



# ANNALS OF IOWA

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## EDITORIAL DEPARTMENT

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### MOTION PICTURE FILMS AS HISTORICAL MATERIAL.

In the collecting of historical materials one finds himself too often inclined to lean upon proof rather than to rely upon prophesy. The historical value of an ancient object or of a manuscript is easy to judge with the light of years upon it but by the same light one observes the absence of other equally important things. Our best museums overlook matters of present moment which will be indispensable in future, yet in future impossible to procure. All materials wisely collected establish or illustrate historical matters. It takes little imagination or courage to select for such purpose materials to illustrate principles or processes now obsolete but known to have been important. But to attempt to select such literature or object material of today as will suitably and sufficiently reveal in the remote future all the probable wants for understanding our own time is much more difficult but none the less the collector's obligation. To choose well, to acquire no waste material and ignore no essential, calls for a species of talent akin to that which in writing guides the author to the selection and treatment of themes at once vital and popular.

When Lew Wallace wrote of Ben Hur's life at the oar as a galley slave, he is said to have reluctantly omitted a description of the mechanical device we now call an oarlock for he could neither imagine nor ascertain how the sea was kept from the hold when the waves lashed the gunwales. As important mechanical devices in our own day are to be examined in the patent office, but what is not shown there and is to be found nowhere else unless in collections of objects and associated materials, is the effect produced by a given device upon the evolution of life. Though the model of the

electric lamp and each of its improvements may there be seen, one is driven to the remotest places for the full demonstration of its effect upon mankind.

The motion picture is one of the more recent revolutionary mechanical improvements. From popular and technical press one finds adequate information upon all its phases. But the collector is obliged now to anticipate its effect, and preserve in the present, for the use of the future. It will not be enough that from the current of press evidence it shall be seen that a single decade of the motion picture has stripped from legitimate theatricals the whole of that patronage which in Shakespeare's time was known as the pit; nor may the average intellect of our day be fairly compared with that of the Elizabethan age by such circumstances as that the stage then produced much sound, less action and little scenery and now no sound, much scenery, and more action. It is incumbent upon us to select such exact original mechanical parts and such typical programs and such pictured personages and events as will fairly reveal in future both the mechanics and the influence of this present day phenomenon.

We have begun for Iowa by acquiring some fifty thousand feet of negative film made of Iowa scenes and persons during the years 1913 and 1914 by the Superior Film Company of Des Moines. Since such scenes are intended to be selected by the company as are of interest in a popular sense, negatives are made and preserved by them, to be multiplied into service films, in such numbers as is required by popular demand. Gauging the value of a film by its "run" precisely as a play is tested on the stage, the company considers its negatives of more or less value, and as is true of the vaudeville stage, such parts of the series of scenes or acts on a reel as prove of mere momentary interest are cut from the film and new parts are substituted. Thus the commercial value soon vanishes as to some parts, persists as to others, but disappears as to the whole very shortly. Whether, after some years it will have a new and different value, such as the writer would characterize as a reminiscent popularity, is unknown. But whatever value it may possess, the company does not wish to part with nor the Historical Department need to acquire.

The junk value of old films constantly tempts it away from the company, so the best service is where the Historical Department acquires title and possession, and reserves exclusive commercial use to the company for a reasonable future period. The Department, however, by taking and keeping possession, is depriving the company of only the money value in the film roughly fixed by the silver content.

We handle the negatives in our collections by the routine administrative processes usually given a manuscript, except that the tin, airtight shipping container, sealed with adhesive tape, is regarded as the cover or binding, and carries such library marks as would be found upon or within the binding of an ordinary book. As the negative and its container remain separable, the designation on the container is also placed on the film itself, the injury being negligible, while the chance of lost identity is eliminated. In subsequent treatment we may find it of advantage to cut a film into as many parts as there are distinct subjects photographed, or we may make a calendar of the contents of each reel, depending upon whether the company in future demands it for its own use. The physical care-taking is simple and without risk. The inflammability of the negative which is composed principally of celluloid is completely neutralized by its insulation in the airtight, sealed container. In our steel, locked cases in fireproof quarters, maintained at a temperature and humidity suitable for books and papers the negatives are removed from the realm of danger.

The field of serious and important possibilities to the scenario producer broadly overlaps that of the collector of historical or other important information. Hints to him are as practical as to the photographer, so that co-operation between the producer of commercial film and collector of historical materials may be no less in its creation than its preservation.

An Iowa sculptress asserts that after full preparation and some years in her actual career, she needs most to see the almost superhuman dexterity of Rodin; to see his very hands and fingers manipulating plastic material into harmony with his thought. In resemblance is the manual marvel of an Iowa

surgeon in one of his most difficult and successful operations with hands, instruments and affected tissues photographed in motion.

We have a daguerreotype portrait of the first short horn bull brought upon Iowa soil. He was imported by Timothy Day from the herd of Brutus J. Clay, of Lexington, Kentucky, in 1852, and was the object of enormous interest at the earliest Iowa agricultural fairs. And we have a negative picturing in motion, Gov. George W. Clarke conferring in 1913 the first medals upon the successful competitors among Iowa prize babies.

These instances suggest the precedents and the probability of historical value peculiar to present day motion picture negatives.

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#### CO-OPERATION IN ACQUIRING HISTORIC GROUNDS AND MARKING HISTORIC SITES.

The State of Iowa has certain assets not of pecuniary nature that have remained undeveloped or are going to waste. Some of these seem fairly within the scope of the responsibility of the Historical Department of Iowa yet not under the special attention of any other person or public interest. Under the heading of "Notes" in this issue are two such groups of assets respectively entitled "Acquiring Titles to Historic Areas" and "Marking Historic Sites".

While there is something of a feeling that a state should bear all the responsibility for preserving and utilizing these opportunities, such feeling is not universal nor sound. For these are not solely and often not mainly assets of the state, but are or should be part of the natural interest of the people of the localities, or of individuals attached by kinship or associated by other interest. There is a distinct disadvantage to the present and to posterity in this mutuality of interest. "What is everybody's business is nobody's business."

Nearly every one wishes these assets recognized, retrieved and realized upon. The Historical Department was allowed by the Thirty-sixth General Assembly certain sums and by implication certain authority to participate with others in

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