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Interview with Thomas G. Smith, Educational Filmmaker

Amanda R. Keeler

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I interviewed Thomas G. Smith in Los Angeles, California, on March 19, 2010, during the Society for Cinema and Media Studies (SCMS) annual conference. Smith was invited to speak at two panels at the conference about his prolific career in educational filmmaking and, later, visual effects over the last forty-five years. He also screened his film *The Solar System*, which he directed and produced for Encyclopaedia Britannica Educational Corporation (EB) in 1977.

Smith was born in Canton, Illinois, in 1938. He attended Northwestern University, where he met his wife, Elaine Cosley. Smith began working as a writer and, later, a producer-director at EB. The first film he directed at EB was *Food from the Sun* (1965), a film that teaches how life on earth absorbs energy from the sun. Over the next twelve years, he directed more than fifty educational films for EB, including *Discovering the Forest* (1966), *Midwest: Heartland of a Nation* (1968), *Introduction to Holography* (1971), *Venereal Disease: The Hidden Epidemic* (1973), and *The Solar System*.

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Thomas Smith operates a camera while attending the French film school IDHEC in 1960-61. At his side is instructor Joseph-Louis Mundwiller, principal cinematographer on Abel Gance's *Napoleon* (1927). Thomas Smith, private collection.

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After EB closed its Wilmette, Illinois, office, Smith and his wife moved to Los Angeles. In 1980, he began working for George Lucas's Industrial Light and Magic (ILM). There he managed more than ten features, including *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), *E.T.* (1982), and *Star Trek: The Search for Spock* (1984). Smith also published a book on visual effects, *Industrial Light and Magic: The Art of Special Effects* (1986). After ILM, he continued to work freelance visual effects and was a producer on a number of films for Lucasfilm, Disney, Henson, and Turner. As executive producer of the 1989 film *Honey, I Shrunk the Kids*, he won a BAFTA (British Academy Award) for outstanding visual effects. More recently, Smith completed a new edit of his 1976 film *Spoon River Anthology*, based on works by the poet Edgar Lee Masters. Originally twenty-three minutes, the new film, titled *Spoon River Anthology: Heartland Poetry for a New Age* (2008), now runs fifty minutes. Smith restored the original film elements and added an interview with Masters's son Hilary Masters. The new edit is available through the Phoenix Learning Group, an academic film distributor.¹

Smith's panels at SCMS were sponsored by the Nontheatrical Film Scholarly Interest Group, which was created in 2008 because of the growing interest in films that were produced since the earliest days of moving pictures that did not always play on the theatrical circuit. Recently, scholars have begun to revisit these forgotten films, including educational films, science films, industrials, and training films. The growth in their popularity as objects of study has brought attention to filmmakers like Thomas Smith.

Smith began making educational films in 1965, but the history of nontheatrical educational films in the United States dates back to the first decade of the twentieth century, when such films were championed by people like Charles Urban and George Kleine. Urban produced a pamphlet in 1907 titled "The Cinematograph in Science, Education, and Matters of State." Kleine followed with his 1910 *Catalogue of Educational Motion Pictures*. By the early 1910s, reformers such as John Collier and Jane Addams, popular magazines, and motion picture trade journals all avidly promoted films for use in venues such as churches and schools as an alternative to theatrical moving pictures. By the 1920s, the discussion was taken up in a

number of publications such as *Reel and Slide*, *The Screen*, and *Visual Education*, which were devoted to educational films.

Educational journals, such as *School and Society*, *Industrial Education Magazine*, and *School Review*, featured articles touting the educational potential of moving pictures.

With the advent of safety film in the 1910s, and Eastman Kodak's smaller-gauge 16mm stock in 1923, it was safer and cheaper for amateurs to shoot moving pictures, which opened up new arenas of film production for people wanting to make home movies and allowed more companies to go into the business of making classroom films.

With the 16mm gauge, companies like Bell and Howell, ERPI [1], and Victor Animatograph developed portable and inexpensive 16mm cameras and projectors, which further helped with the ease and implementation of visual education in the classroom. With these improved technologies came an explosion of companies producing educational films such as EB, Coronet, McGraw-Hill, and many others. The companies produced educational, industrial, and training films from the 1920s through the 1980s. The production of these films peaked in the 1950s–1970s, during which time, thousands of films were produced for all manner of educational purposes, ranging from science, music and art appreciation, driver's education, and health and well-being to sexual education. Despite the long history of nontheatrical film production and exhibition, these films have typically been relegated to the margins by academics and archival institutions.

Most of these films were shot on 16mm, and school districts and university libraries owned collections of 16mm film prints that they loaned out to other institutions. As the prints aged, they were often thrown away. As video technologies became increasingly inexpensive and viable, many discarded their 16mm prints.

Thankfully, not all schools purged their holdings. At present, many educational films, like the ones that Thomas Smith directed, remain in collections in university libraries or have been taken up by personal collectors and archivists with an interest in preserving this history. But the state of these prints is not always ideal. Because they were rented out and sent around the country, sometimes projected by

student assistants with minimal training, many are in poor condition, often too fragile to be threaded through a projector for viewing, let alone digitization or copying. Because many of these works lack the visibility and canonical status of theatrical feature films, copies of many of these films have fallen into disrepair, many of them being orphaned by their producers and distributors.

The aim of this interview² with Thomas Smith is to recapture and share some of his personal experiences working for EB, Churchill Films, Bailey Film Associates (BFA), and Public Broadcasting Service (PBS). There is an urgent need for the academic and archival community to document the careers and histories of neglected nontheatrical filmmakers like Smith. Equally critical, the films they produced must also be preserved for posterity. We are at risk of losing our best chance of documenting this history as these films and their makers are forgotten, lost, and abandoned. Unless funds can be allocated for the preservation of these important films, the vast history of nontheatrical film production and exhibition in the United States is at risk. There are also issues of priority. There is an institutional hierarchy in which theatrical films sit on top; nontheatrical films like Smith's do not have as many advocates pleading for their preservation or restoration.

As Smith discusses in the following interview, there are serious issues regarding the archiving of educational films, including concerns over their availability for people who want to study them, their preservation, and the fidelity of the formats in which they were originally produced. Despite his keen awareness of these issues, Smith is not in possession of all the films he produced and directed during his career. Many are difficult to locate, and some may be lost. Perhaps this interview will act as a call for action, for archivists and scholars to continue to build a common knowledge base that can help locate these missing films and facilitate their dissemination to people interested in watching, studying, and writing about them. As well, I hope that this interview reminds other scholars and archivists of the utility of oral histories in the preservation and re-creation of an important film production industry in the United States.³

<BEGIN INTERVIEW HERE>

AMANDA KEELER (AK): How did you get started in filmmaking?

THOMAS SMITH (TS): When I was a freshman at Northwestern University in 1956, I took a film course with Jack Ellis [Professor of film at Northwestern University, 1956– 91], and I got very interested in film. While still in college, I was hired by a Chicago film studio and started as a runner [a low-level film set gopher job]. When I was about to graduate, Dr. Ellis said, "Why don't you apply for a Fulbright?" My grades weren't that great, but he said, "Go ahead, do it." And so I applied for a Fulbright to study film at IDHEC [2] in Paris. I spoke French because as a child I spent five years in France and Belgium, so I had that advantage. Surprisingly, I won the Fulbright, so after I graduated, my new wife, Elaine, and I shipped off for France. We spent nine months in Paris while I studied film at IDHEC. I would have stayed the second year, because they offered a two-year course, but I got drafted. In 1961, all young men were subject to the draft. So I came back to America and went into the air force's Officer's Training Program. I served three and a half years and, in 1965, joined EB. They hired me as a writer. So I started writing my first assignment, an elementary-level script about photosynthesis and the sun's energy. When I finished the script, they didn't have anyone to make the film. So I volunteered to make it. It was a low-budget production, so they said I could do it.

AK: What film was this?

TS: This was *Food from the Sun*, an elementary-grade film making a point that the sun is the source of all our energy and our food. It went over well, so I was assigned more films. I was no longer just a writer, I was a writer-director, producing films. I was working on a small budget, and I shot a lot of them myself.

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Chicago editing room for Encyclopaedia Britannica. Dave Harvey (editor), Dave Diederich (researcher), and Tom Smith (producer-director). Circa 1968. Thomas Smith, private collection.

AK: Did you shoot on 16mm film?

TS: Everything was 16mm.

AK: Black and white? Color?

TS: Color film.

AK: What kind of cameras were you using?

TS: Well, that was a problem when I started, some of the other producers didn't like a twenty-eight-year-old kid producing and directing films. They monopolized the Arriflex cameras and wouldn't let me use one. So Elaine and I dipped into our savings, and I bought my own used Bolex 16mm camera for \$350 and I started shooting.

AK: Was it sync sound?

TS: No, *Food from the Sun* was a simple film—narration, sound effects, and music. The films got more complicated later. Eventually I was shooting not only sync sound but using actors; some were period films with sets, props, and costumes. Then, in 1969, my wife and I moved from Chicago to the Hollywood unit in Los Angeles. I felt the West Coast EB unit was better than the Chicago one, and I was getting tired of the Midwest winters. I continued making educational films, and in 1975, EB announced that they were going to close down their Hollywood unit.

AK: Were they downsizing?

TS: They wanted to save money, I guess. The federal government, who had been subsidizing educational films since 1965, was beginning to scale back. EB had to reduce their costs. So I

became a contractor, and I made a few films for them on contract, including *The Solar System*. I also made films for the Public Broadcasting Service, Churchill Films, and Bailey Film Associates. I'd work for anyone who would pay me. *The Solar System* changed my career. Its cinematographer, Jim Veilleux, went on to work for George Lucas. He used *The Solar System* to get a job as a cameraman on the visual effects for *The Empire Strikes Back* [1980]. Lucas was looking for somebody to come in who could oversee his visual effects operation, Industrial Light and Magic, and prepare it to become a service for other film producers like Steven Spielberg.

AK: So you were hired to oversee ILM?

TS: Yes. First to finish *The Empire Strikes Back*, and when that was done, to go into business as an effects house, servicing other films. This was early December of 1979.

AK: What was your title at ILM?

TS: General Manager of ILM. Later it was Vice President of Lucasfilm, Ltd. The great benefit of that job, during the first year, was that I got to see George Lucas almost every day. He would come into my office, and we would talk about things, anything, the company operation, filmmaking in general, or how bad Hollywood was. I had also made 16mm films, and he respected 16mm filmmaking. I was doing visual effects, but I never really cared for the process of visual effects, really. Even when I did *The Solar System*, I found it maddeningly tedious.

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Thomas Smith shoots a scene for *American Indian Speaks* (1974). Photographer Katie Maloney. Thomas Smith, private collection.

AK: I was going to ask you about Jack Ellis again. I know you studied with him at Northwestern University, and he really was an advocate of educational film, and I wondered if, when you studied with him, he pushed you into thinking about educational film? Did you ever talk about it? After you became a filmmaker, did you discuss it with him?

TS: I came back to see him at Northwestern a few times, and we corresponded from time to time. If it hadn't been for Jack Ellis, there wouldn't have been a film department at Northwestern University, and I wouldn't be working in film.

AK: And you took film classes with him?

TS: Yes. He was the head of a small department, the only one with a PhD. I took film production and film history. But as far as educational films are concerned, I always thought that was a fallback position. If I couldn't do feature films, I'd do those. We students were very naive thinking we could make feature films. I have since found that my years in the academic film field provide just as many good memories as the time I worked in features. Some of those short films were far more fun to make. The attitude of students about film in the late 1950s at Northwestern fell into two different categories. Most theater students thought that film was a form of prostitution. They thought that film acting was a canned performance. They believed it wasn't real acting like stage acting. They had their eyes on Broadway. On the other side, the television students told me, "Why are you doing film? Television is growing by leaps and bounds. Film will be gone in a few years. Get into television."

AK: Getting back to your film production, did you make most of your educational films through Britannica?

TS: I would say, 75 percent at EB.

AK: The other films, how did you get those jobs? Was it through your reputation? Through EB?

TS: Yes, I knew a lot of people who worked in the educational film community.

AK: We talked over e-mail about your surprise over the resurgence in interest over educational films. Are you excited that people are talking about these films, watching these films again?

TS: Yes, it's nice to see the interest. I think it has come up partly because of streaming film technology over the Internet. This finally makes 16mm films more accessible to millions.

AK: Do people contact you about your films?

TS: Last year, when Peter Jones was making a two-hour documentary for PBS about the famous Chandler family of Los Angeles, who owned the *Los Angeles Times*, he couldn't find good footage of the newspaper operation the way it looked prior to the computer. I had shot the newspaper film *The Newspaper Story* in 1972, just a few years before the computer revolution.

The Chandlers essentially developed the San Fernando Valley, which is a big area north of central Los Angeles. The Chandler story is a complicated and interesting one. In the 1980s, computers came into use at newspapers. Right off the bat, typewriters were out. Photography became digital. Now, lead type is hardly used. The film needed shots of the newspaper operation as it looked thirty years ago. So they went looking for footage showing the traditional process. They heard about my film and went to EB asking to see it. EB showed them a poor-quality VHS tape. The image was terrible. They couldn't possibly use it.

AK: And you had shot *The Newspaper Story* on 16mm?

TS: Yes. But in the 1980s, EB decided film was out and tape was in. So they took the 16mm internegatives of their films and transferred them to tape. I think they chose U-matic as a master stock, a Sony three-quarter-inch analogue magnetic tape medium. The resolution was worse than Hi-8 video. So, after they made these horrible transfers, they saw no reason to keep the 16mm internegatives and tossed them out. The documentary group learned that I had a 16mm print of the film. They paid EB for the intellectual rights, and I provided the 16mm film for them to transfer to digital. It is expensive to digitize a 16mm film, to do

it properly. You can't just put it on a machine and walk away. Getting a good DVD of my film was all I wanted.

AK: Did they clean up the images?

TS: They corrected for color and density changes from shot to shot and watched carefully, to take the dirt and maybe scratches out. I was very disappointed to learn that EB's library of over thirty-five hundred 16mm titles is now no longer available on film. The transfers they made to tape are not nearly as good. They were done on analogue, a lower-than-optimal-resolution tape format. This means titles cannot now be properly digitized and put on DVD. It also means that the best examples of the work can only be found on old 16mm release prints in private hands. I understand EBEC [3] is now offering newer titles made with video in the 1980s and beyond. They may be of better quality, but I don't know. I haven't seen their most recent productions.

Here at the 2010 Society for Cinema and Media Studies conference, we hear a lot of talk about found films, but I always want to know, what's the medium? How close was it to the original film? There is a big difference. The next question is, is the film accessible? Videotape has been subject to many formats. It is nearly impossible to find machines to run some of the older, wide-gauge tape formats. And if you do find them, they have to be adjusted to be compatible with the tape you have. Archivists face difficult technical issues.

AK: Can you say some more about the issue of film as a material in relation to educational film?

TS: Let me talk about 16mm film for a moment and review the way we printed our films. All release prints were made from an internegative of the original film. We shot in 16mm positive stock called Ektachrome Commercial. It was a low-contrast film so the prints would look good. After the internegative was made, the original 16mm positive film was shipped to an underground archive in Hutchinson, Kansas, a salt mine, deep in the ground. They were afraid these valuable elements might get burned in a fire or destroyed in a nuclear attack. They didn't realize that they would ultimately be lost by executive error.

Maybe the originals are still down there. But EB won't tell me, nor can the former owner, Charles Benton, find out what they still have in storage. But if they do find these elements, there is another hurdle that archivists should know about.

In the process of making a 16mm film, you shoot it, you edit a work print, then you conform the work print to the original. This is the same as 35mm features. But in 16mm, you go another step not used in 35mm. It has to do with the nature of the smaller-gauge film. The frame line is only hair thick. So when you make a splice in 16mm, each splice leaves a telltale horizontal line near the bottom of the frame. There is a way to eliminate that. We did what was called "checker-boarding." We created an A roll and a B roll. When the film was printed, the splice was on black film that alternated with the scene desired. There could also be a C roll for overprinted titles. When the archivist opens the box containing the original elements for one 16mm film, they may find three or four equal-size 16mm rolls, no one of which is the whole film. The scenes alternate from A roll to B roll, and when there is a dissolve effect in the film, the images between the two rolls overlap.

Two years ago, I decided to restore a 16mm film I made for BFA, *Spoon River Anthology*. I got the original film elements from BFA. But in order to make a copy of the film, I transferred all the rolls to digital and then recut them using Final Cut Pro. The sound track was recorded on 16mm magnetic film. I called all over Los Angeles explaining I had a 16mm magnetic sound track that I wanted to transfer to digital. Most of the people answering the phone had no idea what I was talking about. I felt like Rip Van Winkle returning to finish a film. These are the kinds of problems an archivist faces when dealing with 16mm original film or any of the older mediums. Of course, it is far simpler if you have a release print, but release prints are third generation, and over the years, color has been lost, and many have been scratched up in projectors.

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Thomas Smith, today, with his Arriflex camera. Photographer Elaine Cosley Smith. Thomas Smith, private collection.

AK: This is a technology that is just twenty years old. It is not that long ago.

TS: Well, thirty years ago you could find racks of these 16mm sound machines in the backroom of sound-mixing facilities. Now they're gone. I finally found a little place in Hollywood, a little studio in a converted house that still had a 16mm Magnasync machine. The guy who ran the place loved the old technology, and he maintained the machine and kept it covered with a cloth. So simply finding the original 16mm film in storage isn't enough. The archivist has a big job to make a watchable movie out of it. Because this is so rarely done from the original film, people get the idea that the 16mm films must have looked poor, like the faded release prints they see transferred to DVD or digitized for screening. But I'm here to tell you they didn't look that poor; we're only seeing copies of copies.

AK: Yes, some people see these bad copies and assume that all educational films were amateurish, that they looked sloppy.

TS: The color was great, in most cases, the image sharp, but these later generations are only a shadow of what they were originally. So I hope to encourage archivists to try to get as close to the original as they can. Some restoration programs have the money to make optical prints, using an optical printer just as we did thirty years ago. This is a long and expensive process but one way to overcome the problem of multiple elements. It would be great if it could be done that way more often. We have to worry, then, that the old splices don't break in the film's printing machine.

AK: I think a lot of archivists want to restore all the films in their collections, but there is just not as much money. It takes an

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enormous amount of time and energy to apply for grant money to preserve these films.

TS: It comes down to money. No entrepreneur is going to take even a good EB film from thirty years ago and pay to restore and make a proper digital copy of it. It's not going to pay off. I spent about ten to fifteen thousand dollars of my own money to restore *Spoon River Anthology*, and there is not the slightest chance I can recoup this in DVD sales. This is the problem with film. If you put a book on the shelf, people can read it a hundred years later, just as they did after it was first printed. But if you can't find a good film print, you don't know what it was like for the original audience. Imagine if you had a Renoir painting that was all dirty and covered with scum. How could you judge it? You'd have to restore it. Given the limits in money, we have to choose our films carefully—ones with historical or artistic value.

AK: Did you archive your own films? Do you have 16mm copies of them, work prints? TS: I have prints, some are the best prints that exist and they are Kodachromes [Kodak 16mm film stock]. Before we made mass printings of a film, we made one Kodachrome print from the original 16mm film. The release prints were another generation away from the original, and they were printed on a film stock whose color was not stable. Most release prints turned magenta after a few decades. If you pull a 16mm film off the shelf, and it is thirty years old, the color is likely gone. However, with Kodachrome, an older format, the color dye is added in processing and is very stable. Unless you have a Kodachrome print, you are not going to see color the way it was. But these prints are very rare. After 1960, EB only made one Kodachrome print, then they would go into mass production. Oddly, they didn't regard the Kodachrome as worth anything, so they would give it to the producer or discard it. No one was aware in 1970 that the color of our release prints might be gone in a decade or two.

AK: So you have Kodachrome prints of your films?

TS: I have Kodachrome prints for perhaps 25 percent of my EB Films.

AK: Do you have copies of all of your films? Are there some you do not have?

TS: There are some that I don't have.

AK: Which ones don't you have?

TS: I don't know; I'd have to do an audit. As far as I know, I have prints of the best work I've done. Some films I made are no longer important to me. I made my share of turkeys.

I think the ones that I like most, I have. The problem for me now is to convert them to digital so they'll be viewable and safe for the future. I'd also like to get EB's permission to stream them online.

AK: Which one of your films is your favorite?

TS: That's like asking which one of my children is my favorite. I could pick ten favorites. Probably *The Solar System* would be one, *Spoon River Anthology* would be another. *The Newspaper Story* would be another, several of the physics films I made with Dr. Albert Baez I feel are worth seeing. I like a film I made on the Midwest—*The Midwest, Heartland of the Nation* [1967]. Also my film on venereal disease, *Venereal Disease: The Hidden Epidemic* [1973], was very good. I know I've left a lot out, but I can't think of them just now.

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Director Tom Smith lines up a shot of a flatboat with cinematographer Arthur (Buddy) Bothham for the film *Kentucky Pioneers* (1967). Thomas Smith, private collection.

AK: When you were making educational films, how well were you paid for them? Did you make a living off it?

TS: I was paid far less than people working in commercial television or feature films. As an EB staff producer-writer-director, in 1970, I was earning around fifteen thousand dollars a year. This was

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enough to own a three-bedroom home in Santa Monica, California, two cars (one used), and feed a family of five. We bought our house for forty thousand dollars in 1969. We were hardly rich but lived well enough.

AK: When you were making these educational films, did you really believe in the idea of them? Did you believe they could educate?

TS: I enjoyed being a filmmaker, but I also believed that film could inspire. A student seeing *The Solar System* might not remember the details but might come away feeling that astronomy is an interesting subject and want to learn more about it. That was my goal. Some of my fellow filmmakers believed they could change opinions, impart lists of facts, but I doubt this. It is very difficult with film. You can nudge people. But if a person has a certain opinion or attitude, one film is not going to change it. It isn't a good medium to learn lists of information like the technical definition of the parts of a frog.

AK: Who were some of your peers?

TS: EB and other educational film companies didn't particularly want the names known. We didn't have the star system Hollywood thrives on. The company was afraid these people would want more money or be stolen by some competing company. They didn't want the word getting out. But now, to understand the period, scholars and archivists should start learning the names. In that way, they can be on the watch for films made by the more talented of the group.

AK: Who were some of the more talented filmmakers?

TS: During my tenure in Chicago, I saw new producers come and go, but there was a core of solid producers [4] who remained, and I will mention some here; these are the ones who, like me, lasted more than ten years. At EB the title Producer usually included director, often cinematographer, and writer as well. Here are a few names important in those days.

John Walker began working at EB shortly after World War II. He was a writer-director-cameraman and producer of his own films. He did not edit his own films. His films were

academically solid and simple. He never recorded lip sync, never used music, there were few sound effects, and the narrator clarified every shot, sometimes redundantly and didactically. He made about five films a year, specializing in animal and plant life.

Bert Van Bork was a postwar immigrant from Germany. He was probably born in the early 1930s and as a child witnessed the horrors of Hitler's war. He married an American opera singer and migrated to the United States. In 1957, he made his own film about the Midwest's locust infestation and sold his insect film to EB. They then hired him as a cameraman, and within about five years, he had moved up to producing and directing his own films. Bert had a great eye for image composition. He was also very bold. His volcano films took real physical bravery to shoot. He had a thirty-one-year career with EB that ran until 1988.

Milan Herzog began as a producer around 1946. He was head of EB's production when he hired me in 1965. He was a gregarious personality, born in Yugoslavia in 1908. He'd escaped Europe prior to World War II and joined the company shortly after the war. He was very cosmopolitan and spoke more than five languages. He made two series of foreign language instruction films— French and Spanish. Herzog was a writer-director and producer. He never operated his own camera. He is now 102 years old and lives in the Hollywood hills with his much younger wife.

William Deneen had his own film production company and began making films on contract for EB in the 1950s. He was a writer, director, producer, and often the cameraman. He was also a private pilot, which gave him the mobility to fly to remote locations to film. Around 1967, EB hired him to succeed Herzog in running the production department while Herzog moved over to the international sales department. After a couple years as head of production, Deneen left to form his own educational film company called "Learning Corporation of America," which lasted into the mid-1980s.

EB had a New York unit, but its staff served one producer, John Barnes. Barnes often filmed in London and on the European continent. His films dealt with cultural subjects such as the Roman Empire, cathedrals in France, and classic plays. One of his early masterpieces was *People along the Mississippi* [1952].

The Hollywood unit had two distinguished stars: Stan Croner and Larry Yust. Nearly any film made by one of these two is worth seeing. Croner was perhaps the best writer in the company and Yust the most outstanding director– producer. These were the most prolific and important producers working in Chicago, Hollywood, and New York during my time with EB. Few young people were given a chance to produce for EB. Most who got this opportunity had already proven themselves somewhere else prior to joining the company.

One woman worked for a couple years as a producer in Chicago, Maclovia Rodriguez. One of her best films was *The City in Winter* [1968]. She left shortly after that for a better job at PBS. My favorite film editor, Nina Kleinberg, cut more than six films for me in Hollywood, and camera technician Jeannie Rosenberg was one of the two who shot *The Solar System* models. Joan Churchill, a superb cinema verité cinematographer, worked for me on *The Newspaper Story*. She has become a renowned documentary filmmaker on her own. Her *Tattooed Tears* [1979] was a PBS masterpiece. As for producer–directors moving on to feature films or television, an astounding few made the move.

Two-time Oscar winner and cameraman Haskell Wexler got his start at EB in the early 1950s as an assistant cameraman. He learned from then cameraman John Walker. Wexler went on to film TV commercials in Chicago, and then moved to Hollywood, where he has had a stellar career beginning with Mike Nichols's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolfe?* [1966]. He also directed several of his own features, including *Medium Cool* [1968]. I had lunch with Wexler a few years ago, and we shared stories about making educational films at EB. He told me he loved it, learned a lot, and now at times wonders if it

was real or only an old man's dream. Other than Wexler and me, I know of no Chicago-based EB producer who managed to have a feature film career.

Hollywood-based Larry Yust went on from EB's Hollywood unit to direct two features. Yust's first feature, *Trick Baby* [1972], was a modest success. It was one of the first films featuring an African American as a tough ghetto detective. His second feature, *Home Bodies* [1974], was not a success and had a limited release. Yust has had success in recent years as a fine art still photographer. His prints sell for thousands of dollars. Though in his late seventies, his work is being widely exhibited, and two large-format books of his photos are now in print. He is better known as a still photographer than he was when producing for EB. So EB was neither easy to join as a producer-director, nor did it lead to feature films for 99 percent of those working there. Yet nearly everyone still had the dream of one day breaking into feature films. Sadly, it rarely happened.

AK: Who decided what topics these films would cover? Did the director decide, or did the companies approach you and say, we need a film about such and such topic?

TS: Both ways. Sometimes a producer would say, "I would like to do a film about such and such" and write a proposal. *Spoon River Anthology* was like that. I wanted to do that film. I sent a proposal to EB; they said no. I went to BFA, and they said yes. Then there were films that came in to EB from the outside. They bought finished films from the Canadian Film Board and from people who were independent producers. One of the first films I wrote and produced at EB was built around a Japanese film of the life cycle of a ladybug; it had beautiful microphotography. I recut it and wrote a new narration for it. This became *The Life Story of the Ladybird Beetle* [1965]. It's a nice little film, with stunning close-up photography. Children are still fascinated by it.

AK: At the screening of your film *The Solar System* at the Society for Cinema and Media Studies [March 21, 2010], you mentioned

that the filmmakers you knew and worked with, your colleagues, had mental lists of the best films, best filmmakers. Do you remember which films were on these lists?

TS: We used to see everything that came out. I remember Stan Croner was one of the names I mentioned earlier. He made a lot of great films. One was about poet and author James Dickey, *Lord Let Me Die but Not Die Out* [1970]. That was an outstanding film, and historically important, as it gave us a good look at a great American poet and author of the 1970s. Dickey wrote and even appeared in the film *Deliverance* [1972]. Croner also made a fine film for EB called *The South: Roots of Urban Crisis* [1968]. Larry Yust made a lot of fine short story films. I particularly liked *The Lady, or the Tiger* [1969] and *The Lottery* [1969].

AK: By Shirley Jackson?

TS: Yes.

AK: I've seen that one. I remember watching it in English class in high school.

TS: That film was one of the big sellers. He did another one called *Bartelby* [5] [1969], which was terrific, and *The New Tenant* [1975]. Thirteen years before I arrived, there was a film called *People along the Mississippi*. For its time, it was a good film. *People along the Mississippi* is the story of a boy in Minnesota who puts a toy boat in the source waters of the Mississippi River. We follow its progress as it floats down the Mississippi River, learning both American geography and social studies about the cultures found along the great river. People who find this little boat send the Minnesota boy postcards telling of its progress. The toy manages to go all the way down to New Orleans and into the Gulf of Mexico. In the middle of the story, when it gets to Missouri, we meet a black boy and white boy who are friends. They find the boat stuck in the weeds and relaunch it. This part of the film was controversial in 1952 in southern states. Many refused to buy the movie because of it. You have to understand the state of race relations back then.

AK: Because there was an African American child in it?

TS: Because there was an African American and a white child together in it, and they were shown as buddies. There also was a little white girl, sister of the white boy. Barnes and Weisenborn fought for it and said they wouldn't change it. Management asked them to just shoot something different for that part of the film. They would not. When I started with EB in 1965, some of the older producers said, "It used to be a few years ago, that when you shot in the classroom, up north, you would line up the black and white kids together, and if the black kids were taller, you'd say we only want the short kids." You didn't show them together in class. If you did, it wouldn't sell in the South. This was before *Brown v. The Topeka Board of Education* [1954].

AK: So there were very different markets in the United States?

TS: This was the case in the 1950s. But when I started in the mid-1960s, it switched around because the federal government said, "You've got to integrate your films or we won't subsidize them." Now we went out of our way to integrate the cast of the film. Companies like EB were followers and very concerned about the values of school boards, who might be scandalized by something. This was a big problem with my venereal disease film. Attitudes are not the same all over the country, and we were making film for every state.

AK: Yes, sex education is still very contentious today. But when people think about educational films, people of my generation immediately think of our health classes, where we watched a lot of these sex education films.

TS: That's true, but a venereal disease film isn't a sex film, it's a health film. You may call it a sex film because sex is involved, but it is a community health issue.

AK: So what was your film *Venereal Disease: The Hidden Epidemic* about?

TS: Of the fifty-plus films I made during my fifteen years at EB, I consider this to be one of my best, equally as good as *The Solar System*. The venereal disease film was compelling and

informative. When we showed it to high school test audiences in Santa Monica, California, it held their interest and raised spirited discussions. The last hurdle was to show it to EB's management in Chicago. After seeing it, they roundly praised it. In 1972, it became EB catalogue number 3156, and prints were made for sale. Prints sold well, it was well reviewed, and it even won some awards in educational film contests.

Then we suddenly ran into a backlash, mainly from southeastern school boards. They were shocked by it. They found the film too frank and particularly didn't like the suggestion that youths should wear condoms for protection. The doctor in our film mentioned condoms, opened a packet, and rolled it over two of his fingers. EB's management buckled to the pressure, and a representative from Chicago flew to Los Angeles and gave me a list of scenes that had to be excised from the film. In another place in the film, I showed a chancre on a penis. It was anything but erotic. The revised film, with four minutes cut from it, was rereleased in 1973 as EB catalogue number 3197, and number 3156 was dropped once they sold the prints they had in stock. So archivists might look for the rare number 3156 film, the one censored by the company and withdrawn from circulation. Those who preached abstinence only used the dangers of disease as a barrier to teenage sex: "Have sex and you could get pregnant or worse—a deadly disease." The original film suggested another way of protecting against disease. And so the values of one region forced all who bought the revised film to be subject to censorship that pleased one region of the country. I would estimate that EB sold over a hundred prints of the original [uncensored version]. I have no idea how well the censored version sold. Once the shelves were cleared of number 3156, the buyer had no choice and got number 3197.

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Thomas Smith editing one of his 16mm films for Encyclopaedia Britannica in 1969.
Thomas Smith, private collection.

AK: And what year was this?

TS: The original was produced in 1972, and the censored version in 1973 with four minutes taken out.

AK: So this film, did people end up buying it and using it?

TS: Yes, there were two versions. Santa Monica School District [in California] bought the early version of the film. I know because I lived in that community. But because of complaints from some districts around the nation, we had to redo it and sent them the second version.

AK: Missing the idea of preventative care?

TS: Not missing it but casting doubt on it. After instructing what to do, the narrator adds that even that might not work—that nothing is certain, nothing is safe.

AK: Do you have any closing thoughts?

TS: There are probably more than ten thousand 16mm educational films that were produced for classrooms. Some of them are not worth spending money on. I've made a few of those myself. But there are some treasures out there that archivists and scholars should keep a watch for. As for the physical condition of the prints, most have lost their color. Keep an eye out for those rare ones that actually have some color left. Finding a Kodachrome made from the original will be a rare find, but there are many lost, and some may still be out there.

AK: I know that archivists do apply for grants and they are awarded grant money, and they are able to restore one or two films. But this isn't about one or two films, this is about thousands of films that we need restored, archived, cataloged, and available. Well, thank you very much for talking with me today.

<END INTERVIEW>

<NH>NOTES

1. Edgar Lee Masters's son is Hilary Masters, an author and now a teacher at Carnegie Mellon University. Smith shot additional material in Petersburg, Illinois, at the Edgar Lee Masters home and library, where Masters lived as a child in the late nineteenth century. The new hourlong cut is designed to be interactive: the viewer can select specific poems or interviews to personalize the experience. The distribution company, Phoenix Learning Group, has a large library of educational films and videos. They acquire films, but they do not produce them.
2. This interview has been edited for clarity and length.
3. Thankfully, there are numerous online resources about these films and filmmakers, and many of these films have been digitized and are available for use and study. For more online information about instructional and educational films, and for online access to many of them, please visit Geoff Alexander's Academic Film Archive Web site (<http://www.afana.org/>); Skip Elsheimer's Web site (<http://www.avgeeks.com/>); and Rick Prelinger's Internet archive site (<http://www.archive.org/details/prelinger>).