

The short and tragic life of Olive Thomas

By: [R. Marc Kantrowitz](#) May 29, 2021



Olive Thomas, deemed 'the Most Beautiful Girl in New York City,' and actor Jack Pickford

In search of a more exciting life, 18-year-old Olive Thomas left her husband of two years behind in Pennsylvania and moved to New York City. A year later, in 1914, she entered and won a beauty contest and was crowned "The Most Beautiful Girl in New York City."

Actress Mary Pickford, "America's Sweetheart" who in 1917 signed to a contract worth \$1 million, described her future sister-in-law Olive as a legendary beauty with the "loveliest violet-blue eyes I have ever seen. They were fringed with long dark lashes that seemed darker because of the delicate translucent pallor of her skin."

With Olive's career now launched, she found herself posing for several artists, often scantily clad. She became the first "Vargas Girl" and joined the famed Ziegfeld Follies. Florenz "Flo" Ziegfeld — when he

wasn't having sex with her and some of the other Ziegfeld Girls — cast Olive in the after-hours risqué Midnight Frolic show, which catered to wealthy men who spent lavishly on the beautiful, nubile women performing before them. Many attended expecting far more than watching an entertaining show. Ziegfeld, who was married at the time to Billie Burke, later the Good Witch of the North in 1939's "The Wizard of Oz," proclaimed Olive as one of the most beautiful women in his show.

The net of her allure now widely cast, she, not surprisingly, moved to film, appearing in six movies in 1917, three in 1918, a whopping eight in 1919, and five in 1920. In sharp contrast to her Vargas and Follies background, in the movies she frequently portrayed the innocent and naïve country girl. She deviated from that role somewhat in "The Flapper" that last year. There she introduced the flapper lifestyle, which became a cultural craze throughout America during that "Roaring" decade.



Olive, the first 'Vargas Girl'

Along the path to stardom, Olive met and married fellow actor Jack Pickford, the hardy partier and younger brother of superstar Mary. Appearing on stage at an early age, Jack typically was cast as the good-looking and wholesome boy next door, in sharp contrast to his private persona, marked by alcohol, drugs and philandering. Notably, he joined the military at the outset of the first World War. Once in though, he reverted to his less-than-stellar ways, involving himself in a scheme allowing the wealthy to avoid military service and reportedly also procuring women for some of the officers. Needless to say, his military service ended poorly.

The short and tragic lives of Jack and Olive could have served as a storyline in one of the movies made during that time period. Francis Marion, the highly successful and well-paid screenwriter who wrote "The Flapper" and more than 300 other scripts, described their relationship as "[t]wo innocent-looking children [who] were the gayest, wildest brats who ever stirred the stardust on Broadway. Both were talented, but they were much more interested in playing the roulette of life than in concentrating on their careers."

With their marriage teetering, they decided to take a second honeymoon in Paris. After a night of partying in the swankier bistros of Montparnasse in early September 1920, they returned to their luxurious hotel at 3 in the morning. There, Olive somehow came to drink a poisonous solution prescribed to treat the syphilis-caused-sores from which Jack suffered. Five days later, on Sept. 10, she died. The following day the front page of The New York Times announced: "Paris Authorities Investigate Death of Olive Thomas." Under that loud headline, a smaller one stated, "Police Seek Evidence on Rumors of Drug and Champagne Orgies."

The rumors indeed flew. Suicide caused by Pickford's wanderings! Suicide due to Olive contracting syphilis from her husband! Death due

to drug addiction! Pickford murdering wife to collect insurance! Marital strife caused death! Cocaine dealer questioned! And, of course, the one to which The Times alluded: Drug and champagne orgies lead to death!

Pickford, conversely, and not surprisingly, insisted that the two were in love when Olive inadvertently ingested the toxic solution, from a bottle labeled in French, which somehow came to be mixed with alcohol. He remained at her bedside for several days. When he asked her how she was feeling, she softly muttered, "Pretty weak, but I'll be all right in a little while. Don't worry, darling."

Those were her last words. Dead at 25, her death was ruled accidental. Thirteen years later, a twice-more-married-and-divorced Pickford, ill and emaciated, died of alcoholism.

Epilogue

The public's virginal views of the two greatly differed from their true lives. Once that hitherto unknown aspect came to light, the public recoiled. How could such sweet, gentle and likeable people so portrayed in their movies and the press be so outrageously different in real life?

Soon, and in quick succession, other egregious events involving Hollywood stars jumped from the front pages into the lives of everyday Americans, causing further unrest and anger.

To fend off calls for censorship and indeed how the movies were being made, the anxious studio heads turned to outside help. Political bigwig Will Hays was brought in to calm the waters. Once in power, he helped devise a production code, which evolved into the movie rating system we have today.

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