

# What and Why Is a Gaffer?

(The Man Who Has the Lightest Job)

By BOB HUSSEY

It's really time that someone turned the spotlight on the fellow who always holds the spotlight on someone else.

He's another of the unsung heroes of the Hollywood studios—the gaffer.

Webster's Dictionary defines a gaffer as "an old man; an aged rustic; a master." The gaffer of the studio is neither an old man nor a rustic, but he is, indeed, a master. He's a master at the art of lighting.

The Chief Electrician on the movie set is he, the gaffer. Why he is called a gaffer no one seems to know. Some say that gaffer is defined in some dictionaries as a foreman, but why he isn't called a foreman isn't known. From the time of the first motion picture he has been the gaffer, and it's likely he'll always be that.

The gaffer is the cameraman's right hand man, his lieutenant. Back in the old days the gaffer was considered important enough to rate screen credit, but these days he isn't given the honor. His work, strangely enough, is much more important now than ever before, but—that's Hollywood.

The gaffer is the fellow who "lights" the set. He directs the placing of lights, the direction of them, the intensity, the diffusion.

He knows photographic lighting. He knows how to fix lighting for this purpose and that purpose. He knows how to get this effect or that effect. He knows make-up, shadows, angles.

Too, he knows the secrets of the stars. He knows why one star is never photographed from one angle or why another can't be photographed in certain poses. He knows these secrets of the stars and helps them keep them.

Directors, cameramen, actors and actresses all rely on gaffers, for their aid is invaluable in properly photographing a picture. When a cameraman finds a gaffer who works with ability, speed and artistic effectiveness it is likely that the two will remain associated over a long period of years.

Much time on production can be saved when the set is lighted quickly and properly. Some gaffers know so well the type of lighting sought by their cameramen and directors that they can go about making ready a set long before either of them are on hand. Then, when all is in readiness for the scene, a quick glance about to check last minute details is all that is needed.

Some gaffers win the undying gratitude of screen players by knowing how to get best lighting effects without using too many lights. The minimum of lights saves those beneath them from the sweltering rays usually found on movie sets.

Gaffers at the Warner Brothers-First National Studios have found that less lighting on sets makes for more natural lighting, for the subjects seem more natural to the eye when seen on the screen.

Just as certain stars ask for certain directors, so do cameramen request certain gaffers. Larry Kennedy, Fank Flannigan and Claude Hutchinson have long been working at Warner Brothers-First National and each possesses a long list of pictures to his credit.

On the movie set the gaffer is the one who directs the electricians who walk above on narrow catwalks and handle the huge lights, just as he supervises the fellows who handle the "floor lights" on the set.

The gaffer sees the "rushes" on the picture each day during filming and with the cameraman works out proper details of lighting. It is no secret in Hollywood that many moving picture photographers who have gained fame for their artistic endeavors attribute most of their success to the aid of efficient gaffers.

Just as every scene in a picture requires a different type of photography, so does each scene have its individual type of lighting. Long shots, medium shots, close-ups, day shots, night shots, storm scenes—each must have its individual treatment.

The gaffer has his own language, too. A "baby" isn't an infant in the language of the gaffer. A "baby" is a small spotlight used for high-lighting purposes. An electrician is termed a "juicer" and a "spider" isn't a spider at all. It's a certain type portable electric switch. "Jack" and "Jenny" refer to no people in the vocabulary of the gaffer. A "jack" is just a hole at the end of an electric circuit into which a plug may be inserted to continue the circuit and "jenny" is an abbreviated way of saying generator. It is applied to a small portable generator frequently used on sound stages.

The large multiple arc lamp which hangs high over the set is termed an "ash can" and "twins" refers to double arc lamps when the gaffer uses the word. "Inkies" refers to incandescent lamps and "butterfly" is a silk-covered frame fitted over lamps to soften the light beams.

There is much more, of course, to the "slanguage" of the gaffer, just as there is much more to his job than can be told in these few words. He is, take it from those who know, a very important fellow in the making of motion pictures even if he is hidden among the unsung heroes of the studios.

The bridgeman with his best man has nothing on the gaffer, either. The gaffer's assistant is known as the "best boy" wherever gaffers are found, and gaffers are found wherever pictures are filmed.

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