Thanhouser: A Microcosm of the Transitional Era in Silent Films

*Why the Studio Never Made it to Hollywood*

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Southwest/Texas Popular and American Culture Associations

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The Transitional Era in American Silent Film

- Period from 1908 to 1917
  - End of the “primitive” era
  - Start of “classical” Hollywood era
- “Single Reel Era” – 1908 to 1913
  - One-reel standard (1,000’ of 35mm film)
  - Edison dominates with Motion Picture Patent’s Corp (MPPC, aka “The Trust”)
- Transition to “Features”* – 1914 to 1917
  - Emergence of the “Star System”

* Feature = Four reels or more per title
Thanhouser vs. The Industry
(1910 to 1917)

* Feature = Four reels or more per title

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Thanhouser Back Story
Theatrical Experience

Edwin Thanhouser
ca. 1897

Gertrude Homan
ca. 1896

Academy Theater Program
January 7, 1900

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Into the Motion Picture Business
First American Studio with Theatrical Background

Certificate of Incorporation – October 25, 1909

Lloyd Lonergan

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The First Thanhouser Release

The Actor’s Children

“So I set about seeing how I could make pictures without infringing upon patent rights…”

EDWIN THANHOUSER, The Moving Picture World, MARCH 12, 1910

The Actor’s Children, March 15, 1910
Breaking the Mold
Multiple Reel Films

• “Natural Length Films”
  – *Romeo and Juliet*, (2 reels), Sept. 1, 1911
  – *She*, (2 reels), Dec. 26, 1911
  – *Nicholas Nickleby* (2 reels), March 19, 1912
  – *The Merchant of Venice* (2 reels), July 26, 1912
  – *The Star of Bethlehem* (3 reels), Dec. 24, 1912
Thanhouser and the Single Reel Era

(1910 to 1912)

• Establishing a reputation of quality
  “…Thanhouser pictures, of course, rank highest.”
  - *The New York Dramatic Mirror*, ca. summer 1910

• Promoting the “Brand” above all else
Under the Mutual Banner
1912 – A Year of Change

• Thanhouser Sold to Mutual in April for $250,000
• Renamed: “Thanhouser Film Corporation”
• Edwin and Gertrude “retire” in November
• 1912 Feature Scorecard
  – Industry: 1%, Thanhouser: 0%
Expanding Thanhouser Output
Princess Brand

• New Division
  – Aug. 23, 1913 Intro

• Three per Week
  – Mutual Distribution

• Features New “Stars”
  – Muriel Ostriche
  – Boyd Marshall

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The 518th Thanhouser Release

An Elusive Diamond

• One Reel Crime Drama
  – Mignon Anderson

• Camera & Editing
  – Foreground and Background Action
  – Close Up Shots
  – Analytical Shots
  – Scene-to-Scene Transition

An Elusive Diamond - January 23, 1914
The Million Dollar Mystery
Thanhouser’s Successful Serial

• 23 Weekly Episodes
  – June 1914 to Feb. 1915

• Featuring
  – James Cruze
  – Marguerite Snow
  – Florence LaBadie

• Solution to the Mystery
  – $10,000 Prize
  – Earned over $2M
Embracing the Star System
(1913 to 1914)
Tragedy Strikes Thanhouser
August 21, 1914

• Charles J. Hite Dies
  – Auto Accident
• Management by Committee
  – Lack of direction
  – Loss of talent
• 1914 Feature Scorecard
  – Industry: 20%, Thanhouser: 4%
Edwin and Gertrude Return
1915

• Escape Europe and World War
  – Land NYC August 24, 1914

• Mutual Rehires Thanhouser
  – Three Year Contract - Feb. 1915
  – Inherited Failing Zudora Serial

• Exit Princess, Enter Falstaff
  – April 16, 1915
  – Focus on One-reel Comedies
More Industry Transitions
1916

• The Shift to Features
  – Mutual Introduces “Masterpicture”
  – Thanhouser Produces 23 Titles
• Mutual Ejects Thanhouser (June)
  – Forms Alliance with Pathé
  – “…one-fourth the number of reels with four times the quality.”
• 1916 Feature Scorecard
  – Industry: 45%, Thanhouser: 20%
Exit Thanhouser
1917

• Thanhouser’s Alliance with Pathé
  – 100% Features, 29 Releases
  – More Star Power
    • Frederick Warde, Jeanne Eagels
  – All Five Reels, Save One:
    • Vicar of Wakefield (Eight Reels)

• Tragedy Strikes Again
  – Florence LaBadie Dies Oct. 1917
  – Industry Move to CA, Recession
Thanhouser Feature Scorecard
Features vs. Total Output 1910 to 1917

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Thanhouser Legacy

www.thanhouser.org