

From Stage to Screen: Edwin Thanhouser's Rise to Fame and Fortune in Early Cinema

by Ned Thanhouser

I saw its possibilities. I became filled with the idea that I could produce better pictures than a majority of those I had seen.

-Edwin Thanhouser, *The Moving Picture World* (March 10, 1910)

In October 1909, the motion picture industry was dominated by Thomas Edison's Motion Picture Patent Corporation licensees and DW Griffith had been directing films for over a year at the Biograph studio in New York. A growing community of independent producers was emerging, all vying to reap the financial rewards by supplying movies to a rapidly expanding market for mass entertainment. Edwin Thanhouser's decision to enter the industry was predicated by twenty-two years of experience as an actor touring the United States combined with his skills managing popular mid-west theaters. With a \$10,000 investment, he became the first to head an American motion picture studio with a background in the theatrical arts. His vision, energy, and hard work earned the Thanhouser Company the loyalty of film going audiences, praise from reviewers as a producer of the highest quality independently produced films in America, and a bank balance worthy of a highly successful businessman.



Edwin Thanhouser (ca 1920)

I am the grandson of Edwin Thanhouser, and I grew up with the story handed down to me by my father that after closing the studio in 1918, Edwin felt the cost to store the studio's volatile nitrate negatives exceeded the value of saving them as historical artifacts. As a result, the contributions of the Thanhouser studio has been largely overlooked by scholars as the surviving cinematic record was relatively inaccessible residing archives and private collections scattered around the globe. But, thanks to the

encyclopedic research effort by Q. David Bowers¹ and my 25 year journey to seek out and make accessible surviving distribution prints, the studio's legacy has been largely reconstructed. The complete history of the Thanhouser film enterprise, posters, images, ephemera, and 58 complete films are now available for immediate online access at no charge at www.thanhouser.org.

The Early Years²

Edwin's formative years and his maturation as actor and theater manager prior to his entry into the motion picture industry provide valuable insight into his motivation and agency as a studio executive. Born in Baltimore, Maryland 1865 at the conclusion of the Civil War, he learned as a young man the value of money by working at his father's bank. By the time he was 18, he was handling loans of up to \$20,000, a substantial fortune in those days. Roving troupes of actors played at the local theater, and Edwin regularly attended their performances. In his mid-20's, he became stage struck and yearned to be an actor. In 1893, when his father was appointed the U.S. Consul to Mexico at Matamoros, Edwin declined to accompany his parents and instead joined the traveling theatrical company of Alessandro Salvini, then one of the idols of the American stage.³

Edwin's stage career lasted about four years. He journeyed across the country with the Salvini troupe, playing mostly "one night stands" in numerous' cities, towns and hamlets from coast to coast. Edwin never starred, but earned favorable press notices for the minor roles he played, such as Captain Larolle in *Under the Red Robe*.⁴ Salvini died suddenly in 1896 at the age of 35, leaving the members of his

company stranded and "at liberty." Edwin made his way to New York hoping to land a theatrical role in a Broadway production. While he failed to land an acting job, he did manage to impress the Shubert



Edwin Thanhouser as Capt. Larolle in *Under the Red Robe* (1897-98)

brothers with his financial acumen and executive ability, and was hired to manage their theater, The Academy of Music, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.⁵

In the days before motion pictures, live theater constituted the chief form of popular entertainment in America. Each large city had its own resident stock company consisting of a leading man, a leading lady, a “juvenile,” an “ingénue” and a variety of other types such as “heavies” (villains), comedians and “character” actors. Edwin’s management of the Academy Theater followed this tradition and he assembled a robust and lively stock company that put on plays weekly much to the delight of the local community.⁶



Academy of Music Theater
Milwaukee, Wisconsin (ca 1909)

In the spring of 1909 flush with financial success as a theater manager, Edwin was acutely aware that the entertainment business was undergoing rapid, radical change. Motion pictures were capturing the box office receipts of theatrical enterprises, and attendance dwindling at his newly leased Chicago theater. Edwin Thanhouser believed he could stage and produce films with serious dramatic content that would profit from on his years in the theater.⁷

Into The Motion Picture Business

Edwin moved his family to New Rochelle, New York, and with a \$10,000 capital investment incorporated the Thanhouser Company on October 28, 1909 with his wife, Gertrude, and brother-in-law Lloyd Lonergan. The stated purpose of the company was, “To take, make and exhibit, moving, animated, and stationary pictures and photographs, and to lease



Thanhouser Company Studio (ca 1910)

rights to exhibit the same..."⁸ In a February 1910 interview, Edwin articulated why he would be successful in the motion picture business:

The Thanhouser Stock Company for years was recognized as one of the foremost in the country. I produced many hundreds of plays, [and] the experience gathered in this way is very helpful, for it has given me...one of the most vital necessities for producing good motion pictures, the knowledge and the value of a dramatic situation and its proper staging.⁹

Later in the same interview, he targeted his audience and the type of films he would produce:

We do not care to do any pictures that the masses cannot grasp, but that does not mean that our pictures cannot be of a high order. They must appeal to the best instincts of all audiences, and must always tell a moral and logical story.

We hope to turn out artistic productions, particularly in the field of legitimate drama and comedy. And when I say comedy, I mean comedy, not slap sticks.

From my standpoint, a good moving picture must possess these qualifications: first, it must tell a good, wholesome, logical story without being involved; second, it must be well cast, well acted, and artistically produced...and, third, it must be as near photographically perfect as possible. These are the kind of pictures we want the Thanhouser films to be - and we will not be satisfied with anything less.¹⁰

Building the Thanhouser Team

Edwin Thanhouser knew he would need a team of creative scenarists, directors, technicians, and actors to make the venture a success.

Foremost among these was his wife, Gertrude Thanhouser, who was not only a talented actress, but from her years on the stage and helping to manage the Academy Theater, she applied her knowledge of stagecraft to the fledgling company. My father, Lloyd, recalled Gertrude's responsibilities in a 1980 interview, "...all the editorial work, the writing of the manuscripts, was handled by the team of my

mother and Lloyd Lonergan. She also became a very skillful editor of these films. I remember being in the...cutting room. She'd count, 'one, two, three, four...cut!' And she became extremely adept at



Gertrude Homan Thanhouser
(ca 1920)

matching action when one piece stopped and another started. She was known throughout the industry as one of the most competent technicians in the cutting and editing of motion pictures.”¹¹

The duty of script writing for Thanhouser Company fell squarely upon the shoulders of Lloyd F. Lonergan, a co-founder of the company. The husband of one of Gertrude Thanhouser's sisters, Molly Homan, Lonergan was educated at the United States Naval Academy and eventually became a well paid journalist at the New York Evening World.



Lloyd F. Lonergan (ca 1920)

Edwin revealed in a March 1910 interview the challenges surrounding his entry into the motion picture business:

I applied [to the MPPC¹²] for a license as a manufacturer, but was, of course, refused, as I then had no plant and may be said to have known nothing of the business. I have great respect for the Motion Picture Patents Company and appreciate what their protection means to the Licensed manufacturer and to the moving picture business, but this was not helping me to realize my ambitions. So I set about seeing how I could make pictures without infringing upon patent rights...¹³

Barry O'Neil and George O. Nichols were among the first directors to join the studio. O'Neil directed many of Thanhouser's early releases, including its first release, *The Actor's Children*, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Dickens' *The Old Curiosity Shop*, and Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Nichols directed some of Thanhouser's most important and critically acclaimed releases, including a three-reel version of *David Copperfield*, the child labor expose *The Cry of the Children*, the fairy tale story of *Cinderella*, and Rider Haggard's *She*.

Edwin hired Carl Louis Gregory, one of the best known early cinematographers, who worked at the Thanhouser studio through



Carl Lewis Gregory (ca 1913-1914)

1915. A man of many talents, he also directed and wrote scenarios.

Among Independent producers, the Thanhouser studio was a year or two ahead of his time in the dramatic content of films and the care with which they were prepared. Edwin, who had appeared in or directed hundreds of plays, knew that preparation of a detailed script in a film, as in a stage production, would result in a better product. In the motion picture industry at the time, scripts, usually referred to as scenarios or continuities, were casually prepared and consisted of simple notes outlining the intended action. Lonergan wrote of his craft in an article titled "How I Came to Write Continuity" where he told of Thanhouser's originality, "Everybody knows what 'continuity' is nowadays, but Edwin Thanhouser is the man who invented it. There wasn't such an animal in 1909 when he started his studio in New Rochelle."¹⁴

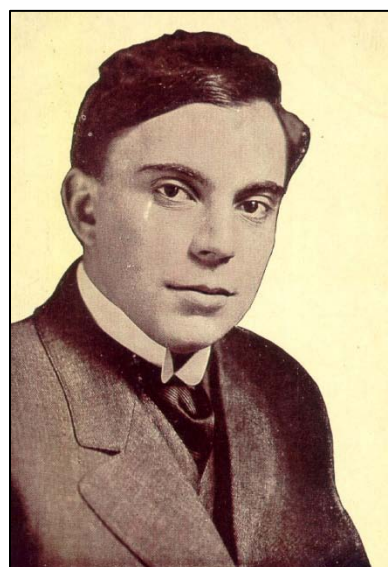
Establishing a Reputation for Quality

By the summer of 1910, the quality of Thanhouser Company films as an independent producer were praised by reviewers. "The Spectator," an unidentified editor of the motion picture section of *The New York Dramatic Mirror*, wrote, "On the other side of the Independent fence, the Thanhouser pictures, of course, rank highest. Indeed, the manner in which this new company without previous experience in picture making has developed in quality shows what may be done in film manufacture when intelligence and energy are employed."

Edwin hired acting talent that appealed to the interests of his middle-class audience. Florence LaBadie became the best known of all Thanhouser players with the longest tenure with the company. She was a frequent subject for articles and letters in fan and trade magazines, and over a period of years she was the most publicized of



Florence LaBadie



James Cruze

all Thanhouser players.¹⁵ James Cruze, an enigmatic and controversial man, became one of his most successful leading male actors who would go on to become the highest paid director in Hollywood and direct the first full scale Western themed feature film, *The Covered Wagon*.¹⁶

Building the Business

By the end of 1911, both the MPPC and Independent producers had expanded output by 50%. By this time, the Thanhouser Company had released 191 films establishing it as one if the leading independent producers. Edwin, familiar with the dramas and comedies of the stage, knew which ones were popular, and how to produce them. Numerous fairy tales, poems, legends, and mysteries which he had acted in or directed were eventually adapted for use in Thanhouser Company films, including *Jane Eyre*, *Rip Van Winkle*, *The Vicar of Wakefield*, *Silas Marner*, *Sherlock Holmes Solves the Sign of the Four*, and *The Last of the Mohicans*. Lloyd



Advertisement in the Moving Picture World for *The Cry of the Children* (April 1912)

Lonergan's creative and restless mind invented dozens of dramas and comedies that were invented or lifted from headlines of the day, including such titles as *Daddy's Double*, a comedy about a foiled elopement and assumed identity, *Young Lord Stanley*, dealing with the repeating theme of indomitable young romance, inheritance, classism, and wealth, *The Pasha's Daughter*, an exotic tale of a young American man who escapes in woman's clothes from Turkey, and *Get Rich Quick*, a moral tale about an elaborate swindle that challenges the quest for material wealth. Entering 1912, Edwin expanded output by dispatching a film crew to Jacksonville, Florida to take advantage of the warmer climate. Eighteen films were produced during the first half of 1912 that took full advantage of location settings, including *The Arab's Bride*, *Into the Desert*, and *The Ring of a Spanish Grandee*. Meanwhile back in New Rochelle, classics were produced, including *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, *Under Two Flags*, and *The Merchant of Venice*. On April 30, 1912 Thanhouser released its most acclaimed drama, *The Cry of the Children*, a critical pre-World War I film that

contributed to the child labor reform movement in America and advanced the political power of the cinema.

Under the Mutual Banner

Just two years after opening his studio, he had released 228 films to wide industry praise, many of which went into worldwide distribution. The business of movie making had grown from a novelty shown between acts at a vaudeville show to a full-fledged industry in its own right. In April, 1912, a group of well-heeled investors led by Charles J. Hite approached Edwin, and he sold his stake to the Mutual Film Corp., for \$250,000 – 25 times his original investment, about \$6.5 million in today's dollars – and the enterprise was renamed the Thanhouser Film Corporation.

The Rest of the Story

Edwin remained as general manager and showed Hite the ropes at the studio. Hite, 36, was knowledgeable about the business, having formed his own film exchange in Chicago six years earlier. Satisfied the studio was in capable hands, Hite took over day-to-day control as the organization's new president, Edwin retired at year's end and took his family for a grand tour of Europe. But, after a two year hiatus, and due to unforeseen tragic circumstances that included the death of Charles Hite and the outbreak of World War I, Edwin Thanhouser was lured by Mutual in February 1915 to resume leadership of the Thanhouser studio. Struggling to keep pace with a rapidly changing market, three years later, Edwin Thanhouser would shutter the enterprise, and permanently retire from the industry.

But, that is another story.

¹ Bowers, Q. David, CD-ROM: *Thanhouser Films: An Encyclopedia and History*, Portland, Oregon: Thanhouser Company Film Preservation, Inc. (1997), and online: www.thanhouser.org/tcood.

² Summarized from *The Thanhouser Family*, a monograph by Lloyd F. Thanhouser, son of Edwin and Gertrude Thanhouser (January 1970), in the author's personal collection.

³ Alesandro Salvini was the son of Italian actor Tommaso Salvini, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tommaso_Salvini, accessed 9/10/12.

⁴ From Edwin Thanhouser's scrap book (1896 to 1898), in the author's personal collection.

⁵ The Shubert family of New York City, NY was responsible for the establishment of the Broadway district, in New York City, as the hub of the theatre industry in the United States. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shubert_family, accessed 9/10/12.

⁶ Bowers, Q. David, *Thanhouser Films: An Encyclopedia and History*, Chapter 1: The Early Life – Success Continues at the Academy (1997).

⁷ Ibid, Chapter 2: Into the Film Industry – Investigating the Field (1997).

⁸ Certificate of Incorporation, Thanhouser Company, October 28, 1909.

⁹ The Motion Picture News, February 26, 1910.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Thanhouser, Lloyd F, audio recording in the author's private collection (1980).

¹² The Motion Picture Patents Company (MPPC, also known as the Edison Trust) was founded in December 1908 with the goal to exclude others from entering what was becoming a growing and profitable business arena. Its members included established major American film companies (Edison, Biograph, Vitagraph, Essanay, Selig, Lubin, Kalem, American Star, and American Pathé), the leading film distributor (George Kleine) and the biggest supplier of raw film stock (Eastman Kodak); in 1909 the Gaumont Company and Gaston Méliès were admitted to the group. Previously competitors, and often litigants against each other, the firms comprising the MPPC were strange bedfellows, and the alliance was strictly one of greed, not one of camaraderie or mutual support. Production companies that were excluded from the cartel became known as "independents."

¹³ *The Moving Picture World*, March 12, 1910.

¹⁴ Lonergan, Lloyd F., *The Moving Picture World*, July 21, 1917, page 403.

¹⁵ Bowers, Q. David, *Thanhouser Films: An Encyclopedia and History*, Biographies: Florence LaBadie (1997).

¹⁶ Ibid, Chapter 4: 1911 – Enter James Cruze (1997).