

Birth of cinema has local link

Festival features silent films shot nearby

By [Germain Lussier](#)

Times Herald-Record

September 30, 2007

Watching silent films gives great context to the birth of modern cinema. They're a hint of what was to come. It's appropriate, then, that this weekend's silent-film event at the Neversink Valley Area Museum in Cuddebackville was also small, but with plenty of potential.

The event began Friday night with 15 attendees who watched five films by D.W. Griffith, Mack Sennett and Thanhouser Productions, all of whom made films in and around Cuddebackville.

"Many people don't know that New York was the center of the film industry at the turn of the century," said Eileen White, a filmmaker and professor at Queensborough Community College, who spoke between the shorts.

White gave the audience context into what silent films meant to the history of cinema.

"Griffith didn't give us real time, he gave us screen time," she said, to explain how Griffith created suspense through editing, something he's credited with inventing.

Originally, Seth Goldman, executive director of the museum, had planned to hold the festival on the lawn of the facility.

However, a mixup with the tent forced the event into the D&H Canal pavilion. With the outdoor screen, seating at picnic tables and bug spray available, it had a real summer-camp feel.

The event continued Saturday with a bigger crowd of about 25 people who gathered at the indoor visitors center.

There, Ned Thanhouser held a historical lecture and screening about his grandparents' silent-film company, Thanhouser Productions.

He described it, and Cuddebackville, as "lost gems" of the silent-film era.

"This was Hollywood before there was Hollywood, right in your area," Thanhouser said.

Thanhouser Productions made more than 1,000 films between 1909 and 1917, of which only 200 are still around. One of the 800 missing is "The Forest Rose," which was shot in Cuddebackville in 1912.

Thanhouser displayed two still photos of the production, and Goldman revealed his possession of an old hotel register containing signatures of the crew from during the filming.

The two-day, four-hour event ended with four new silent films from the U.S. and Canada.

"We hope to connect the dots from the past to the present," Goldman said.

These movies were all much in the vein of silent films of the past, but had differences, too; they were either shot in color or with a modern sensibility.

In the future, Goldman hopes to expand the entire festival, going so far as to call this one "the first annual."

More new films, more history and even a music competition are all possibilities.