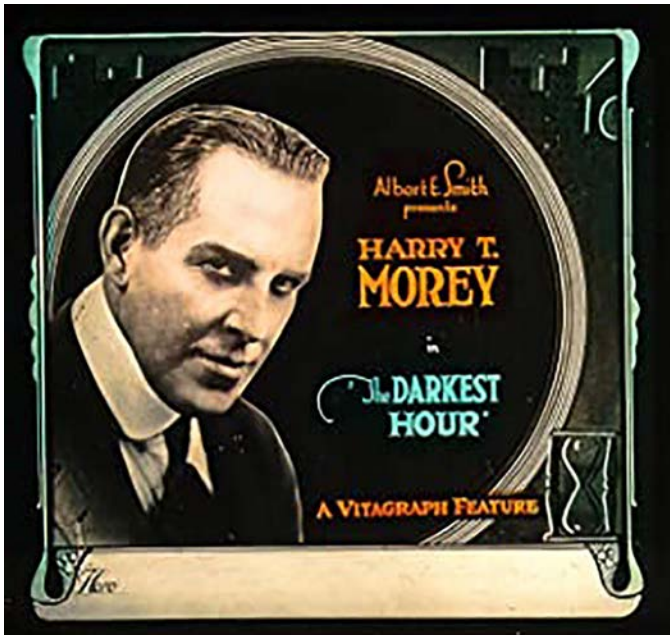




## WATERVILLE ON THE SILENT SCREEN



December 1919 saw the premiere of a feature film by Vitagraph, the motion picture studio that made many a silent movie, back in the day. *The Darkest Hour* starred leading actors Harry Morey and Jean Paige, and told a gripping story: A rich New Yorker develops amnesia after being hit on the head in a robbery. Somehow, he ends up in a lumber camp, where he assumes a new identity (under the name of John Doe!) and falls in love with the lovely niece of the camp's manager. After many plot twists involving corrupt lumber bosses, treacherous New Yorkers, and the hero's recovered memory, the couple is happily married and, we may assume, will spend at least an occasional vacation in the idyllic environs of where they first met. On-location filming took place in July and August of 1919, at a Mad River lumber camp called Swazeytown.



On July 28 the 18-year-old Elsie Ford, waitress at the Elliot hotel in Waterville, wrote an excited letter to her sister Gertrude: "What do you 'spose has happened? A whole moving picture troupe of the Vitagraph Company have come here to make a scene in a new picture... the leading lady is Jean Paige, then there are nine men, including the leading man who has his wife with him. They are all staying at a cottage across

the drive and come in for meals... they are going to stage a scene in one of the neighboring lumber camps ... it's funny to see them wandering around all dressed up. The villain wears the awfulest black and white checked shirt."

The next day she gives the details of watching a fight scene being made: "We went this après-midi to Swazeytown to see the picture taken. The greater part of the time was taken up with getting cameras sighted and arranged. ... The villain walks calmly to the edge of territory at the top of a sand bluff overlooking the water. When reaching the 'territory' the hero, Harry Morey, jumped on the villain and over they went, squirming, punching, grunting, joking, rolling down the hill, ... obeying all orders (you imagine how fast one can roll) and landed in a heap at the bottom. The camera stopped. They got up, grinned, shook themselves. The director yelled orders and they went thru it all again. ... We had taken our camera and got a picture of the villain, the heroine, and the hero. I'm crazy to see how they come out!"

Alas, *The Darkest Hour*, like many silent films of the era, has been lost to posterity. But the charm of Jean Paige, wearing overalls in her "woodland dell," as one film notice describes it, can still be seen in a news photo announcing the release of the movie. Maybe someday Elsie's snapshots will come to light in an attic or a family collection.

The letters of Elsie Ford are in the town archive managed by the Waterville Valley Historical Society.

