

## THE HISTORY OF CINEMATOGRAPHY

### PART TWO - CINEMATIC STORYTELLING

The Lumière brothers, Louis and Auguste, in France, saw a demonstration of the Kinetoscope in Paris in 1894. It sparked their imaginations and inspired them to invent a combination motion picture projector and camera called the Cinématographe. The name is a Greek word that means writing with light and motion.

The Lumière brothers produced a series of short films, including one documenting workers leaving a factory at the end of the day, and another one showing a train approaching a station. They presented eight of their short films at the Grande Café in Paris on December 28, 1895. It was the first time an audience paid to see movies projected on a screen.

Thomas Armat and C. Francis Jenkins patented the Vitascope motion picture projector they invented and built in February 1896. Armat contacted Edison's agents to arrange for a supply of films. Edison asked to see a demonstration of the projector. Afterwards, an agreement was reached to sell the Vitascope projector under Edison's name.

The first public screening was on April 23, 1896, at Koster & Bial's Music Hall at 34th Street and Broadway in Manhattan. There were 12 short films augmenting vaudeville acts. The projector was installed by an ex-sailor named Edwin Porter. The films included a boxing match, a serpentine dance, the German emperor reviewing his troops and one called *Rough Sea at Dover*. A reporter for a local newspaper wrote enthusiastically about the experiences shared by the audience of strangers, sitting in a dark theater, watching moving images projected on a screen.

He wrote, "The second film represented the breaking of waves on the seashore. Wave after wave came tumbling on the sand, and as they

struck, broke into tiny floods just like the real thing. Some people in the front row seemed to be afraid they were going to get wet, and looked to see where they could run, in case the waves came too close."

Edison gave the (Andrew and George) Holland brothers sole rights to market the Vitascope projector in Canada. The first screening there was staged in West End Park in Ottawa on July 21, 1896. Some 1,200 spectators saw a magic show, following by a series of short films. The hit of the evening was *The Kiss*, a brief film featuring Canadian actress May Irwin and actor John Rice, co-stars of a popular Broadway play, *The Widow Jones*. It was just a quick kiss on the cheek, but "the kiss" had been scandalizing Broadway audiences, and with the magic of film, people everywhere could now share in that titillating experience.

Porter spent the next three years on a barnstorming tour showing short films in Canada, Central and South America. Edison hired him to direct and shoot short films at the company's new glass-enclosed studio in Manhattan in 1900. By then, Edison alone owned copyrights on some 500 short films, including many shot by roving freelance cinematographers. One film was a boxing match staged for the camera. Another one showed William McKinley campaigning for president by greeting visitors on the porch of his home in Ohio.

Porter experimented with creating a grammar for visual storytelling by moving the camera to alter the audience's point of view, intercutting parallel scenes, creating double-exposures and combining live-action in the foreground with painted and projected backgrounds.

His 12-minute 1903 drama, *The Great Train Robbery*, was one of the most successful narrative films made during that period. In 1907, Porter hired a stage actor named D.W. Griffith to appear in a film called *Rescued*

*from an Eagle's Nest*. Griffith directed his first film the following year, and began a 16-year collaboration with "Billy" Bitzer.

Bitzer was an electrician who began his career shooting scenic footage of the Canadian outback during the late 1890s. His films were sponsored by the Canadian national railroad. They arranged to show the films in England to attract settlers to travel by train to the outback.

Bitzer's co-ventures with Griffith included such landmark dramas as *The Birth of a Nation*, *Intolerance* and *Broken Blossoms*. He pioneered the use of cinematic storytelling techniques in those and other films, including close-ups, soft focus, fade-outs and backlighting.

In 1913, Bitzer installed an iris diaphragm in his personal camera, which enabled him to go to black between scenes. He and Griffith first used that technique while they were filming *The Battle at Elderbush Gulch*. Bitzer also used the iris diaphragm to subtly sharpen the focus on characters and actions in the background. Bitzer and others in the first generation of cinematographers were inventing a new language.

Arthur C. Miller, ASC took his first pictures with a Brownie camera when he was a teenager in 1906. Two years later, he was hired by Crescent Film Company in New York, where he became a full-fledged cinematographer. Miller owned a Pathé Professional camera, which he later replaced with a Bell & Howell Camera that was easier to crank.

Miller eventually earned Oscars® for *Anna and the King of Siam*, *Song of Bernadette* and *How Green Was My Valley*.

George Folsey, ASC once recalled what it was like starting out at the Famous Player Studios in 1914 when he was only 13 years old. Cinematographers didn't have crews. They loaded their own cameras, took still pictures and many of them also processed their own film. A

cinematographer named H. Lyman Broening hired Folsey to keep track of fades and dissolves made in the camera, so they could be intercut later on.

Karl Brown's parents were performers in the light opera in New York who went to work as actors for Kinemacolor, a British film production company, which moved to Long Island in 1912. Kinemacolor used a special camera and projector to produce, create and display short films in two primary colors. The cinematographers were from England.

When he was eight years old, Brown hung around behind the scenes, watching his parents perform, and took still pictures with a pinhole camera. He was put to work in the film lab at the studio at the age of 12, initially mopping floors and then processing the negative.

Brown described vivid memories of watching a cinematographer use candlelight to visually augment a dramatic scene and then seeing and feeling the emotions it evoked on film. He moved to Hollywood with the Kinemacolor Company in 1914, when he was 16 years old. The company went out of business within a few months, and Brown was hired by Griffith to assist Bitzer by carrying his camera.

In 1916, Griffith put Brown in charge of shooting visual effects, using such in-camera techniques as stop-motion and double exposures, and also filming miniature models. Brown served in the U.S. Army during World War I. After the war, he was hired as a contract cinematographer by Lasky Studios, which became Paramount Pictures. Brown's cinematography credits included *The Covered Wagon* in 1923.