# Social Register
## Locator & Observer

Winter 2019


STRAND
MON. & TUES., APR. 2 And 3
"High" society wasn't "high" enough for this chorus girl!
Colleen MOORE
in
SOCIAL REGISTER
with
CHARLES WINNINGER • PAULINE FREDERICK
ALEXANDER KIRKLAND • MARGARET LIVINGSTON
From the play by
JOHN EMERSON and ANITA LOOS
Supervised and Directed by
MARSHALL NEILAN
Associate Producer
WILLIAM C. DeMILLE
A Columbia PICTURE
COLUMBIA PICTURES
PRINTED IN U. S. A

# Social Register Icon and Silent Star Still Speaking

## The Life of Colleen Moore, the World's Most Famous Flapper

By Pippa Biddle

*Social Register*, arguably the most provocative movie of 1934, declared on its posters that "*High* society wasn't *high* enough for this chorus girl!" Colleen Moore plays the role of Patsy Shaw, a wild working-class girl who upsets the stuffy social order when a spoiled son falls in love with her – to the great frustration of his family. Chaos, expectedly, ensues. What remains of the film is as mesmerizing as her life.

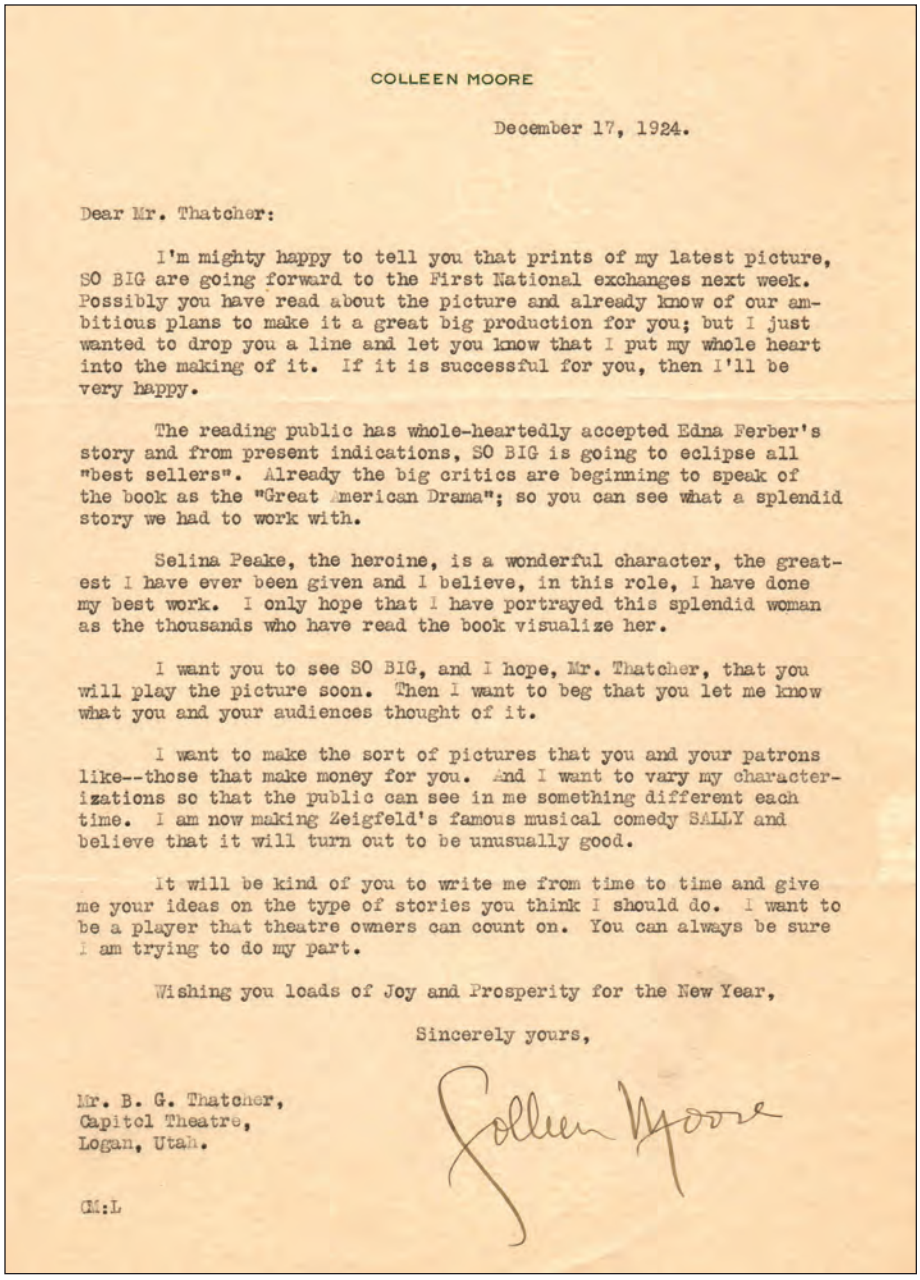
On the front flap of her memoir, *Silent Star: Colleen Moore Talks about Her Hollywood* (1968), author F. Scott Fitzgerald is quoted as writing, "I was the spark that lit up *Flaming Youth*. Colleen Moore was the torch. What little things we are to have caused all that trouble." It is true that after breaking out of the "nice girl" mold, Colleen was cast as a troublemaker. Whether embodying the flapper or orchestrating a raucous gag, she always had a thing for stealing scenes and getting laughs. But the Colleen Moore seen in theaters across America was not, she said, the whole her. From the beginning, Colleen Moore was a business run by a young girl, then woman, named Kathleen Morrison, who at the height of her career earned a million dollars a year from her films on the eve of the Depression.

Colleen Moore was born Kathleen Morrison on August 19 in Port Huron, MI, to Agnes Kelly Morrison and Charles Morrison. We know, as did all of her fans, that she was born with heterochromia, one blue eye and one brown eye, because they remained that way her entire life. Her birth year, however, is an unknown. While census records show a girl with her name, born to parents with her parent's names, on August 19, 1899, Colleen insisted that she was born in 1902. Like much that is lost to time, we will probably never know which account is true.

The young Kathleen moved frequently. She lived in Atlanta and Pennsylvania before her parents settled her, and her brother Cleeve, in Tampa, FL, in 1911. In Tampa, the young girl grew into an aspiring actress. She would go to the Bijou Theater on Fridays after school and the Strand Theater, which would later premiere the movie, *Social Register*, on Saturday afternoons. When she wasn't watching the newest films, she was writing fan letters and building scrapbooks full of cutout pictures of Mary Pickford and J. Warren Karrigan, dreaming about getting in front of the camera herself.

It was an exciting time for film. By 1915, production companies had flocked to Southern California for its reliable sun and mellow weather after trying Florida and Cuba, but discovering hurricane season. "Hollywood" was forming—not

**Left:** Original and rare "Social Register" (1934), movie window card with Strand Theatre premiere dates. From Social Register archives.



COLLEEN MOORE

December 17, 1924.

Dear Mr. Thatcher:

I'm mighty happy to tell you that prints of my latest picture, SO BIG are going forward to the First National exchanges next week. Possibly you have read about the picture and already know of our ambitious plans to make it a great big production for you; but I just wanted to drop you a line and let you know that I put my whole heart into the making of it. If it is successful for you, then I'll be very happy.

The reading public has whole-heartedly accepted Edna Ferber's story and from present indications, SO BIG is going to eclipse all "best sellers". Already the big critics are beginning to speak of the book as the "Great American Drama"; so you can see what a splendid story we had to work with.

Selina Peake, the heroine, is a wonderful character, the greatest I have ever been given and I believe, in this role, I have done my best work. I only hope that I have portrayed this splendid woman as the thousands who have read the book visualize her.

I want you to see SO BIG, and I hope, Mr. Thatcher, that you will play the picture soon. Then I want to beg that you let me know what you and your audiences thought of it.

I want to make the sort of pictures that you and your patrons like--those that make money for you. And I want to vary my characterizations so that the public can see in me something different each time. I am now making Zeigfeld's famous musical comedy SALLY and believe that it will turn out to be unusually good.

It will be kind of you to write me from time to time and give me your ideas on the type of stories you think I should do. I want to be a player that theatre owners can count on. You can always be sure I am trying to do my part.

Wishing you loads of Joy and Prosperity for the New Year,

Sincerely yours,

Colleen Moore

Mr. B. G. Thatcher,
Capitol Theatre,
Logan, Utah.

CM:L

**Above:** Original autographed letter reaching out to a theatre owner, and signed by Colleen Moore, on December 17, 1924, on her personal stationery. From Social Register archives.

just the place, but the fantasy, too. Bigger movie houses fought for the spare change in working-class people's pockets, pushing out small theaters. Movies were silent, of course, but they came out constantly and in enormous volume, always offering a fresh face and a new romantic lead to swoon over.

Kathleen arrived in Hollywood in 1917, but her big break had nothing to do with her acting. As she would later say, it was one of two gifts from her uncle, Chicago newspaperman Walter Howey.

In exchange for pulling political strings on behalf of D.W. Griffith, Howey got his beloved niece a six-month movie contract with Griffith's Triangle Film Corporation. As a parting gift, he gave the young Kathleen Morrison one more thing—a stage name: Colleen Moore. "Colleen," because a good Irish name would attract strong crowds. "Moore," because it would fit on a marquee. With a new name and a contract, the newly dubbed "Colleen" packed her bags and boarded a train with her grandmother, who would stay with her in Hollywood, and mother, who would remain just long enough for her to settle in.

Her parents had decided that a big family move wasn't necessary. Her school was to send her coursework, and in six months she'd be home in her own bed. They had yet to realize that the little girl who wanted to be on the silver screen had just taken her first steps on the road to stardom.

In many ways, the first few years of Colleen's career are a typical stardom story, at least for the time. Girl wants to act, girl gets a break through family connections, and she manages to make the most of it. Most of the actresses she worked alongside had followed a similar trajectory. The number of people there as a favor to someone else, she remembered, was astonishing. It was as if all of Hollywood was stocked with powerful people's favorite nieces.

As the fresh young faces without experience but with contracts to fulfill, it was normal for actresses like Colleen to be assigned roles without having any say in the process. And so, she accumulated bit parts and spent all day at the studio even if she didn't have a job, just in case they'd need her for something. Gradually, she was picked for bigger parts in which she was able to build her acting chops and hone her comedic timing, something she would become known for even when playing dramatic roles.

It was an era when machines ran, conveyor belts turned, and stars were manufactured more often than discovered.

The road had bumps, of course. Hollywood was new and production companies had a propensity to be

short-lived. Money flooded in and then dried up, and Colleen often had to get creative, especially after her six-month contract was terminated early as Griffith's business began to go under. Her first starring role, the titular character in *Little Orphant Annie* (1918), an early version of the iconic *Annie* film and play, wasn't even for Griffith's Triangle Film Corporation, but for Selig Polyscope. Selig would itself become insolvent shortly before *Little Orphant Annie* was released. It was absorbed by the Film Fox Corporation, and the cogs of Hollywood kept on turning. All Colleen could do was continue taking one step at a time, a reel of film tucked under her arm.

The Victorian Era had ended in 1901 and the Edwardian period had been cut short by the outbreak of World War I, but the strict constraints both periods put on women took longer to slough off. By 1920, young women across the country were sick of the long hair and longer hemlines older generations demanded, and the scissors started coming out.

Since age 16, Colleen had been playing adult romantic roles, but her perceived (and, according to her, real) innocence is what they were trying to bottle up and sell, even as she approached and hit her twenties. As society was shifting, she was still portraying an ideal of womanhood that was rapidly being left behind.

In that vacuum, the flapper girl emerged. The term "flapper" originated in Great Britain as young women began wearing rubber galoshes left open to flap as they walked. Flapper girls deviated from society's norm, dressing in their own style, including short dresses and bobbed haircuts, their faces heavily made up with lipstick, rouge, and mascara. They smoked and danced to Jazz Age music, not caring in the least about society's expectations of young women at the time.

By 1923, Colleen was ready to grow up, but embodying the flapper aesthetic that she would help to popularize took a bit longer. When, in a 1922 interview for *Motion Picture Magazine*, reporter Gordon Gassaway asked if she was a flapper, already a burgeoning movement among women her age, her answer was straightforward.

"Well, I don't roll my stockies, I don't swear—much, and I do not smoke cigarettes or a pipe or anything. I don't drink cocktails, and you know my mother won't let me bob my hair, so I guess I don't qualify."

She had started tucking her long hair under, though, mimicking the short hairstyle that, according to a June 27, 1920, New York Times article, had a way of making women more "kittenish, playful"—it granted freedom.

**Above:** "The Perfect Flapper" (1924). Starring Colleen Moore with her iconic Flapper bobbed hairstyle.

It was in 1923 that Colleen signed her contract with First National as one of eight leading players. She had already earned respect on set for her comedic work, but now she would have more say in what she worked on, what was filmed, and what ended up on the cutting room floor—a power amplified by the fact that scripts in the silent film era were mostly rough outlines with huge opportunities for improvisation.

She also married John McCormick that year. A few months earlier he'd shown hints of the chaos to come, but passing out on their floor on their wedding night signaled a pattern of binge drinking and disappearances that would play on repeat throughout their seven-year marriage.

And, with her mom's encouragement, a quick turnaround from her 1922 insistence that she was against short hair, Moore bit the bullet and chopped off her long curls before a screen test for *Flaming Youth*. Whereas before she'd be feigning the look of the time, now she was embracing it. "I felt as if I'd been emancipated," she later wrote. "It was becoming. More important, it worked."

The 1923 film *Flaming Youth* would transform Colleen into the rebellious flapper girl the country would fall in love with. And, as if she'd forgotten shrugging off the flapper trend just a year earlier, she was ready for it. "After


six years of treacle," she wrote, "it was heaven to be given a little spice." The film was a massive success. Even greater a badge of honor than the new bob haircut that would remain her signature look for the rest of her life, was news that the film was banned in Boston. The good girl image was gone.

If the flapper look was short hair, short hemlines, and unbuckled galoshes, the flapper girl was now globally personified by Colleen Moore.

But while Colleen Moore the actress was growing to be a symbol for sexual freedom and the transformation of

**Left:** Colleen Moore playing Christmas Carols, 1920s.

**Below:** "The Power and the Glory" (1933), with Spencer Tracey and Colleen Moore, based upon an original screenplay by Preston Sturges. (SR member).

societal expectations, Kathleen the woman was still treated like a kid. Reviews infantilized her, continuing to refer to her as a child well into her adulthood, a constant reminder that growing stardom and the astronomical paychecks to match guaranteed neither equality nor respect.

Her husband, John McCormick, spoke for her, represented her, and regularly claimed credit for her success. In 1927, Colleen was frustrated when she was not invited to participate in the first organizational event of the International Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. She would only later learn that she was, in fact, invited, and was even listed as a founding member, but McCormick—perhaps chaffing under his wife's successes—had decided not to pass on the information.

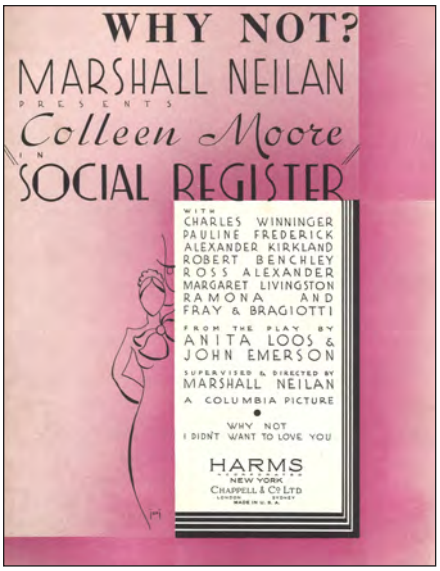
In spite of these headwinds, Colleen continued to demonstrate unusual financial savvy. She reached out directly to theatre owners encouraging them to see her movies and soliciting their ideas for successful films. In a letter to Mr. B.G. Thatcher, Capitol Theatre, Logan, UT, promoting her 1924 movie, *So Big*, Colleen explains "I want to make the sort of pictures that you and your patrons like – those that make money for you."

The late 1920s was a period of turmoil in Colleen's life and in Hollywood. While the creation of the Academy entrenched those already in positions of power, new developments in technology were already threatening to completely upturn the industry. By 1928, sound was not yet synced up, but it was being recorded—mostly as musical accompaniment—and was beginning to be distributed to theaters nationwide along with the film reels.

There was a buzz in the air, but this excitement among the nation's moviegoers was struggling to get through to many of the newly ensconced Hollywood influentials. "For an industry whose very livelihood depended on giving the public what it wanted," Colleen remembered, "we in Hollywood not only underestimated the public where sound was concerned, we didn't understand it."

Indeed, sound seemed overwhelming, as though it would trigger a sensory overload, canceling out every enjoyable aspect of going to the movies. Even in 1929, after Colleen's first talking picture was released, President Hoover would hold strong to the belief that watching talkies was too demanding—if you weren't feeling it, you couldn't just take a nap anymore!

But before Colleen could appear in her first "talkie," she would have to prove that she wasn't mute. She had been the biggest box office draw in America for two years running, but could she keep it up?




**Above:** "Social Register" sheet music "Why Not?" (1933) sung by Ramona. From Social Register archives.

**Below:** "Social Register" (1934), with Colleen Moore as Patsy Shaw, and Alexander Kirkland as Charlie Breen.

**Above:** "Social Register" (1934), starring Colleen Moore *(second from right)*, and Charles Winninger.

Even actors with stage experience weren't ready for the peculiar acoustics of early talkies. One by one, stars had their voices tested. Those deemed "recordable" underwent intensive vocal coaching. Only select silent stars would make this cut or survive the reviews of their first talking films. The problem was that the actors and directors didn't realize that there was more to making a talkie than mere talking. Acting itself had to shift, and the pantomime that had made Colleen famous would quickly be deemed heavy-handed, awkward, and even uncomfortable to watch. Where once there had been no capacity for subtlety, now there was no room for communicative physicality.

Colleen soon negotiated an extra $25,000 from First National for each film she spoke in, with *Smiling Irish Eyes* (1929) having the honor of being her first. It could hardly be called a grand debut. "It was surely the longest, slowest, dullest picture I ever made," Colleen recalled in her memoir, *Silent Star*. It was, in effect, a silent film with voices, the pantomime and all, and where these exaggerated movements and grand gesticulations had once been necessary when conveying a story without sound, they abruptly appeared unnatural. That wasn't how anyone actually talked, and now that the stars could speak, audiences expected them to act like it!

The development was to be the first of many ill tidings for the flourishing film industry. The year of the release of *Smiling Irish Eyes*, Colleen's marriage was crumbling, and the stock market plummeted in the Wall Street Crash of 1929 — the infamous Black Thursday of October 24th would soon set off the 12-year-long Great Depression that plunged the nation into the depths of some of its darkest and most desperate days.

Colleen, at the height of her career, withdrew from the spotlight. She would not return to the screen for four years, co-starring in *The Power and the Glory* (1933), with Spencer Tracy. First, though, she filed for divorce on April 15, 1930, citing mental cruelty. McCormick was an emotionally abusive alcoholic with a habit of disappearing for days at a time. While he'd bolstered Colleen's career early on, he'd become a liability for her, for those around them, and for himself, so she cut him loose.

The marriage was over quickly, and McCormick wallowed in depression and drink. A few years later, he would attempt suicide by swimming out to sea. He was rescued by friends and, in true Hollywood fashion, the story was

incorporated into the original screenplay for the 1937 film *A Star is Born,* about an aspiring actress and the fading actor who helps launch her career. The film would be remade in 1954 (starring Judy Garland and James Mason), 1976 (Barbara Streisand and Kris Kristofferson), and its latest iteration came out in the fall of 2018, starring Lady Gaga and Bradley Cooper. A fine testimony to Hollywood's perpetual proclivity for remakes.

Throughout the divorce and the messy aftermath, Colleen worked to keep McCormick from bringing her down with him. With no film to distract her, she needed something else to sink her teeth into. The whimsical answer came to her while relaxing with her father on the deck of a yacht: together, they would build a dollhouse.

The idea had roots deep in Colleen's childhood. When she was two, her parents had built her a dollhouse from cigar boxes. She couldn't take it with her when the family moved, but after settling down in Florida, she built a paper dollhouse from wallpaper samples and pictures of furniture cut out of her parents' magazines. Like many children, a dollhouse gave her a space to control and a means of escape. The shrinking down of the adult world to a manageable child's size helped her come to terms with all of the crazy things "grown-ups" do. Nothing, no matter how daunting, is as intimidating when it's tiny.

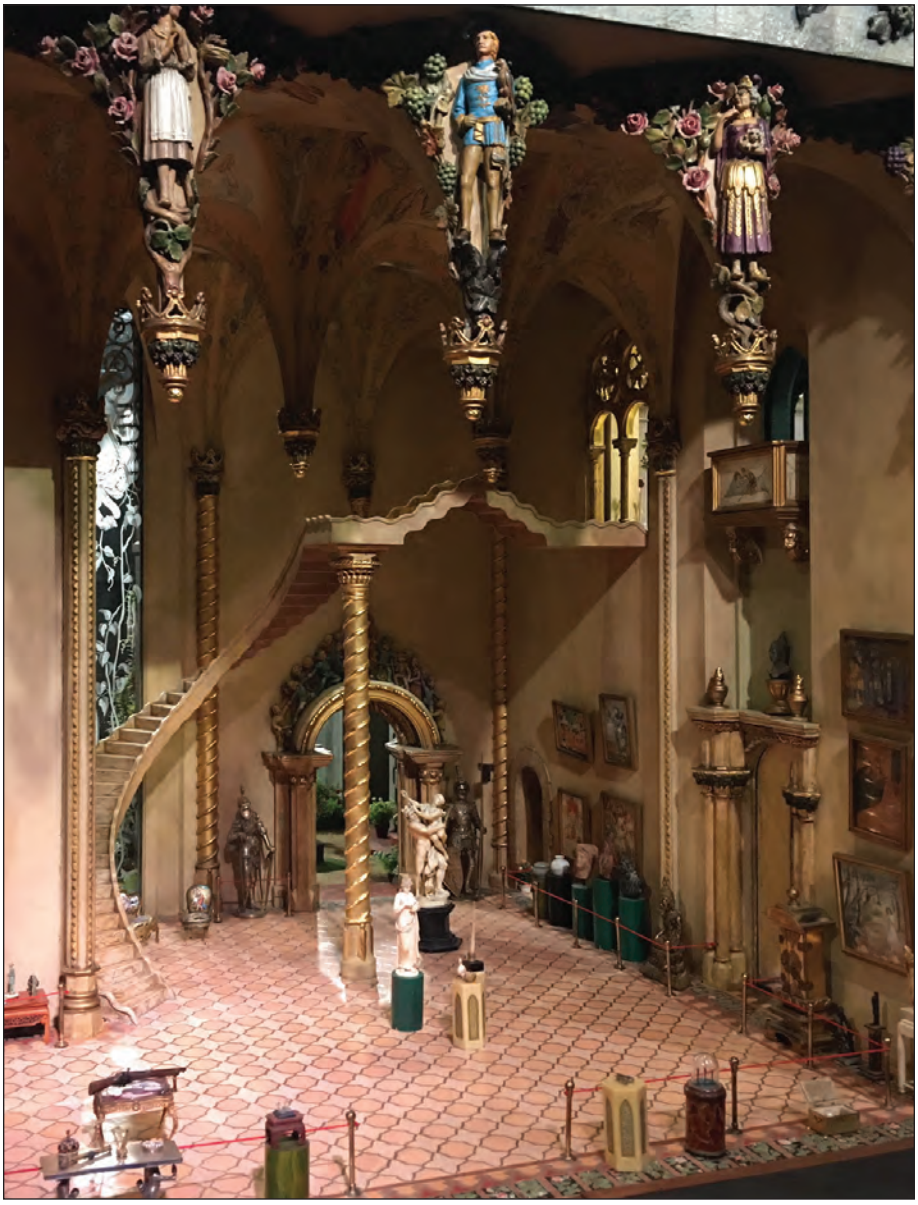
Colleen had been collecting miniatures for years, and as all of this rushed back to her on the deck of that yacht, she turned to her father for his assistance. He ran with the idea, quickly appointing himself "chief engineer" of the project. It would have to be on a grand scale, lavish, but, most importantly, still portable. He didn't want her to ever have to leave it behind.

It wouldn't be completed until 1935. During that time, Colleen would marry her second husband, Albert P. Scott, who encouraged her interest in investing. She returned to film, appearing in her last four films, all talkies, between 1933 and 1934. She divorced Scott in 1934 as well, and decided she'd retire from acting for good. But, through it all, she worked on the dollhouse, which would soon be called the Fairy Castle.


**Above:** Colleen Moore in the comedy "Sally" (1925), co-starring Lloyd Hughes and Leon Errol.

Over 100 artisans worked on the nine-foot square castle, built on a 12:1 scale, before it was complete. The castle's sumptuous rooms were decorated with solid gold chandeliers, diamond-encrusted chairs, and hand-painted frescos. The theme, dreamed up by decorator Harold Grieve, is "Early Fairie," a style typified by tiny treasures that the castle's residents would have collected from antique stores in fairyland.

In order to pull off the project, master plumbers installed tiny pipes that carried



**Above:** In the Great Hall of the Fairy Castle dollhouse, a "miniature home of fantastic proportions," there is a staircase that floats upwards, twisting gracefully without railings or bannisters.

running water to sinks and ran droplets down the branches of the weeping willow. A medical technology company made her light bulbs, each the size of a grain of wheat. In the library, books the size of postage stamps feature handwritten notes from authors including Arthur Conan Doyle, Agatha Christie, and John Steinbeck. A miniature autograph album was personally signed by six presidents, Queen Elizabeth, Prince Philip, Churchill, Jawaharlal Nehru, Picasso, and Eleanor Roosevelt, before resting on a shelf in Fairy Castle.

Colleen furnished the home from her own collection, including a tiny purple wine glass, once one of a set of six, from her childhood cigar-box dining room. Over the years, the castle started collecting for itself. In the chapel rests a sliver of the "true cross," a gift from American author and U.S. Ambassador Clare Boothe Luce. The fragment was a gift to Luce from Pope Pius XII. Ambassador Luce asked to have it housed in the castle's chapel in memory of a daughter, killed in a car accident at the age of 19.

Built in the midst of the Great Depression, the castle cost more than $435,000 at the time, or around $7 million today; perfect for the tiny fairies Colleen imagined living within its cast aluminum walls.

Once the castle was completed in 1935, Colleen was presented with a different challenge: what to do with it. It had been designed to be transportable, but where would it go? After negotiating a deal with Macy's in New York, the castle was broken down, loaded onto a private train car with an armed guard, and trucked across the country. Its debut on April 5, 1935, launched a nation-wide tour that would raise more than $500,000 for children's charities. The castle proved to be a hit and continued traveling until it settled down for good at the Chicago Museum of Science and Industry in 1949. More than a million people visit it each year as part of the museum's permanent collection.

In the Great Hall of the Fairy Castle, there is a staircase that floats upwards, twisting gracefully without railings or bannisters. But why no bannisters? In what could be a metaphor for Moore's life, you don't need something to hold onto when you are your own safety net, and you don't need something to catch you when you fall. Fairies, after all, can always fly.

Colleen's life continued, now mostly out of the spotlight. She married Homer Hargrave in 1937, adopted his two young children, Judy and Homer Jr., and joined her husband as an early partner in Merrill Lynch. She called her 1969 book *How Women Can Make Money in The Stock Market* her "graduation thesis." She was only partially joking.

Homer passed away before the book, and her 1968 memoir, were published.

LISE HONORÉ-WOLF

In 1983, Colleen was married for a fourth time. She would stay with Paul Maginot until her death on January 25, 1988, in Paso Robles, CA.

In one memorable scene from *Social Register*, Colleen's second to last film, Ramona of Paul Whiteman's Orchestra, a well-known singer of the time, is invited to perform while at a high-class party. Colleen is there, as Patsy Shaw, tucked away against a bookcase. But as Ramona's fingers hit the keys, she pulls out of the shadows, leaves her beau's side, floats to the center of the room, and rests her arms on the piano, listening intently as Ramona sings:

*Why not? Life is short and love is fleeting.*

*Why not? Both our hearts are wildly beating.*

*Try not to forget how much I worship you.*

*Why not satisfy romantic hungers?*

*Why not, we grow older never younger?*

*Cry not, I swear I only care for you...*

And there, in that moment, beyond the bobbed hair and the made-up face and the knowledge now that it would be one of her last scenes on the silver screen, Colleen Moore is Kathleen Morrison, a girl from Tampa who became the world's most famous and glamorous flapper, cheered millions of children, helped women manage their own finances, and made her wildest dreams come true. SR


**Top Right:** Built in the midst of the Great Depression, the Fairy Castle cost more than $435,000 at the time, or around $7 million today. The dollhouse can be seen at the Chicago Museum of Science and Industry.

TOP: LISE HONORE-WOLF

## HEAR THE SONG ON YOUTUBE!


"Why Not" from the movie "Social Register" (1934) by Ramona – 2:07 min.

Rare film footage of singer and pianist Ramona from her Paul Whiteman's Orchestra years.

Type the link below into your browser:

https://youtu.be/A8zJE1voq3Q