

I met this fine lady through Jan

Recalling Ithaca's movie days

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Star dazzled cameras along Cayuga

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INTERLAKEN — When friends and relatives showed up recently for Edna Johnston's birthday party, she drew back aghast when people wished her a happy 103rd birthday.

Unable to speak for the last few years, Johnston pleasantly scribbled a note for partiers to read.

"I'm 82," she wrote.

Johnston's spunky, unflinching determination to stay vibrant and youthful is characteristic of the way she has approached life. She appeared in silent films during Ithaca's movie-making heyday, divorced two husbands before the 1950s and purchased her first house at the age of 101.

Upon turning 103 — or 82 as she likes to report — Johnston lives at home with help, still takes walks, writes and reads almost one book a week. Judging by a library book viewed on an end table in her Interlaken home on Sunday, she's into romance novels right now.

Silent film star

Johnston was born Edna Ditmars on April 28, 1894, on the same farm where her niece Shirley Acky now lives in Trumansburg and grew up there with six brothers and sisters.

It was during her first marriage to Ithaca resident Aubrey Holman around 1914 that she

attended an elegant evening dance held at Renwick Park, now Stewart Park. The event was held by newly arrived movie executives Theodore and Leopold Wharton.

Wharton Studios Inc. had just started construction on a silent movie studio on the shores of Cayuga Lake and was shooting a dance segment for a new film that night. Johnston got lucky when a Wharton employee combed the well-dressed, young crowd and requested some to come down to the studio later and try out for bit parts.

Johnston soon appeared as an extra in a church scene and was noticed by Leopold Wharton and asked to do a screen test. The day came and Johnston became more and more nervous as she watched each actress contort her face to correspond with silent film melodrama. When it was her turn, the director didn't want to see Johnston try out at all. His reason — she seemed like a natural in front of the camera.

Johnston — whose stage name was Audrey Farmer — was enticing to movie executives, not only because of her beauty and on-screen presence, but because she was willing to do stunts the New York City actresses wouldn't dare. If the plot required her to dive off the gorge, it was no problem.

In fact, Johnston's tenacity was well-suited to the movie



Archive photo

SILENT STAR: Edna Johnston and an actor from New York City star in a Wharton Film Studios production filmed at Beebe Lake on the Cornell University campus during the silent film era.

making style that flourished in Ithaca around 1910. Many of those were adventure tales of women falling off waterfalls and female heroines trapped in gorges and tied to train tracks.

Unfortunately Ithaca's Hollywood only lasted about five years. The Whartons' followed other producers to

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