

# Lloyd F. Lonergan: Studio Co-Founder and Prolific Scenario Writer

by Ned Thanouser – November 2013, Revised March 2014

## Introduction

Lloyd F. Lonergan was one of three co-founders of the Thanouser Company. Incorporated on October 25, 1909 in New Rochelle, New York, the studio went on to be one of the most popular and successful independent silent motion picture studios in America's burgeoning moving picture industry. Lonergan was the company's chief of production and prolific scenario writer with 600 to 800 of the 1,086 films released by the studio credited to his pen. The least known and underappreciated of the three founders of the studio, he was a frequent subject for dozens of newspaper articles in trade periodicals. These surviving documents and the films he authored supply an intimate and revealing glimpse into the day-to-day workings at this pioneering studio providing a new and fresh look into the "transitional era" in early cinema. <sup>1,2</sup>

## The Motion Picture Industry in 1910

By the end of 1909, the motion picture industry in America was 15 years old and dominated by a handful of picture producers, including Edison, Lubin, Vitagraph, and American Biograph, that banded together under the Motion Picture Patents Corporation (also referred to as the MPPC) to monopolize the industry through licensing arrangements. Storefront theaters were popping up on almost every street corner showing a program of "one reel" subjects that could be viewed for a nickel. By 1910, the "Nickelodeon Era" was in full swing and it is estimated that there were 10,000 theaters across the nation. <sup>3</sup> This resulted in an insatiable appetite by the movie going public for new films. As Tom Gunning notes, "The Nickelodeon era also saw a sharp rise in the production of story films, which began to replace non-narrative actualities as the most popular genre."<sup>4</sup> The result: movies were overtaking traditional live theater by providing low cost entertainment to an emerging middle class flush with newly found leisure time and disposable income.



Figure 1. Nickelodeon ca. 1910

## Enter Edwin Thanouser

Edwin Thanouser was a successful manager of theatrical companies in the mid-west, but he was witnessing firsthand the impact of the new technological marvel of motion pictures on his theatrical business - his box office receipts were on the decline as audiences were spending their time and money watching movies at nickelodeons. A seasoned actor turned savvy business manager, Thanouser recognized the imminent transition of the entertainment industry from



Figure 2. Edwin Thanouser ca. 1910

## Lloyd F. Lonergan: Studio Co-Founder and Prolific Scenario Writer (1910 to 1917)

stage to screen. He knew from his years on the stage and managing a theatrical company how to produce compelling dramas, and that the preparation of a detailed script in a film, as in a stage production, would result in a better movie than those he had seen. With his wife Gertrude, also a seasoned actress and creative partner in their theater ventures, Thanhouseer made the bold decision in the spring of 1909 to enter the moving picture industry. Denied a license by the MPPC, Thanhouseer decided to enter the fray as an "independent" producer. That was when Edwin and Gertrude Thanhouseer moved to New York and recruited Lloyd F. Lonergan, Gertrude's brother-in-law, to join them in their venture as one of three founders of the company.

### **Lloyd F. Lonergan: Newspaper Writer**

Lonergan came from a family steeped in storytelling. He was born in Chicago on March 3, 1870 to Thomas Lonergan, a newspaper publisher and editor, and Ellen Lonergan, a newspaper writer born in Ireland. He was educated at the United States Naval Academy, but washed out due to poor eyesight, so he followed his family into the newspaper business where he worked for the Hearst organization in Chicago, and by 1902 he was on the staff of *The New York Evening Journal*. Lonergan married one of Gertrude Thanhouseer's sisters, Molly Homan, and in 1909 he held a well-paying position at *The New York Evening World*.



Figure 3. Lloyd F. Lonergan (ca. 1914)

### **Lloyd F. Lonergan: Scenario Writer**

At the Thanhouseer Company, the duty of script writing fell upon the shoulders of Lonergan, and in the early years from 1910 to 1912, nearly every scenario can be credited to his pen despite the lack of a complete public record for his work. During this period, Lonergan remained at his *World* desk, and with the assistance of Gertrude, crafted one scenario a week starting with the company's first film, *The Actor's Children*, released on March 15, 1910.<sup>5</sup> In an interview with a local newspaper reporter, Lonergan related his work ethic:

"What are your best hours of work, Mr. Lonergan?" the scribe asked.

"Any old time when the spirit moves me. I have written at every hour of the day."

"How do you work?"

"My method is simple. I get an idea, dope it out roughly, smooth off the rough corners, then dictate to a stenographer. I often work on more than one script at a time. I find that while working on drama, it rests me to dash off a comedy in between."<sup>6</sup>

### **"Thanhouseer Not Buying"**

The demand for story material generated during the nickelodeon era outstripped the underdeveloped efforts of most studios that had yet to organize talent and manage a pipeline to

produce a steady stream of scenarios for filming. To supplement scenario development within the studios, many studios solicited stories from the growing movie going public who were captivated by this new medium.<sup>7</sup> Kathy Fuller writes:

Scenario writing provided one way for fans to create their own “fan literature” based on film characters and situations. Tens of thousands of eager amateur writers across the country, middle-class and working-class men, women, and children, joined the silent film scenario-writing craze, which rivaled only the writing of advertising jingles for contests as a national passion during the 1910s and early 1920s. A columnist for *Moving Picture World* reported in 1913 that “the number of scenario writers is estimated at about fifteen hundred. If a census were made of all who had written one or two scenarios, the number would approximate twenty thousand.”<sup>8</sup>

But Thanhouser was not interested in acquiring scenarios from the public thanks to Lonergan’s fertile mind. In 1912, Thanhouser posted a notice in the trade journal *Moving Picture World* stating that the company would not buy manuscripts submitted by the public. (Figure 4).<sup>9</sup>

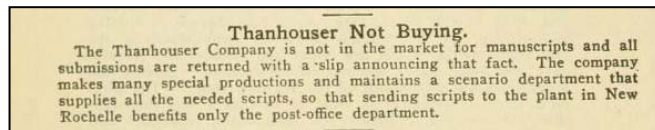


Figure 4. *Moving Picture World*, January 20, 1912

Epes Winthrop Sargent, an American movie critic, wrote in 1914 of Lonergan’s accomplishments:

Almost since the formation of the Thanhouser Company, Lloyd Lonergan has written practically all of the Thanhouser releases; not by merely putting his name on the script he revises, but digging out the idea, getting it on paper and generally cutting the film afterward. We are inclined to think that he has written more produced plays than any single photoplay writer, and his batting average runs about .980. He has kept on year after year, turning out two or three a week and yet never letting the suggestion creep into his stuff that it is machine made.<sup>10</sup>

### Organizing for Success

By early 1913 after the Thanhouser Company had been acquired by the Mutual Film Corporation, Lonergan and his wife moved to Beacon Hall, an apartment building adjacent to Thanhouser's studio in New Rochelle, where he worked full time as Thanhouser’ scenario writer and chief of production. Under Lonergan’s direction, the Thanhouser studio was an early adopter of the “producer-unit” system abandoning the traditional “director-unit” system that was prevalent at most studios during the “one-reel” era.<sup>11</sup> In the “producer-unit” system, many of the managerial tasks that had traditionally fallen to directors, particularly in the pre-



Figure 5. Lonergan (second from left) supervises the filming of a scene

production phase, were assumed by Lonergan.<sup>12</sup> He wrote of the studio's production process in a 1917 article titled "How I Came to Write Continuity":

Everybody knows what "continuity" is nowadays, but Edwin Thanhouser is the man who invented it. There wasn't such an animal in 1909 when he started his studio in New Rochelle. [His] inquiries developed the fact that it was all up to the director. "Just rely on him," Mr. Thanhouser was told. "A good director will take a company out, see something that will screen well, take it and write a story around it. Scenarios will be the least of your troubles."

"When I had my theatrical company," [Thanhouser] said, "I never told the director, "Go and put on a play," and trust it to his inventive genius. I selected the manuscript I liked, and he followed it. And I don't see any reason why the same course shouldn't be a success in the motion picture game."

And that's how I came to "write continuity," and see it put on the screen at a time when other companies let the directors do everything.<sup>13</sup>

Thanhouser controlled production primarily through the continuity script which was essentially a complete blueprint for a film shoot. John W. Kellette, a scenario writer who worked at Thanhouser from 1913 to 1915, summarized how Lonergan's scenarios drove the organization's production process:

He revises the first draft from the stenographer, and this is passed on to the typist to make the copies that the studio requires - a dozen in number - for several departments must have a script before the work is shown as a first run. The director gets one, his assistant another; the studio manager, the carpenter, the scene painter, technical constructor, negative cutter, the joining room, and others who figure into the making of the script.<sup>14</sup>

The standard had been, and continued to be for many other studios, the director-unit system whereupon the director had the story in his or her head, filmed it with minimal planning, and attempted to put it together in the editing room. Even a traditionalist like Charles Chaplin was still making movies without written scenarios in the 1930s even though the industry had widely embraced the producer-unit structure resulting in a division of labor and specialization into various departments.<sup>15</sup>

### **Lonergan Scenarios**

Lonergan's scenarios were the foundation of the Thanhouser studio's reputation for quality, whether with original stories or adaptations. Noteworthy, almost half of Lonergan's credited films are categorized as "comedies," most released under the studio's "Falstaff" brand, matched his reputation for his love of this genre. Recurring storytelling themes were the basis for many of

his simple, engaging and unlikely scenarios. Examples of repeated themes that can be seen in surviving Lonergan scripted films:

- **Indomitable Young Romance:** *Daddy's Double* (1910), *In a Garden* (1912), *The Farmer's Daughters* (1913)
- **Inheritance & Wealth:** *The Actor's Children* (1910), *Young Lord Stanley*, (1910), *His Uncle's Wives* (1913)
- **Classism:** *The Coffin Ship* (1911), *The Cry of the Children* (1912), *Get Rich Quick* (1912)
- **Crime Drama:** *The Center of the Web* (1914), *An Elusive Diamond* (1915), *Crossed Wires* (1915)
- **Comedy:** *The Star of the Sideshow* (1912), *His Uncle's Wives* (1913), *The Marvelous Marathoner* (1915), *The Soap Suds Star* (1915)



Figure 6. *In a Garden* with James Cruze, Marguerite Snow, and Riley Chamberlin

Approximately 10% of his films drew upon classic tales, novels and plays for inspiration, including: 1911's *Cinderella* (based on Charles Perrault's famous 1697 fairy tale), Rider Haggard's 1886/1887 adventure novel *SHE* in two-reels, and the three-reel adaptation of *David Copperfield* (based on Charles Dickens' 1850 novel). In 1912 it was *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (based on Robert Louis Stevenson's story from Thomas Russell Sullivan's stage adaptation in 1888 for Richard Mansfield), in 1914, a four-reel feature *Joseph in the Land of Egypt* (based on the 1913 pageant play *Joseph and His Brethren* by Joseph Napoleon Parker), and in 1917 a five reel feature *The Woman in White* (based on the 1859 novel by Wilkie Collins, considered an early example of the detective fiction novel genre) and perhaps the first film to feature an actress, Florence La Badie, in a dual on screen role.

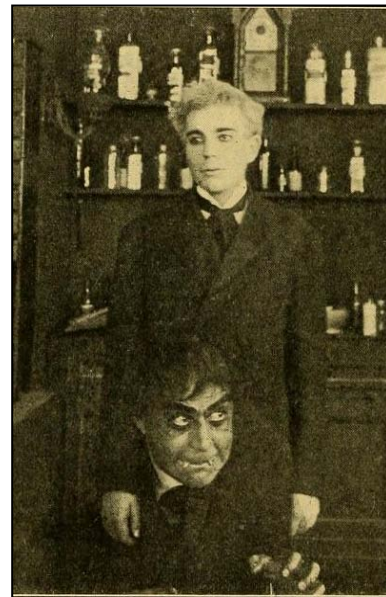


Figure 7. Harry Benham as Jekyll and James Cruze as Hyde in Thanhouser's 1912 *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*

## Conclusion

Lonergan's commitment to scenario-driven movies was an important reason that early on the studio earned a reputation for quality films, and he embraced the producer-unit production system for filmmaking during the formative years of American film. Virtually all of today's theatrically released films utilize these production processes pioneered by Lonergan at the Thanhouser studio as vital elements for successful motion pictures.

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- <sup>1</sup> Background of the Motion Picture Industry (1896 to 1910): Starting in 1896 the marvel of moving pictures gradually became scheduled “fillers” between acts in vaudeville programs. Films of this era are typically referred to as “primitive cinema” or “cinema of attractions” and were typically non-narrative in content. More of a novel exhibition of the technology of moving pictures, it could transport spectators to exotic locations to observe attractions not normally available to them. These films engrossed an audience primarily by the spectacle of moving images that ran a minute or two. Subjects were mostly actuality in nature, including, for example, a woman performing a fan dance, a speeding train, a boxing match, a visit to Coney Island, the arrival of war ships in port, or a visit to a natural wonder, such as Niagara Falls or Old Faithful in Yellowstone. But, as filmmakers explored the potential of this new medium beyond mere spectacle, the new language of cinema (e.g. close ups, parallel editing, analytical shots, etc.) enabled films to tell a story, ushering in what is now referred to as the “Transitional Era” in early cinema. Early examples include Georges Méliès' 1902 *A Trip to the Moon* and Edwin S. Porter's 1903 *The Great Train Robbery*.
- <sup>2</sup> Keil, Charlie, *Early American Cinema in Transition: Story, Style, and Filmmaking, 1909-1913*, The University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 2001, pp 3-19.
- <sup>3</sup> Fuller, Kathryn H., *At the Picture Show: Small-Town Audiences and the Creation of Fan Culture*, University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville and London, 1996, page 48.
- <sup>4</sup> Gunning, Tom, *D.W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film: The Early Years at Biograph*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 1994, pp 59-60.
- <sup>5</sup> Bowers, Q. David, *Thanhouser Films: An Encyclopedia and History*, Thanhouser Company Film Preservation, Inc., Portland, Oregon, 1996, Chapter 2: Into the Film Industry – Scenarios.
- <sup>6</sup> *The New Rochelle Pioneer*, February 27, 1915.
- <sup>7</sup> Liepa, Torey, *Entertaining the Public Option: The Popular Film Writing Movement and the Emergence of Writing for the American Silent Cinema*, in *Analyzing the Screen Play*, ed. Jill Neldes, London, Routledge, 2011, pp 7-23.
- <sup>8</sup> Fuller, Kathryn, *Studying Movie Audiences*, in *Major Problems in American Popular Culture*, edited by Kathleen Franz & Susan Smulyan, Wadsworth Cengage Learning, Boston, 2012, page 181.
- <sup>9</sup> *Moving Picture World*, January 20, 1912, page 200.
- <sup>10</sup> *Moving Picture World*, April 4, 1914, page 55.
- <sup>11</sup> *The Continuity Script and the Rationalization of Film Production*, The Wisconsin Center for Film & Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison. In a "director-unit" system, a studio's talent would be split into groups (often with genre specialization), each led by one filmmaker. In the “producer-unit” system, many of the managerial tasks, particularly in the pre-production phase, that had traditionally fallen to directors were assumed by central managers.  
See <http://www.wcfr.commarts.wisc.edu/collections/featured/aitken/continuity/>, accessed 11/6/13.
- <sup>12</sup> *The New Rochelle Pioneer*, September 5, 1914, page 4.
- <sup>13</sup> *Moving Picture World*, July 21, 1917, page 403.
- <sup>14</sup> *Moving Picture World*, September 12, 1914, page 1497.
- <sup>15</sup> Robbe, Adrian, *Classical Hollywood's Central Producer System: The Contribution of Irving Thalberg to Studio Era Film Style*, <http://lartedelcinema.wordpress.com/article/classical-hollywood-s-central-producer-2ar0j9fkv4m0g-8/>, accessed 11/6/13.