

Ephemeral Films

By Paul Eisloeffel, Media Archivist, Lincoln, Nebraska

[Used with permission of the Midwest Archives Conference]

We may quite naturally consider studio-made fictional feature films as the principal result of American filmmaking. But in point of fact, ephemeral films were—and still are—created in vastly greater numbers than their theatrical cousins. Like the short-lived paper items that share the same designation, ephemeral films were made for specific or audiences with little or no expectation of survival beyond their immediate usefulness. Yet if the contents of archives and special collections may be used as a gauge, scores of ephemeral films have cheated time and still exist in great numbers.¹ Moreover, they are the focus of increasing scrutiny as important historical, social, and cultural documents.

Some of the earliest surviving moving images were ephemeral. Even before the turn of the twentieth century, fledgling motion picture companies in America like Biograph and the Edison Company produced short films of everyday life and events as they occurred. These so-called “actuality” films or “actualities”² reveal an unmistakable air of experimentation, testing the potential of the new motion picture technology. Another film genre born early in the twentieth century, the theatrical newsreel,³ took actuality footage a step closer to documentary filmmaking. Nevertheless, neither was meant as a document of enduring use or historical value.

In the late 1910s and throughout the 1920s, motion picture production and the infrastructure to exhibit them escalated dramatically. Entrepreneurs converted existing public houses (particularly opera houses) to accommodate film projection, and built new theaters solely for the exhibition of movies.⁴ These trends also encouraged local filmmaking. In larger cities, scores of photographers, film distributors, and investors set up or collaborated in independent businesses for the production of local motion picture projects. The phenomenon of home-grown cinematic activity resulted in films that ran the gamut of genres, from fictional features, travelogues, and historical reenactments to industrial training, educational, and promotional films.⁵ Some filmmakers hoped for widespread distribution of their creations; others were satisfied with the limited and local exhibition intended by their efforts.⁶

Local ephemeral filmmaking found perhaps its most unique expression in the independent itinerant producers who traveled throughout a region and filmed events or short fictional pieces for a fee. Fueled by the popular regard for motion pictures, along with a narcissistic thrill of seeing themselves on the Silver Screen, these projects were embraced by locals. In the Midwest, such films were made in countless venues. These projects most often resulted in footage of a county fair or other local celebration or pageant, but some, called “local talent” films, involved the residents themselves playing roles from a pre-packaged narrative script.⁷ In any case, all were shown to rapt local audiences within a few days of the completion of filming, and most probably rarely or never again. This barnstorming kind of filmmaking was prevalent throughout the first half of the twentieth century.

At the same time, a more structured branch of ephemeral filmmaking was also flourishing, born of the notion that the motion picture was not just for documentation or entertainment, but could also be used as a powerful tool for instruction, promotion, and persuasion.⁸ This gave rise to projects broadly categorized as “sponsored films”—films made or commissioned by businesses, charities, educational institutions, advocacy groups and the like.⁹ Some corporate bodies retained their own production units,¹⁰ while others hired independent filmmakers or filmmaking companies. It also accounted for the launch of a huge industry for educational film production, sparking the beginning of the use of multimedia in the classroom.¹¹ Sponsored and educational films account for the lion’s share of professionally produced films in the entire history of filmmaking, even to the present day.¹²

Virtually all genres of ephemeral film benefitted from World War II. The conflict produced a new generation of trained filmmakers, and even more importantly the 16 mm format (heretofore an amateur or distribution format) gained professional status.¹³ This led to a golden age of ephemeral filmmaking; production of promotional, public service, and educational films flourished.¹⁴ The advent of local television in the late 1940s, which used 16 mm film for field news gathering, solidified the small-gauge’s predominance in professional ephemeral filmmaking.

How can we account for the recent swell in interest in ephemeral films? There are several reasons, all pointing to these unique documents being in the right place at the right time. With the release of the brilliant documentary, *The Atomic Café* in 1982, made entirely of clips from commercial and government ephemeral films, baby boomers were reintroduced to many of the films that resonated with their collective memory. Later documentary filmmakers, responding to the promise of almost certain distribution on the new medium of cable television, used stock footage from ephemeral films as an effective and inexpensive way to produce their media. Colleges and universities began or augmented programs in material culture studies, using legacy media as a keystone. New-found attention in moving images in general by a specialized segment of the archival community propagated the notion that ephemeral films (and others, such as home movies and local television programming) are significant, incomparable, and at risk. And granting agencies began to including moving images in their funding criteria.

These and many other factors have helped focus a spotlight on ephemeral films. But whatever the reasons, the fact remains that countless thousands lie in the stacks of archives, museums, and libraries, collectively making up a singular passageway to America’s cultural past.

Notes

¹ According to *A Public Trust at Risk: The Heritage Health Index Report on the State of America's Collections* (Washington, DC: Heritage Preservation, 2005), a survey of over 30,000 collecting intuitions (including archives, libraries and museums) indicated that they collectively hold a total of 5.9 million motion pictures on film, 68 percent of which are of unknown or in at-risk condition.

² In 1903, the year in which this film genre reached its zenith, more than 350 actuality films were registered for copyright protection. The term technically applies to films made in the first decade of motion pictures, after which fiction films took over in popularity, yet the moniker lives on as a way to describe raw footage that captures scenes and events without editorial intent. For more on the survival of early actualities, see Kemp Niver and Bebe Bergsten, *Motion Pictures from the Library of Congress Paper Print Collection, 1894–1912* (Berkeley, CA: The University of California Press, 1967).

³ A good source on the history of the newsreel genre is Raymond Fielding, *The American Newsreel: A Complete History, 1911–1967* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2006).

⁴ For example, by 1917 there were nearly six hundred movie theaters throughout Nebraska, almost double the number of just a few years before, and roughly 9,200 throughout the 13 Midwest Archives Conference member states. (See “Amusement Statistics,” *Moving Picture World*, March 17, 1917, pp. 1776–1777).

⁵ Some of the best sources for finding detail about or the making of ephemeral films are: *Moving Picture World*, published by the Moving Picture Exhibitors' Association in New York from 1909 to 1927; *Business Screen Magazine*, 34 volumes (Wheaton, Illinois: Brookhill Division, Ojibway Press, 1938–1973), full on-line texts at www.archive.org; *Educational Film Guide. Annual Edition* (New York: H.W. Wilson Company, 1947), full on-line text at www.archive.org; *Motion Pictures*, Four volumes spanning 1912–1969 (Washington, DC: Library of Congress Copyright Office, 1951–1973), full on-line texts at www.archive.org; *The American Film Institute Catalog of Motion Pictures Produced in the United States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971–<c1999 >), searchable database at www.afi.com/members/catalog; and local newspapers.

⁶ One example from the Midwest Archives Conference member states is *In the Days of '75 and '76*, a Western-genre dramatic film written and acted by the townspeople of Chadron, Nebraska, in 1915. The ambitious movie play was five reels long, unheard of for a local production (D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*, which premiered the same year, was seven reels long). The film's producers, incorporated as the Black Hills Feature Film Company, hoped for wide distribution of this film and production of more, but neither came to pass. For the complete story of this film, see Andrea Paul and Paul Eisloeffel, “Hollywood on the Plains: Nebraska's Contribution to Early American Cinema,” *Journal of the West*, April 1994.

⁷ Perhaps the most prolific of these itinerant filmmakers was Melton Barker, a native of Texas who traveled literally from coast to coast to film local children in a short “Our Gang”-style film, *The Kidnappers Foil*. Collaborative archival research has confirmed more than 120 instances of this film, dating from the late 1930s to the early 1970s. In the Midwest Archives Conference region states, Barker produced at least 37 *Kidnappers Foil* films, from 1937 through 1972. For more information, see www.meltonbarker.com.

⁸ Beginning as early as the 19-teens, motion picture projectors became increasingly common fixtures in schools, churches, corporate offices, government agencies—even jails and medical facilities. In Nebraska, both the State Penitentiary and the State Hospital for the Insane had motion picture projectors (*Moving Picture World*, various issues, 1912–1919).

⁹ Rick Prelinger, *Field Guide to Sponsored Films* (San Francisco: National Film Preservation Foundation, 2006). The *Field Guide* is available in hard copy or as a downloadable PDF file on the Web site of the National Film Preservation Foundation (NFPS), www.filmpreservation.org. For a review, see *Archival Issues*, 30:1 (2006): 74–76.

¹⁰ The Union Pacific Railroad, headquartered in Omaha, Nebraska, made its own instructional films for employees. One, produced in 1914, was titled “Proper and Improper Methods of Firing a Locomotive.” A synopsis of the film in *Moving Picture World* (May 23, 1914) noted that “The pictures are full of thrills, involving the injury or crushing to death of several persons—cleverly impersonated by dummies.”

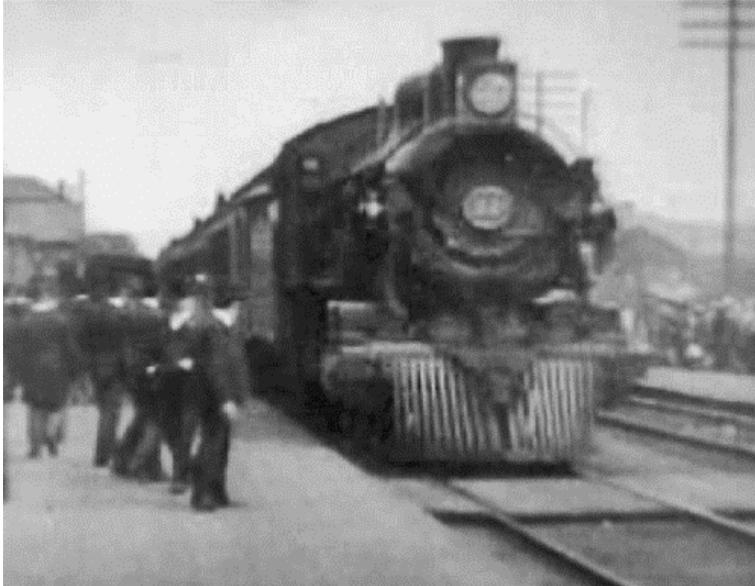
¹¹ Three familiar giants of this genre are McGraw Hill, Coronet, and Encyclopedia Britannica.

¹² Two companies that produced sponsored and educational films in the Midwest region were the Calvin Company in Kansas City, Missouri (ca. 1931–1978) and the Centron Corporation of Lawrence, Kansas (ca. 1948–1981). Particularly during the 1950s—the golden age of industrial, promotional and educational filmmaking—these companies consistently produced more films than did Hollywood studios. Many of the Calvin Company’s films reside at the Library of Congress, and the Centron Corporation’s in the Special Collections of the University of Kansas.

¹³ During World War II, the 16 mm film gauge won favor over the long-established professional format, 35 mm, particularly due to the relative ease of using the smaller, lighter equipment in the field.

¹⁴ Itinerant filmmakers also benefitted from this, and increased ease in travel broadened their potential clientele considerably. One example is Robert Carson, a Minnesota-based filmmaker, who in the 1950s made commissioned promotional films of towns and cities, each title starting with the words “this is our town.”

Illustrations



This frame is from actuality footage of President William McKinley's funeral train arriving at the Canton (Ohio) station, photographed by the Edison Company on September 18, 1901. To view the entire surviving film, go to memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/D?papr:1:./temp/~ammem_u4Kh:. (LC 983: Paper Print Collection, Library of Congress.)



Filmmaker Robert Carson produced several films promoting Midwestern towns during the post–World War II years. This frame is from a scene in *This is Our Town: Syracuse* [Nebraska], which shows employees of the Syracuse Sausage Company “twisting wieners,” a part of the sausage-making process. (RG4917.MI: Robert M. Carson Productions, Nebraska State Historical Society Moving Image Collections.)

WHO WILL BE RUTH?

THE MAJESTIC THEATER—
I herewith cast ONE vote for

M.....
(Contestant's Name.)

Address

For leading woman in the motion picture film to be produced in Muncie by The Majestic.
Other young ladies in the cast will be those receiving the next highest number of votes, in their order.

This coupon must be mailed to The Majestic Theater, care Contest Editor or cast in the ballot box at the Majestic before 10 p. m. on the night of Tuesday, November 2, 1915.

The making of “local talent” films was generally accompanied by copious publicity to increase residents’ interest in the project. Sometimes it even involved locals in key production decisions. This ballot appeared in the *Muncie (Indiana) Evening Press* of November 2, 1915, in conjunction with the local talent film project *The Man Haters*, produced by itinerant filmmaker Basil McHenry in 1915. In this case, votes cast chose the player of the leading female roll. For more information on this local talent film, see libx.bsu.edu/collection.php?CISOROOT=/mnhts. (MSS 177 / V 177 / PSC 159: “The Man Haters” Research Collection, Digital Media Repository, Ball State University Libraries.)