

Reconstructing Thanhouser

The Twenty-Five-Year Journey of a Citizen Archivist

NED THANHOUSER

“Preservation without access is pointless.”—*The Committee for Film Preservation and Public Access, 1993*

The Thanhouser film enterprise produced and released 1,086 films between 1910 and 1917, working from its headquarters in New Rochelle, New York.¹ Unlike the studio founders at Biograph or Edison, Edwin Thanhouser saw no reason to preserve any of his negatives or distribution prints.² Without a central repository for its films, the Thanhouser studio output was deconstructed, its films scattered across the globe via its network of distribution channels. As a result, surviving Thanhouser films have gone largely unseen. Early film history was consequently written by scholars who principally studied productions from a handful of studios and from archives that provided easy access. Now, with a catalog of surviving Thanhouser films and improved access, a new perspective on this important era is starting to emerge.

This article chronicles my twenty-five-year journey to reconstruct the Thanhouser film legacy by locating, identifying, assuring the preservation of, and improving access to 222 surviving Thanhouser films that have been located around the world at archives and in private collections. The ability to view surviving Thanhouser films is no longer limited to scholars and researchers who travel to archives to view preservation prints under controlled conditions.

Technological advances in video distribution over the past three decades have redefined the paradigm for access. As Rick Prelinger argues, archive managers and collectors should be “points of origin,” supporting public access to their materials to enable a new generation of citizens and scholars to view and interpret our cinematic history. He succinctly states, “While expanding access has become a relatively uncontroversial objective, its implementation is roadblocked by constraint, uncertainty, and ambivalence.”³ My hope is that archives will

view my twenty-five-year quest as a case study and a call-to-action for improved access to their collections.

BACK STORY

Why would Edwin Thanhouser burn what today we judge as treasures? He considered the films to have only fleeting value, so he commanded, “They’re worthless—burn ’em.”⁴ Taking a closer look at our family history, I believe it was more than just an issue of cost. Certainly the expense of storing thousands of reels of highly flammable nitrate film was a factor, especially for a man who learned through the school of hard knocks to be frugal and cautious with his money. More was at stake, however. Edwin Thanhouser had a desire to rise above the second-class social stigma commonly associated with actors and actresses from the stage and screen, and he hoped to enjoy the wealth and status he had worked to achieve.

Edwin began his career on the stage as a supporting actor in the mid-1890s, traveling by train on a grueling schedule from city to city. He honed his craft and eventually left the stage as a performer to establish a very successful theatrical company in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. In 1909, however, box office receipts were on the decline as nickelodeons were opening on every street corner, stealing his audiences by showing the latest novelty: one-reel motion pictures.

The decision to enter the film industry was a business venture for Edwin Thanhouser, not an idealistic dream of changing the world with better entertainment. He was the first with a theatrical background to manage a studio in the United States, which uniquely prepared him to enter the new motion picture business. He had the experience of running a successful theatrical stock company for over a decade and possessed a collection of screen-ready plays combined with access to experienced actors. It was fiscal survival for his family—either suffer declining revenue managing a dwindling enterprise or enter the new entertainment growth industry.

Edwin moved his family to New Rochelle, New York, in fall 1909, and with a ten thousand dollar investment, he translated his theatrical savvy from the stage to the screen. Starting



Edwin Thanhouser as Captain Larolle in *Under the Red Robe*, circa 1895. Thanhouser Collection.



Thanhouser Company studio, New Rochelle, New York, circa 1910. Thanhouser Collection.

in 1910 with the studio's first release, *The Actor's Children*, on March 15, he rapidly built the Thanhouser studio's reputation for quality productions. Success continued, culminating with the sale of the company to the Mutual Film Corporation in April 1912 for \$250,000, twenty-five times the initial capital outlay! After a two-year grand tour of Europe with his family, the outbreak of the First World War, and the tragic death of Thanhouser Film Corporation president Charles J. Hite, Edwin returned to New York. He was rehired by Mutual in February 1915 on a three-year contract with an annual salary of \$75,000 to manage the company bearing his name. But in 1917, with the industry in recession and on the move to California, having released 1,086 films and being one of the few studios with a positive bank balance, the Thanhouser Film Corporation, one of the pioneering independent studios of the era, shuttered its doors.

Edwin retired at fifty-three, wealthy enough to live a life of luxury without ever having to work again. He had achieved the American dream. He was now able to travel the world, collect art, invest in the stock market, and send his son, my father, Lloyd, to the best private schools. Lloyd grew up witnessing the Thanhouser film enterprise flourish, and he

was captivated with playwrighting. He wanted to follow in his family's footsteps and become a playwright like his Uncle Lloyd Lonergan, the prolific Thanhouser scenarist. But Edwin would hear nothing of it; his family had transcended its second-class position for one of wealth and status. He made sure his son received a top-drawer education at Yale Law School, one that would lead to a career on Wall Street. The Thanhouser family was now employed in a legitimate profession, and it was therefore entirely characteristic that Edwin, who saw no value in holding on to the collection of films produced by his studio, burned all the Thanhouser negatives and put that chapter of his life behind him. It was my father's recollection about the family film business and the destruction of the Thanhouser negatives that led me to believe there was nothing left from this era.

DISCOVERY

Unbeknownst to me when I started my investigation twenty-five years ago, each original film negative produced thirty, forty, or more prints that were sent to film exchanges and distribution channels around the world.



**Edwin Thanhouser, circa 1920.
Thanhouser Collection.**

Thankfully, many of these Thanhouser prints were saved by enthusiastic collectors, and surplus reels of films (including one that was rescued from the floor of a decommissioned projection booth) were donated to archives.⁵ Despite the burning of the original negatives, 15 percent of the cinematic output from the Thanhouser studio is now known to have survived. Nevertheless, the studio's output was totally "deconstructed," with films scattered around the globe at multiple sites and without a centralized inventory of titles or easy access

to them. Each collection, taken individually, represented only a fragment of the Thanhouser studio output, failing to give a complete depiction of the rich and diverse nature of its productions.⁶ Because of the broad geographic distribution of these collections, the studio's contributions to the early film industry have gone largely unseen, except by a few scholars who, over years of research and travel, sought out and viewed the few known surviving prints at multiple archives.

By happenstance, in fall 1986, I tracked



**Thanhouser celebration,
Portland, Oregon, 1987.
Thanhouser Collection.**

down a 16mm print of Thanhouser's production of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1912) and purchased it for eighty-six dollars from Blackhawk Films in Des Moines, Iowa.⁷ In April 1987, to celebrate this unexpected discovery of our family legacy, I rented a movie theater in Portland, Oregon, and invited friends and family to watch what we thought was lost forever. My sisters flew in from the opposite coasts of the United States, and we celebrated the discovery with great enthusiasm. The passion within was lit, and the search for additional Thanhouser titles was launched.

The Thanhouser studio and several of its productions had been known by film scholars for years. Articles about the Thanhouser Company had been written in various journals and books, one of the most notable being a chapter in film scholar Anthony Slide's hardback on early silent film.⁸ Over the next two years, I visited Slide in California, made contact with historian Q. David Bowers (who was working on the complete history of the Thanhouser film enterprise),⁹ corresponded with film collector Bob Lee of the Essex Film Club,¹⁰ discovered that fifty-eight Thanhouser titles were listed in *Treasures from the Film Archives*,¹¹ and established links with several public and private archives in the United States and abroad. I personally visited film archives at the Library

of Congress in Washington, D.C., MoMA in New York, and the Nederlands Filmmuseum in Amsterdam. As a result, I acquired several 16mm prints of surviving Thanhouser films for my family to view.¹² But I also discovered that the vast majority of surviving Thanhouser films were 35mm prints, requiring travel to the various archives to view them on a Steenbeck flatbed or in a private screening room. It was apparent that most of the Thanhouser films remained out of reach for easy access and viewing. As I learned more about scholarly research into early film history, my initial desire simply to view our family's heritage was transformed into a quest to locate, identify, assure preservation, and most important, improve access to the Thanhouser film legacy for all to study and enjoy. I had become a citizen archivist.¹³

ENDOWMENT ESTABLISHED AT THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

In October 1989, as a result of locating a number of surviving Thanhouser films, my sisters and I decided to help improve the collection's preservation status and accessibility. We

donated forty thousand dollars from our father's estate to establish the Thanhouser Film Endowment at the Library of Congress, with the aim of expanding its collection of Thanhouser films and encouraging researchers in the United States and abroad to begin new studies of this neglected era in cinema's history.¹⁴ The next several years saw a flurry of new discoveries, including two dozen films held by BFI, six Thanhouser titles held by the George Eastman House in Rochester, New York, and five titles held by MoMA.

IMPROVING ACCESS TO THANHOUSER FILMS

By the mid-1990s, the penetration of VHS videotape players into homes and schools enabled the logical next step in improving access to Thanhouser films.¹⁵ I incorporated Thanhouser Company Film Preservation Inc. in 1995 as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit corporation to finance the venture, obtained film-to-video transfers of the films that I had collected for the past decade, commissioned new musical accompaniment, and began producing VHS videotape compilations from my personal collection. The first video release was announced in 1996; it consisted of thirteen titles organized chronologically on three tapes.¹⁶ Anthony Slide's 1997 review was published in *Classic Images* and closed with the following paragraph:

This is a project well worth supporting. We need more of these types of tape compilations put together with love and respect for the work of the pioneers of the film industry. If nothing else, this set of tapes provides a unique record of early film melodramas and disproves the theory that the melodramatics of the story were matched by the melodramatics of the performers. Here, one has a history of the Thanhouser Company in easily digestible form. Most recommended!¹⁷

EXTANT THANHOUSER FILMS

Thanks to the cooperation of archives and collectors, and the occasional eBay seller, my research has resulted in the identification and cataloging of 222 Thanhouser films, represent-

ing 154 unique titles and located in no fewer than twenty-eight public archives and private collections around the globe.¹⁸ They exist in a multitude of formats, including 35mm nitrate prints, 35mm viewing prints, 28mm diacetate prints, 16mm reduction prints, 9.5mm and 8mm reels, and VHS and DVD copies.

The 154 surviving film titles are representative of the studio's output, starting with its very first release on March 15, 1910, *The Actor's Children*, and extending to its 1,080th film, *The Woman in White*, released on July 1, 1917, and featuring the celebrated Broadway actress Jeanne Eagels. These surviving films reveal the broad range of actors, actresses, directors, and scenario writers from the multiple production units at the Thanhouser film enterprise, including the Jacksonville studio, Los Angeles unit, Falstaff and Princess brands, Mutual Masterpictures, three-reel Than-O-Play releases, Zudora serial episodes, and finally, Thanhouser-produced Pathé Gold Rooster Play feature films.

Thanks to the generous support of archives and collectors who granted access to make copies, fifty-six Thanhouser films are now available on DVD for all to study and enjoy.¹⁹ Additional releases of Thanhouser films on DVD are planned, pending access by archives and collectors. Many extant Thanhouser films known to be held by archives and private collectors, however, remain tantalizingly out of reach, including Thanhouser's 1911 three-part release based on Charles Dickens's character David Copperfield (*The Early Life of David Copperfield*, *Little Em'ly and David Copperfield*, and *The Loves of David Copperfield*); *A Circus Stowaway* (1911), with scenes from the Barnum and Bailey Circus; *The Childhood of Jack Harkaway* (1910), by English writer S. Bracebridge Hemyng; *The Dog in the Baggage Car*, a one-reel comedy with James Cruze and wife, Marguerite Snow; and the five-reel Pathé feature *The Image Maker* (1917), featuring the well-known Danish movie star Valkyrien, the stage name of Baroness DeWitz.

WHAT'S NEXT


With sales of DVDs on the decline since 2004, the next iteration of access will bypass physical media distribution by utilizing online viewing



The Thanhouser Collection,
DVD volumes 1, 2, and 3
(2004). Thanhouser Collection.


Only in the Way

www.thanhouser.org/films/only.htm




Only in the Way

(One reel of approximately 1,000 feet, released January 31, 1911)
Print source: [Library of Congress](#), 12 minutes, 14 seconds.
Cast: [Marie Eline](#) (Marie).
 Original organ score composed and performed by musician [Andrew Crow](#).



Please support online access to Thanhouser films with your donation.

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Through most of 1910, the first year of Thanhouser releases, the studio created vehicles around one of its earliest stars, child actress Marie Eline. She was one of the few movie players to receive screen credit in those early days. Her film role previous to this one was Little Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop*.

and download via dozens of popular internet video sites like YouTube and Vimeo.²⁰ The next evolutionary step for access to surviving Thanhouser films is clear: make them available on demand via the internet. Providing access to the Thanhouser film collection is again a consequence of continual technological advancement. The challenge, like that faced by archives, will be a funding model to support ongoing operations.

Coincident with the publication of this article, all fifty-six of the Thanhouser titles that are available for purchase on DVD are now viewable online at no charge via the Thanhouser website.²¹ To address the funding issue noted earlier, a "Donate Now" button is presented to the viewer based on a leap of faith that individuals who seek out these films to view them online for free will make an appropriate donation to support ongoing operations to make additional surviving Thanhouser films

Thanhouser online video web page for *Only in the Way* (1910). Thanhouser Collection.

available for purchase on DVD and for free online viewing.

THE IMPACT OF INCREASED ACCESS

Reconstructing a representative collection from the Thanhouser studio has spurred renewed scholarly and public interest in what was heretofore relegated to the narrow domain of a few academic researchers able to justify travel to view these films in the cloistered environments of archives. Since the first Thanhouser videotapes were introduced in 1996, over twenty-five hundred VHS and DVD units have been purchased by cinephiles, libraries, and scholars. As a result, interest in and research on the Thanhouser studio have grown significantly over the past decade. Unsolicited feedback

from dozens of e-mails praises Thanhouser films from both nostalgic and scholarly perspectives. The resurgence of academic research on Thanhouser is exemplified by Professor Kathryn Fuller-Seeley's graduate historiography class at Georgia State University, which has produced no less than ten student papers that utilize the Thanhouser videos and Q. David Bowers's CD-ROM as primary source material.²² Most recently, Professor Charlie Keil from the University of Toronto, an expert in early US film history, presented a paper titled "Narration and Authorship in the Transitional Text: Griffith, Thanhouser, and Typicality" that utilized films from the Thanhouser DVDs.²³ Going beyond cinema studies, however, Thanhouser films present us with a time capsule of social, cultural, and moral ideals from the progressive era; consequently, these films are of interest to a broad range of scholarly and popular audiences.

NOTES

Thank you to Rick Prelinger, Kathryn Fuller-Seeley, Bill Thanhouser, and Eliza Canty-Jones for their encouragement and feedback on this article.

1. Q. David Bowers, *Thanhouser Films: An Encyclopedia and History*, October 1, 1997, <http://thanhouser.org/films/Thanhouser%20Filmography.pdf>.

2. Lloyd F. Thanhouser, *The Thanhouser Family* (1970), a privately printed fifty-six-page typed history of the family with biographies of certain family members and the author's recollections of the stories related by his father, Edwin Thanhouser.

3. Rick Prelinger, "Points of Origin: Discovering Ourselves through Access," *The Moving Image* 9, no. 2 (2009): 164.

4. Oral history and reminiscences of Lloyd F. Thanhouser, tape-recorded on August 2, 1980.

5. In March 1999, a 35mm nitrate print of the 1913 Thanhouser production *The Evidence of the Film* was found on the floor of a projection booth in Superior, Montana. John Eickhof, from Northwest Theatre Equipment Company of Wendell, Idaho, made this discovery. His technician, Phil Housh, contacted Thanhouser Company Film Preservation Inc. through the Thanhouser website. Mr. Eickhof graciously

donated the nitrate print to the Library of Congress for preservation in exchange for a 35mm safety print. This film was preserved by the Library of Congress and was subsequently selected in 2001 for inclusion in the National Film Registry by the National Film Preservation Board of the Library of Congress.

6. An analysis by theme of the 1,086 films released by Thanhouser reveals the following: drama, 48%; comedy, 30%; classics, 8%; romance, 5%; mystery, 4%; and documentary, 2%, with educational, western, fairy tale, cartoon, fantasy, and advertising accounting for the remaining 3%.

7. From the 1950s through the early 1980s, Blackhawk Films marketed motion pictures on 16mm, 8mm, and Super 8mm film. Most were vintage one- or two-reel short subjects, usually comedies starring Laurel and Hardy, Our Gang, Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, and other famous comedy series of the past. Blackhawk also offered newsreels, documentaries, and silent feature films. With the rise of the video market in the early 1980s, Blackhawk began producing video versions of many of its titles in 1981 and, within a few years, no longer manufactured film copies. The company was later purchased by Republic Pictures, the film elements still later by archivist David Shepard.

8. Anthony Slide, "The Thanhouser Company," in *Aspects of American Film History prior to 1920*, 68–78 (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1978).

9. Q. David Bowers completed his encyclopedic research on the Thanhouser film enterprise in 1994. *Thanhouser Films: An Encyclopedia and History* includes a narrative history of the company compiled from primary research consisting of interviews and contemporary newspaper and magazine articles, plus a filmography for each of the 1,086 Thanhouser productions and over one thousand biography entries for actors, actresses, and employees. Too big for conventional publication, through a licensing agreement with his publisher, I converted the entire book to CD-ROM format, which was published in October 1997 by Thanhouser Company Film Preservation Inc. See <http://www.thanhouser.org/cdrom.htm> for details.

10. Bob Lee was founder and president of the Essex Film Club in Nutley, New Jersey. A self-proclaimed "film nut," he ran the club and

theater from 1939 to 1992. It was a place to meet and discuss films before the advent of the internet and blogs. Bob was wonderfully cooperative, making 16mm copies of Thanhouser films in his collection for a nominal cost. See <http://www.essexfilmclub.com/>.

11. Ronald S. Magliozzi, *Treasures from the Film Archives: A Catalog of Short Silent Fiction Films Held by FIAF Archives* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1988).

12. I purchased 16mm copies of the following films between 1987 and 1990: *King Rene's Daughter* (Blackhawk Films, 1913), *The Little Girl Next Door* (Essex Film Club, 1912), *Zudora Episode #2: The Mystery of the Sleeping House* (Essex Film Club, 1914), *Get Rich Quick* (MoMA, 1912), *The Cry of the Children* (George Eastman House, 1912), *Petticoat Camp* (Library of Congress, 1912), *She* (Q. David Bowers, 1912), *Zudora Episode #3: The Mystery of the Dutch Cheese-Maker* (Essex Film Club, 1914), *Marble Heart* (MoMA, 1913), *The Soap Suds Star* (MoMA, 1915), *Im Meere Verloren* (*The Coffin Ship*; Nederlands Filmmuseum, 1911), and *The Vicar of Wakefield* (Nederlands Filmmuseum, 1910).

13. In an April 11, 2010, blog post, Rick Prelinger defined a *citizen archivist* as "a person working *outside* established institutions who is doing archival-quality work (not simply collecting), typically in an area that is neglected or inadequately addressed by established collections. Citizen archivists collect and add value to records of significance, many of which ultimately find their ways into institutions." Visit Kate Theimer's blog starting with <http://www.archivesnext.com/?p=1214> for this lively discussion.

14. See <http://www.thanhouser.org/press/LoC%2010-89.rtf>. The Library of Congress was selected because it held the largest collection of Thanhouser films. Today the Library of Congress continues to maintain the largest cache of Thanhouser films, with sixty-seven titles in its collection. The Library of Congress continues its ongoing efforts to repatriate Thanhouser titles held by international archives.

15. The Video Home System (better known by its abbreviation VHS) is a consumer-level video standard developed by Japanese company JVC and launched in 1976. For more history on VHS, visit <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/VHS>.

16. <http://thanhouser.org/films/Booklet%201-2-3.pdf>. Volume 1, *The Early Years (1910 to 1912)*, contained *Only in the Way* (Library of Congress, 1911), *Get Rich Quick* (MoMA, 1911), *The Coffin Ship* (Nederlands Filmmuseum, 1911), *Cinderella* (BFI, 1911), and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (Blackhawk, 1912). Volume 2, *Under the Mutual Banner (1912 to 1915)*, included *The Cry of the Children* (George Eastman House, 1912), *Petticoat Camp* (Library of Congress, 1912), *The Star of Bethlehem* (BFI, 1912), *The Decoy* (Princess; BFI, 1914), and *A Dog's Love* (MoMA, 1914). Volume 3, *Edwin Thanhouser Returns (1915 to 1917)*, consisted of *Crossed Wires* (BFI, 1915), *The Soap Suds Star* (Falstaff; MoMA, 1915), and *The World and the Woman* (Pathé; George Eastman House, 1916).

17. Anthony Slide, "Thanhouser Classics, Volumes I, II & III," *Classic Images*, no. 260 (February 1997), <http://thanhouser.org/press/Tony%20Slide%20Review%20-%20CI%202-97.pdf>.

18. http://thanhouser.org/database/TCO_database.xls.

19. <http://thanhouser.org/videos.htm>.

20. "Home Entertainment Sales Drop for Sixth Straight Year," <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE7o6oGR20110107>. See also http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_video_hosting_websites.

21. <http://www.thanhouser.org/videos-online.htm>.

22. <http://thanhouser.org/research.htm>.

23. See David Bordwell's symposium notes on "Movies, Media, and Methods," May 5, 2010, <http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=8032>. For Professor Keil's talk, see <http://www.thanhouser.org/Research/Charlie%20Keil%20-%20Narration%20and%20Authorship.pdf>.