

Thanhouser Films: An Encyclopedia and History, 1909 – 1918
Review by Paul Holbrook
Big Reel, January 2004

Here's a fascinating excursion back to a special time and place in movie history. This is Thanhouser, its films and people.

If a more thorough study of a pre-1920 American film studio exists, I'm unaware of it. And I don't see how there could be one. Not in one source. Here we have everything we could possibly care to learn or need to know, all researched from primary sources (trade papers, newspapers, books, family histories, legal records, personal recollections, original Thanhouser company documents). The Thanhouser Company was a remarkable place that deserves close scrutiny by anyone interested in the early years of motion picture history.

Thanhouser existed from 1909 to 1917 (and released films a little beyond) in New Rochelle, N.Y. It was owned and operated by Edwin Thanhouser, described as "a theatrical businessman who concentrated on doing two things and doing them well – producing and selling films." Thanhouser was an independent company unassociated with Thomas Edison and the Motion Picture Patents group. It produced more than 1,000 films, including two 1914 serials. The stars it helped create include Marguerite Snow, Mignon Anderson, Muriel Ostriche, Florence LaBadie, William Russell, and James Cruze. Jeanne Eagels, the legendary stage actress, made films with Thanhouser in 1916 and 1917.

The CD-ROM is divided into three sections or "volumes" and an appendix. More than 420 photos and posters give us a look at Thanhouser productions, personnel and history.

The first volume has the 11-chapter, 500+-page narrative history, beginning with an overview of the early life of Edwin Thanhouser. Each chapter is divided into 20 to 30 subtopics. Original photographs from the Thanhouser estate and magazine advertisements from trade publications of the era illustrate the history of Thanhouser. Bowers explores not just Thanhouser's place in history, but in the community of New Rochelle as well.

The second volume is the massive filmography. Complete credits (including plot) and release details are provided for every one of the more than thousand films the studio made. Thirty-three have film clips of their key scenes. Contemporary reviews from trade papers and magazines add details and give a sense of the public's taste in entertainment. These include *Motion Picture World*, *The Nickelodeon*, *Billboard*, *Exhibitors Trade Review*, *Photoplay*, *Motion Picture Story Magazine*, *Moving Picture News*, *New York Dramatic Mirror*, *Exhibitors Herald*, *Film Index* and *Variety*.

The third volume has more than 1,000 biographies. Here you'll find information on everybody who worked at Thanhouser, even he extras! Entities include the person's filmography. In this volume and in the ones preceding it, the amount of information is often staggering. Bowers seems to have added every mention he ever found about the film or person, quoting vintage articles verbatim and at length.

Navigating through his volume is very fast. Icons for each volume are on the work area at all times. Just a click or tow and you've found what you are looking for. You can search by word or access the index at any time on the work area. A window opens with a search field and a scrollable index of topics.

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The appendix covers the bibliography, a list of surviving Thanhouser films, and foreign release titles.

Bowers, whose introduction to Thanhouser came about during the writing of his 1987 book *Muriel Ostriche: Princess of Silent Films* (Vestal Press), undertook this project at the urging of film historian Anthony Slide, who writes in the foreword, “Believe me, this book is definitive. You will not find one fact, one moment in Thanhouser’s life, which is not recorded here. The narrative text is as thoroughly researched as any academic tome in any sphere of study. Complete seems almost an understatement in describing the filmography and biographies.”

In the early days (pre-1920) of motion pictures, dozens of small studios came and went, often leaving little more than some documents that prove they once existed. In almost every case, the films from these studios have vanished, the victims of the highly perishable nitrate film stock. Occasionally enough documentation and prints survive to tell the remarkable era it was. This is an epic history that every film buff or scholar should experience. If only more early studios could get this degree of attention, we could fill in the gaps left by the disintegration of the era’s films.