist on duty informed me, "Only useful stuff here's the candid star footage. The rest of it has no value at all."

A similar fate befell Patricia Douglas. A page-one story and a legal pioneer in 1937, “that girlie” was never heard from again.

It ruined my life. It absolutely ruined my life,” says Douglas. She is 86 and a great-grandmother, housebound by glaucoma, emphysema, and fear. “They put me through such misery,” she murmurs. “It took away all my confidence.” She has not spoken of her rape since the case was dismissed. Until now, not even her family knew about it.

Douglas has agreed to go public again because she realizes this could be her last chance. “When I die, the truth dies with me, and that means those bastards win.” Her need for vindication remains as strong today as it was back then. She can still feel that freshly tilled field underfoot moments before David Ross raped her, she says, adding, “And to this day I can’t stomach the smell of scotch.”

Such sense memories come at a cost. After the dismissal of her federal case, she tells me, “I went from ‘Little Miss Innocent’ to a tramp. I did it to demean myself. I was worthless, a ‘fallen woman.’” Douglas married three times in five years, and two of her husbands were exposed as bigamists. “All washed up with fellas” at 37, she has gone without relationships or sex ever since. “I’ve never been in love,” she states flatly. “And I’ve never had an orgasm. I was frigid.”

Douglas fled Hollywood to settle first in Bakersfield, a desert town she terms “hotter than hell,” and later in Las Vegas, where she subsists on Social Security with a bullterrier named Magdalene. She likes to be called Patsy now, and won’t even answer to Patricia. All her recollections of herself are laced with self-laceration: she says she was “naïve,” “stupid,” “a lousy mother,” “a walking zombie who glided through life.” And because she never shared her deepest secret, which was also the defining event in her life, Douglas can say with confidence, “There’s nobody in this world who really knows me.”

In 1937, burying her past for self-preservation made sense. But even now, in this Oprah era of confession as catharsis, Douglas still lives under self-imposed house arrest, oblivious to her historic status. “What was it I accomplished?” she wonders. “What’s so special about my story?” When I tell her what I’ve turned up, including corroboration from fellow Wild West-party girls and an apology from the children of Clement Soth, whose perjury helped exonerate David Ross, the truth begins to dawn on Douglas. “Pretty gutsy, wasn’t I?” she says.

“Before you found me,” she confides during one of our many long conversations, “I was getting ready to die. I’d buy less food; I wasn’t planning to be around long. Now I don’t want to go. Now I have something to live for. And for the first time I’m proud of myself.” The lion raped, but Patricia Douglas was—and still is—the mouse that roared. Her heroic cry was once cruelly silenced; 66 years later, the last word is hers. The magazine published a postscript to this article in the November 2007 issue.

THE 25 MOST IMPORTANT FAMILIES IN HOLLYWOOD HISTORY



1 / 25

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FROM EVERETT COLLECTION.

DAVID O. SELZNICK AND LOUIS B. MAYER

David O. Selznick, son of silent-movie producer Lewis Selznick, was already on his way through the ranks of new-to-talkies Hollywood when, in 1930, he forged the greatest union of Hollywood families in history by marrying Louis B. Mayer's daughter Irene. Selznick had left MGM for Paramount and then RKO when he returned to work with his father-in-law at MGM in 1933, given a job as vice president and head of his own production unit at the studio. By then, Mayer was one of the most powerful studio heads in Hollywood, overseeing "more stars than there are in heaven." In 1927, Mayer amassed 36 founders from various parts of the film industry to create the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences—the organization responsible for the Academy Awards. The guidance of his father-in-law at MGM paid off for Selznick when he left in 1935 to head up his own independent studio, Selznick International Pictures, which produced the

likes of *A Star Is Born* (1937), *Rebecca* (1940), and (adjusted for inflation) the highest-grossing film of all time, *Gone with the Wind* (1939). His son **Daniel Selznick** became a film producer as well.

David Stenn

David Stenn is a writer and filmmaker.

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