

The Thanhouser Studio and the Birth of American Cinema

by Ned Thanhouser

Thanhouser Company Film Preservation, Inc.

www.thanhouser.org

The untold story of the pioneering independent silent motion picture studio based in New Rochelle, New York and the people that produced and released over 1,000 silent motion pictures from 1910 to 1917 seen by audiences around the world.

Summary

This one-hour documentary recounts the forgotten story of the remarkable rise and fall of one of American's pioneering independent motion picture studios during the second decade of the twentieth century. It traces the evolution of one family's career as it transitioned from producing live theater to establishing one of the most successful but forgotten silent motion picture studios in America. Set against a backdrop of an industry dominated by Thomas Edison's Motion Picture Patents Corporation, the story unfolds in New York, Florida, and California. It is a compelling tale of fame and fortune, twisted by the vagaries of fate, ending on a bittersweet note.

The story is told in 10 chapters that combine archival photographs, surviving film footage, and interviews with internationally recognized film scholars, including: David Robinson, author and director of the Pordenone Silent Film Festival; Paul Spehr, author and film historian; Kathy Fuller-Seeley, author and professor of Cinema Studies at the University of Texas; Shelley Stamp, author and professor of Film & Digital Media at the University of California; and Judith Buchanan, author and Professor of English, University of York, United Kingdom.

Story Synopsis

The documentary establishes Edwin and Gertrude Thanhouser as seasoned actors and theatrical managers at the turn of the 20th century with years of experience running a successful mid-west theatrical stock company.

Thomas Edison changes the paradigm of entertainment in 1895 with the commercialization of his projecting Kinetoscope launching the motion picture industry enabling the proliferation of profitable and product hungry "nickelodeons." Edison establishes the Motion Picture Patents Corporation (MPPC) in 1908 to monopolize his technological innovations with the intention of excluding non-licensed producers.

In 1909 with his box office revenues on the decline and the explosive growth of "nickelodeons," Thanhouser realizes movies are stealing his audiences by showing inexpensive one-reel films. He decides to enter the emerging moving picture business with the belief he could produce better pictures. He moves his family to New York, then the center of the nascent motion picture industry. Edwin and Gertrude Thanhouser with brother-in-law and newspaperman Lloyd Lonergan incorporate the Thanhouser Company in New Rochelle, NY.

Thanhouser's application for a license from Edison and the MPPC is rejected because he has, "...no studio and no experience in the motion picture business." But, Edwin Thanhouser is not deterred. He proceeds to establish the Thanhouser Company as an independent motion picture production company by using Italian manufactured equipment to avoid patent infringement lawsuits.

Thanhouser's years on the stage managing a successful theatrical company teaches him to hire skilled actors, directors, and cameramen to achieve his vision. He is the business manager and spokesperson, Gertrude the artistic director, and Lonergan is the studio's chief scenario writer.

Over 1,000 are employed by the studio from 1909 to 1917, and several stand out as key to the studio's success. Featured in the documentary are: Barry O'Neil, one of Thanhouser's first directors; Carl Lewis Gregory, cameraman and director; Marie Eline, a popular young child actress promoted as the "Thanhouser Kid;" Helen Badgley, the "Thanhouser Kidlet;" Marion and Madeline Fairbanks, the "Thanhouser Twins;" Florence La Badie, the studio's most enduring and popular actress; and James Cruze, Thanhouser's most popular leading man who goes on to be Hollywood's most highly paid director in the 1920s.

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Thanhouser brings classic stories to the screen that win the pocketbooks of an enthralled middle-class audience, including Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* and Dickens' *David Copperfield*. Releasing landmark social-reform films like *The Cry of the Children*, a battle-of-the-sexes comedy *Petticoat Camp*, and big-budget three-reel feature films like *The Star of Bethlehem* make the studio a household name.

The studio quickly adopts or invents new lexicon to the language of cinema by utilizing in-camera double exposures, lap dissolves, special effect stop cuts (inspired by French filmmaker Georges Méliès), continuity editing, and pioneers the extensive use of detailed shooting scripts. These innovations make the studio financially attractive to well-informed investors.

In the spring of 1912, Edwin and Gertrude Thanhouser sell their interest to Charles J. Hite and the Mutual Film Corporation for \$250,000, twenty-five times their original investment. Edwin Thanhouser and his family depart for a European vacation.

Disaster strikes the studio on January 13, 1913 when a fire burns the studio to the ground making headlines across the nation. Now president of the newly renamed Thanhouser Film Corporation, Hite capitalizes on the national press coverage with an opportunistic production of *When the Studio Burned* recreating the dramatic events of the fire. The studio is rebuilt as production continues in California, Chicago and New York.

Hite embraces the "star system" and Thanhouser players rank high in national popularity polls. The studio produces longer "feature" films running an hour or more, and a 23-episode serial, *The Million Dollar Mystery*, that is a huge success. Tragedy strikes again when Charles Hite, the innovative and market savvy executive, dies in an automobile accident in August 1914.

Edwin Thanhouser is re-hired by Mutual in February 1915 to run the floundering studio. The conflict between Thanhouser as an "independent" studio and Edison's MPPC is resolved with "licensed" companies faltering and the federal government dissolving the "trust" in 1915 due to anti-trust violations. In mid-1916, Mutual drops Thanhouser films from its distribution lineup resulting in the firing of popular actors, closing the recently opened Florida studio, and forcing distribution of its films by Pathé Exchange under previously unthinkable terms.

By 1917, the industry is in a two year economic slump due to war in Europe, and Los Angeles is now the center of the U.S. film industry. Florence LaBadie, the last remaining and best known of the Thanhouser players from the old Thanhouser stock company, tragically dies from an auto accident. Edwin chooses not to move to California and compete with expensive stars and the publicity machines of other studios.

The Thanhouser studio, one of the most successful independent movie producers, is unable to adapt to the devastating tragedies, the move of the industry to the west coast, a decline in business due to the world war, and the demands of America's new Hollywood royalty: Charlie Chaplin, Douglas Fairbanks, and Mary Pickford. In the spring of 1918, Edwin Thanhouser, dubbed "The Wizard of New Rochelle" by *The New Rochelle Evening Standard*, retires with Gertrude to travel the world.

About the Thanhouser Films on the DVD

Petticoat Camp

One reel of approx. 1,000 feet, released November 3, 1912

Print source: Library of Congress, 14 minutes, 50 seconds.

Cast: Florence LaBadie, William Garwood, the Jordan Sisters.

This comedy capitalizes on the booming pastime of a newly mobile American middle class — fishing and camping. Not only is the woodsy lakeside photogenic, but it also provides a charming locale for a light handed battle-of-the-sexes comedy. With a fresh and energetic attitude, the story portrays several married couples vacationing on an island. The boys play and the girls work. The girls rebel and move to an island of their own. The boys scheme to show how necessary they are as protectors, but the plan backfires and a truce is reached. The accomplished swimmers in one commercially appealing scene were non-actress stand-ins who performed as the Jordan Sisters in aquatic shows.

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The Evidence of the Film

One reel, approx. 1,000 feet, released January 10, 1913

Directed by Edwin Thanhouser and Lawrence Marston.

Print source: Library of Congress, 14 minutes, 30 seconds.

Cast: William Garwood (the sticj broker), Marie Eline (messenger boy), Florence LaBadie (sister of the messenger boy), and Riley Chamberlin (office clerk).

Discovered in 1999 on the floor of an abandoned projection booth in Superior, Montana, this print of *The Evidence of the Film* is a particularly clever and unusual early example of a fictional dramatic movie with filmmaking as a subject. The portrayal of a movie crew that just happens to be at work on a street corner is accurate. The director is seen consulting a shooting script, something a Thanhouser director would do but probably not another studio's director. The film laboratory and editing scenes are of enormous interest as historical document as well as ingeniously integrated in the crime tale.

The Evidence of the Film was selected in 2001 for inclusion on the National Film Registry by the National Film Preservation Board of the Library of Congress because of its cultural, historical or aesthetic significance.

The Documentary Team

Ned Thanhouser, producer and director, is the grandson of silent film pioneers Gertrude and Edwin Thanhouser. He is president of Thanhouser Company Film Preservation, Inc. and since 1986 has been actively involved in the research, acquisition, preservation and publication of the history, surviving films, and related ephemera from the Thanhouser studio. He is a member of Association of Moving Image Archivists (AMIA), the Society of Cinema and Media Studies (SCMS), and DOMITOR: The Association for Early Cinema.

An independent film scholar, he has published and presented research papers at SCMS conferences (London 2005, Chicago 2013), the AMIA Journal *The Moving Image* (2011), the Women and the Silent Screen conference (Guadalajara 2006), and the Domitor conference (Brighton UK 2012). He is also co-founder of the International Youth Silent Film Festival which organizes competitions for filmmakers age 20 and under to create modern versions of silent films.

Melissa Steineger, writer, is the owner of Flux Films (www.fluxfilms.com) an award-winning video production company based in Portland, Oregon with a special focus on non-profit and social service organizations. She has produced videos for the Oregon Food Bank, Friends of the Children, and Kaiser Permanente. Working with Ned over the period of a year, she researched and co-wrote the documentary script.

Edwin Thanhouser, Jr. is the great-grandson of Edwin and Gertrude Thanhouser. A graduate of Reed College, Ed is an author, musician, and teacher based in Portland, Oregon. He co-wrote the script for the documentary and supervised production shooting for part of the film. His band, Ed and the Red Reds, plays what he calls "Country 'n North-Western" and has released three EP albums, the most recent being *The Liar's Dream*.

David Bryant is a film & video editor, postproduction consultant, and compositing and motion design artist based in Portland, Oregon with over 20 years experience in the industry. He became involved in filmmaking while an English Major in college and has worked for some of the largest advertising agencies in the world, freelancing for numerous post houses, editorial boutiques, and broadcasters in New York City.

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