

Class of 1947 – Velma Leece Gresham.



She was an actress, known for *White Zombie* (1932), *Play-Girl* (1932), and *Straight is the Way* (1934). She was married to attorney Paul J. Ziegler. Velma was beautiful, but so what? Every year since the twenties; thousands of the most beautiful and handsome young women and men in America had migrated to Hollywood. Some of them – a very few –

had sufficient theatrical experience to impress a studio's casting director or the gatekeepers at Central Casting. Most of them however, as they stepped bleary-eyed from Greyhound

buses or stood in line for Hollywood-bound streetcars in the busy streets of downtown Los Angeles, brought with them nothing but their looks, and were destined never to set foot inside a studio or appear in so much a frame of film. Velma was an auburn haired, blue-eyed twenty-one-year-old from Memphis TN and she feared she'd end up among the latter



arrivals. She knew she couldn't compete with the truly talented hopefuls – she had never acted outside college productions, and her singing and dancing were nothing out of the ordinary.

Her only chance was to ensure that her face – her remarkably beautiful face – stood out in the crowds of the lesser-skilled hopefuls.

She needed a gimmick.

Her father was some sort of society figure in Memphis and, before she left town at the beginning of 1932, she gathered together a group of his rich friends and made them an offer. She would legally incorporate herself – as Velma, Inc. – for \$20,000.00, with the idea that she would sell 50 percent of the stock in herself and share her earning with her stockholders. Five of her father's friends backed her, with the result that Velma arrived in Hollywood as the wealthiest jobless starlet in the industry's short history.

Velma spent the next two years working hardly at all and earning very little when she did. It's unlikely that her father's friends' money lasted even her first year in town indeed, the cash that had at the beginning seemed like the thing that would bring her success might by that time have become the source of nothing but guilt – it was obvious that she was never going to be able to pay any of it back. At the end of October, 1934, this headline appeared in the press: "Movie Actress Tries Suicide with Fumes." According to the news stories, Velma had written a suicide note, turned on the gas outlet and laid down on the floor to die. Velma's landlady was woken by screams Velma had panicked as she started to succumb – and hurried to her room. Shutting off the gas and saving her life. Speaking from

hospital the next day. Velma denied that she had tried to kill herself, saying that the police had misconstrued the note.

It mattered little what Velma said, of course. The story that she had attempted suicide was already out and, in any case, it ended up working in Velma's favor. A week later the papers noted that "a kind-hearted movie producer, reading police reports of her unhappiness, offered her a job and she accepted." The hospital required that Velma be released into someone's care when she was discharged, so Velma called around her gentlemen friends, one of who, an attorney named Paul Ziegler, came to collect her and assured the hospital that he would look after her until she was fully recovered. The following year, a small news item appeared under the headline. "Plans Merger," it ran: "Velma Gresham, 28, former Memphis TN girl, incorporated herself, sold stock to friends, thus entered the movies. Now, she and Attorney Paul J. Ziegler have declared their intention to marry. That year, Velma, Inc., was quietly wound down. Once married, Velma never appeared in another film.