

Thanhouser: A Microcosm of the Transitional Era in Silent Films
Why the Studio Never Made it to Hollywood

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. The idea became a determination. I studied the situation on the market. To be frank with you, I applied 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...

EDWIN THANHOUSER, *The Moving Picture World*, MARCH 12, 1910

During its brief but prolific existence, Thanhouser Company, and its successor, Mutual's Thanhouser Film Corporation, was a pioneering independent studio of the silent movie industry. The Thanhouser film enterprise produced and released 1,086 titles during its nine year existence from 1909 thru 1918. The first release was March 15, 1910, a 1,000 foot "one-reeler" titled *The Actor's Children*, and its last release, a five reel feature *The Heart of Ezra Greer*, was produced by Thanhouser and released by Pathé as a "Gold Rooster Play" on October 7, 1917.¹ These dates position the company directly in the heart of what is generally referred to by today's film scholars as the "transitional era" – the period between the end of "primitive" era in 1908 and the beginning of the "classical" Hollywood period in 1917. As Keil and Stamp note in the preface to their anthology, "...the years between 1908 and 1917 arguably witness the most profound transformation in American film history to date."² A detailed analysis of Thanhouser film releases reveals it reflected industry trends for the "transitional era" by length and frequency of its early releases, and also in the marketing of its product to distributors and the public at large, resulting in financial results much to the delight of its investors. But, the untimely death of Thanhouser Film Corporation's president Charles J. Hite in the summer of 1914 resulted in a lack of visionary leadership and a critical loss of talent combined with the failure of the company to embrace the "feature" film format contributed to the company's eventual downfall.

THANHOUSER AND THE INDUSTRY

Ben Singer’s research and analysis provides a comprehensive review of American film production during the 1908 thru 1920 period with year-by-year statistics on films of every length, from half-reel shorts to thirteen-reel superfeatures.³ Thanks to the work by Q. David Bowers, statistics are also available detailing the number of reels of film per release for the Thanhouser film enterprise from 1910 thru 1917.⁴ Following Singer’s methodology, Thanhouser releases were classified into two categories: “short films” (those with less than four reels,) and “feature films” (those four or more reels).⁵ Comparing “Thanhouser” vs. the “American Film Industry” from 1910 thru 1917 yields the following chart:

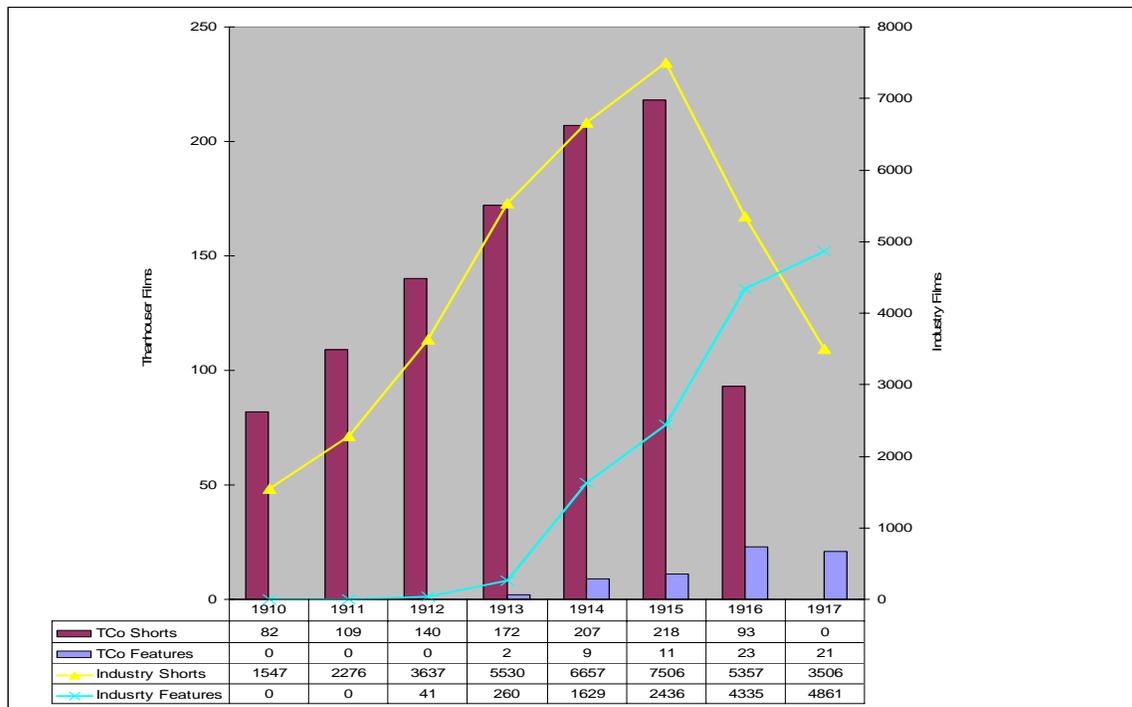


Chart 1. Thanhouser vs. Industry – Shorts vs. Features – 1910 to 1917

Assessment of this data suggests two premises: 1) Upon entering the market in 1910, Thanhouser mirrored the industry production rates through 1915 for “short,” films, and 2) Thanhouser lagged the industry transitioning to the production of “feature” films from 1913 thru 1917. What made Thanhouser a leading producer in the early years with “short” subject films? What forces were at play resulting in Thanhouser’s delay embracing the production of “feature” films? Was Thanhouser unique or representative of the industry? A close examination of production practices, marketing activities and

unpredictable management transitions at the company reveals the cautious response by company leaders to embrace “feature” films was responsible for the company’s demise in 1917.

THE THANHOUSER BACK-STORY

Edwin and Gertrude Thanhouser were uniquely qualified to enter the motion picture business in 1909 – they were the first to head an American studio with a background in legitimate theater. They both had extensive experience on the stage as actors and as theatrical management. Edwin had spent five years as an actor starting in Garden City,



Figure 1. Academy Program, January 7, 1900

Kansas in 1893. In 1894 he traveled with Alessandro Salvini, a well known orator and actor, and then with one of Charles Frohman's companies. In 1898 he settled down in Milwaukee, Wisconsin to establish a theatrical presence where he managed the 1,800 seat Academy of Music Theater. His stock company turned out a regular schedule of performances all year around. Among those employed by the Milwaukee company in the autumn of 1898 was a 16 year old actress, Gertrude F. Homan, who had appeared on the stage since age six in New York City. Edwin courted her for two years and they were married in 1900. The repertoire of the Academy consisted of dozens of

plays during a season. A typical program was that of January 7, 1900 (Figure 1) featuring a production of Shakespeare’s *Othello*. Subsequent programs included Dickens’ *Oliver Twist* and the melodrama *The Great Diamond Robbery*. Other leading houses in the city included the Alhambra Theater, Bijou Opera House, Pabst Theater and Star Theater. In addition, there were numerous side-street entertainment houses in the city. It was a competitive environment and Edwin and Gertrude knew from experience how to put on a good show with lavish sets and effective marketing. In May 1908 after a successful career in Milwaukee, and seeking a bigger challenge, the Thanhouser’s moved to Chicago where Edwin arranged to manage the larger Bush Temple Theater. But, less than a year later, it was clear that the success that he had enjoyed at the Academy Theater was not to be in Chicago. The new phenomenon of moving pictures was gradually winning nickels from the pockets of his traditional audience. As attendance dwindled at the Bush

Thanhouser: A Microcosm of the Transitional Era in Silent Films

Temple performances, Edwin Thanhouser read the writing on the wall – or, to be more accurate, on the silver screen. He terminated his lease on the Bush Temple Theater (Figure 2) in the spring of 1909, made arrangements to enter the motion picture business and moved his family to New Rochelle, New York to be near the center of the budding industry.

Thanhouser Company was incorporated in October 1909 by Edwin, Gertrude, and her brother-in-law newspaper writer turned scenarist, Lloyd Lonergan. It was established to “...take, make and exhibit, moving, animated and statutory pictures and photographs, and to lease rights to exhibit the same, and to deal in and sell same.” The amount of capital stock of the

Thanhouser Company was fixed at \$10,000, divided into 100 shares each having a par value of \$100, of which \$1,000 was to be paid in before the commencement of business.⁶

In early March 1910, when Edwin Thanhouser was preparing to release his first film, the most influential of the trade publications was *The Moving Picture World*. The weekly magazine dispatched a reporter to New Rochelle to see what was going on. Excerpts from this March 12th 1910 article included a first hand interview with Edwin Thanhouser and his aspirations on being an independent producer:

We will produce comedy, not the slapstick kind, comedy-drama, and (pulling down several bound volumes of plays) you see all these dramas produced by the Thanhouser Stock Company. We have plenty of good material to select from and in due time I will produce some of the classics that I have staged. But we will keep away from the wild, wooly, Western, over-acted, overdone cowboy style of melodrama.

I do not want producers or actors from any other manufacturer. I will train my own stock company. That is not new to me. Of course, I had to get experienced men for the mechanical departments, but I do not believe in trying to draw men from any other manufacturer, either Licensed or Independent, and I would want to be treated in the same way. If an experienced man comes to me, who is out of employment, that is another matter. All men must live.

THANHOUSER AND THE SINGLE REEL ERA (1910 to 1912)

Gunning refers to the period from 1908 thru 1913 as “the single-reel era” as it exemplifies the adaptation of production companies to fit their production and



Figure 2. Bush Temple Theater, Chicago

Thanhouser: A Microcosm of the Transitional Era in Silent Films

distribution practices within the constraints imposed upon them by Edison's Motion Picture Patent Corporation (MPPC, or simply "the Trust").⁷ In 1910 when Thanhouser released its first production, *The Actor's Children*, the length of films was standardized as one reel consisting of 1,000 feet of 35mm film. The 1,000 foot length was one of convenience as it was the amount of film on one reel mounted in a projector.⁸ This standard was promoted by the MPPC soon after its formation in 1908 "to gain oligopolistic control of the industry...and to wrest power away from exchange operators."⁹ When projected it ran about 13 to 15 minutes compelling studio directors to quickly develop characters and simplify the narrative trajectory due to this temporal limitation. Trust-aligned members like Biograph and Vitagraph helped establish this standard by producing and releasing one-reel films to distribution. New entrants not aligned with the MPPC, referred to as "independents" like Thanhouser, had to follow the "one-reel" standard in order for their product to be accepted by distributors. Thanhouser diligently adhered to this standard releasing 176 "one-reelers" thru December 1911. When a Thanhouser subject was less than 1,000 feet, for example in *The Convict* (Sept. 23, 1910), another short title was added to make a "split reel" consisting of two titles. In the case of *The Convict*, the short comedy *A Husband's Jealous Wife* was added to make the release 1,000 feet. Thanhouser promoted this split reel as benefit for distributors with advertizing copy in *The Moving Picture World*, September 24, 1910, claiming that it, "...is so screamingly funny that some of your afternoon patrons will come back for the night show just to see it repeated. In fact, it'll 'take' so big that you will vote the whole reel the sublimist [sic] double-subject all-comedy release that ever blessed your screen." A total of 10 "split reel" productions were released by Thanhouser in the 1910 to 1911 period.

The one-reel standard, however, was not to Edwin Thanhouser's taste; he advocated what he termed "natural length films." In an October 5, 1912 *Moving Picture World* interview he stated, "It seems too bad that a producer must sell his story in a given length. It means too short films or too long films; it means the padding evil. It would be splendid if the manufacturers would make up their minds to let a story just run along naturally, not only to start right, but stop right. The story-action would be helped a lot, and if good stories are the salvation of the business we may all yet get around to natural-length

Thanhouser: A Microcosm of the Transitional Era in Silent Films

subjects.” Thanhouser had just released its first multi-reel production, Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, in two reels: Part One on Sept. 1, 1911 and Part Two the following week on Sept. 8th. Thanhouser then released H. Rider Haggerd’s novel *She* in two reels on December 26, 1911. *She* was the first two-reel Thanhouser film to be released intact. However, a few markets were not ready to break with the one-reel per film standard, so Part 2 of the film, the second reel, was released on January 2, 1912.¹⁰ This was the beginning for Thanhouser to break with tradition and release films with increasingly complex story lines and more developed characters. In 1912, this trend continued with Thanhouser releasing 15 multi-reel films consisting mostly of two-reel “classics” including *Nicholas Nickleby*, *Under Two Flags*, *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Woman in White* plus two three-reel productions: *Lucile* and *The Star of Bethlehem*. Keeping with his “natural length films” philosophy, Thanhouser released *Miss Robinson Crusoe* on October 8, 1912 in 1,500 feet split with the documentary *Specimens from the New York Zoological Society* on ½-reel to fill out this two-reel release. Thanhouser multi-reel releases in 1912 represented 11% of Thanhouser films releases in 1912; this was also representative of the percentage for all multi-reel productions in 1912 by the industry.¹¹

During the single reel era, the marketing of films was based primarily on the reputation and brand of the production company. Eileen Bowser opens Chapter 7 on “Brand Names and Stars” in *The Transformation of Cinema*, “Before the rise of the star system, films were perceived and sold by brand name.”¹² Thanks to Edwin and Gertrude’s background in the legitimate theater, they had an inventory of well developed scripts ready for rendition on the screen, and they were familiar with the importance of *mise-en-scène* to produce a quality product. As a result, like other production companies, Thanhouser’s marketing and advertising strategy was designed to differentiate itself from the competition based on a reputation of quality. In the summer of 1910, after only a few months of operation, Thanhouser had already earned the enthusiastic approval of “The Spectator,” an otherwise unidentified editor of the motion picture section of *The New York Dramatic Mirror*, the weekly journal primarily devoted to the opposing Patents Company firms, “...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

Thanhouser: A Microcosm of the Transitional Era in Silent Films

employed.” By January 1911, the Thanhouser Company was one of the leading Independent film makers. While Carl Laemmle's Independent Moving Picture Company of America, familiarly known as IMP, captured the lion's share of publicity, it was the Thanhouser Company that was considered foremost in the photographic and dramatic quality of its films. A March 1911 glass slide (Figure 3) promoted the “Special Feature” Thanhouser film *The Spirit Hand* with the exhibitor adding in grease pen “One Great Picture.” No mention of cast or story line, the “Thanhouser” brand was reason enough to see this film.



Figure 3. Glass Slide, 3/10/1911

By early 1912, Thanhouser was releasing films on Tuesdays and Fridays promoting “The Thanhouser Two-A-Week” (Figure 4). In this January 27 advertisement there is no



Figure 4. 1/27/1912

mention of actor names, director, scenario writers – only the headline about “Thanhouser” and the films.

Advertising for the Biograph brand, which was considered to be the best quality of the MPPC aligned companies, Griffith was never mentioned in this context as director’s names were not generally known or valued by the viewing public. An exhibitor in Independence, Missouri reported, “This town felt that there was only one firm in the business that could make a motion picture. Anything that carried the Biograph title was good and every other make was rotten.” Then he

switched to the independent side and discovered Thanhouser, and in fact, his letter was printed in a Thanhouser advertisement.¹³

The other important marketing element utilized by Thanhouser was lithograph posters. Mostly “one-sheet” (approx. 41” x 27”) posters were utilized but larger formats were often made available to the exhibitors. At least a half dozen of these one-sheet posters have survived from Thanhouser’s 1910 thru 1912 period. They all demonstrate a uniform protocol promoting the Thanhouser brand to the exclusion of actors, actresses,

Thanhouser: A Microcosm of the Transitional Era in Silent Films

scenario writers, etc. Figures 5 thru 10 exemplify these posters, not only as beautiful works of art, but evidence of the company's efforts to market the Thanhouser brand above all else.



Figure 5. 11/4/1910

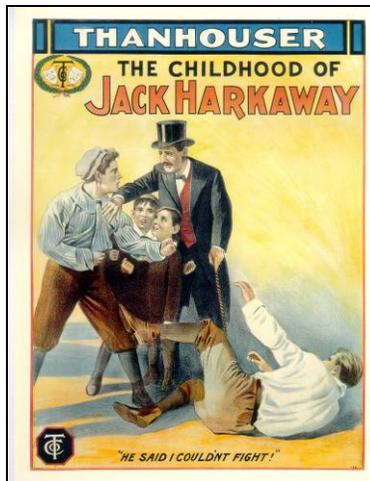


Figure 6. 12/23/1910

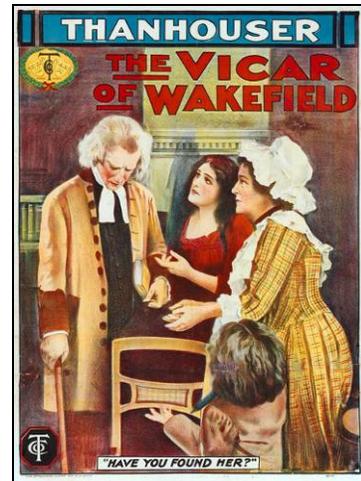


Figure 7. 12/27/1910

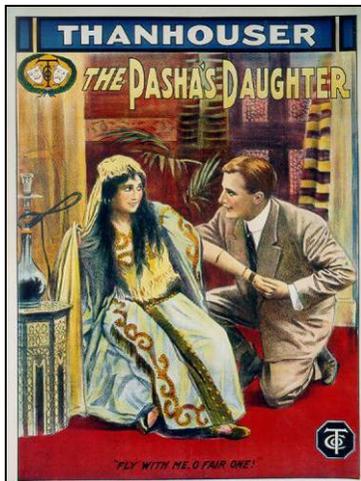


Figure 8. 1/3/1911

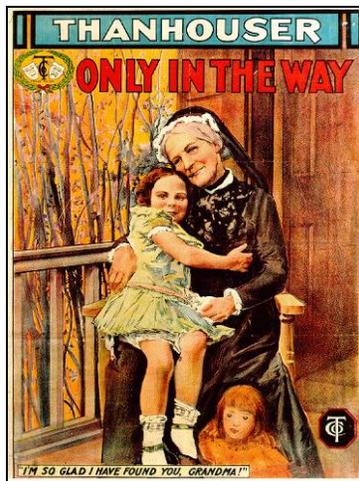


Figure 9. 1/31/1911



Figure 10. 4/11/1911

Thanhouser: A Microcosm of the Transitional Era in Silent Films



Figure 11. Advertisement in *The Moving Picture News*, April 27, 1912

In April 1912, having established the value of the “Thanhouser” brand as one of the leading independent film producers of the era, founders Edwin and Gertrude Thanhouser and Lloyd Lonergan took advantage of their market position and sold their interest to Charles J. Hite and the Mutual Film Corporation for \$250,000; Edwin Thanhouser would remain as manager of the company with a salary of \$500 per week. Being part of the Mutual program provided Thanhouser with a guaranteed distribution channel for its

product. Charles J. Hite made arrangements with Thanhouser whereby *Dora Thorne*, a two-reel production, was to be released by the Mutual Film Corporation on a states rights basis with distribution beginning in early May 1912 (Figure 11).¹⁴ Mutual was an operator of film exchanges, and the releasing of its own film, *Dora Thorne*, represented a new business activity. Apparently, this endeavor was not particularly successful, for no other Mutual brand films were released until the next winter. Recognizing the high value of the Thanhouser brand, Mutual went on to release over 200 films under the Thanhouser brand. *Moths*, the second Mutual brand release was produced by Thanhouser and released in September 1913; only 15 Thanhouser productions were ever released under the Mutual brand.

Of all the Thanhouser films released in early 1912, none was more heralded than *The Cry of the Children*, released in two reels on April 30th. Edwin Thanhouser was especially proud of this release and promoted the film in numerous advertisements and publicity notices for many weeks before its actual release, emphasizing its theme and message. One ad (Figure 12) capitalized on Theodore Roosevelt’s message speaking out against the evil of child labor abuse. The area of social responsibility was one of concern to film makers in an era in which many moralizing citizens condemned films as



Figure 12. Advertisement in *The Moving Picture World*, April 20, 1912

Thanhouser: A Microcosm of the Transitional Era in Silent Films

being an evil influence. Various studios created films on such subjects as child labor, white slavery, minorities, immigrants, women's suffrage, drugs, and alcohol, and when such films demanded changes for the better (rather than simply exploiting the topics for their sensational value), producers like Thanhouser could rightly say that they were making important contributions to society and improve their "brand" image in the public eye.

As 1912 came to a close, the so-called "star system" was also taking roots. Exorbitant sums were now being spent on lavish new productions, such as the unheard of sum of \$8,000 for Thanhouser's first three reel production with a cast of 200, *The Star of Bethlehem*, released on December 24, 1912. Actors and actresses no longer shied away from publicity about their work in motion pictures as the industry gained popularity. Public interest in the movie performers became the favored topic for letters to trade periodicals and to the production studios. In late December *The Morning Telegraph*, New York City's most enlightened newspaper from the viewpoint of motion picture coverage, had just completed its popularity contest for screen players. The winner was Martha Russell of Essanay, with 208,748 votes, followed by Lillian Walker of Vitagraph with 144,724 votes and Florence LaBadie of Thanhouser with 114,882. Among other Thanhouser players, far down the list, were Mignon Anderson at 11,262, Marguerite Snow at 4,807 and Francis A. Newburgh at 2,329. Votes were received from all over the United States. The year 1912 also saw millions of picture postcards distributed with the portraits of popular players, as well as a sharp gain in circulation for the leading fan publication, *The Motion Picture Story Magazine*.¹⁵

CHARLES J. HITE, MUTUAL AND THE STAR SYSTEM (1913 TO 1914)

At the beginning of 1913, Edwin Thanhouser "retired" taking his family on an extended tour of Europe, Charles Hite assumed leadership of Mutual's Thanhouser Film Corporation that was now releasing three films per week, the film industry was experiencing healthy revenues and the "star" system was starting to take hold. Hite was a gifted entrepreneur, and under his administration Thanhouser achieved many successes, building upon the foundation laid by the firm's founders. In 1913 with Hite at the helm, the Thanhouser Film Corporation released 174 titles, over 88% of which were still one-reel titles or split-reel subjects keeping with industry practice. The balance of the 1913

Thanhouser: A Microcosm of the Transitional Era in Silent Films

releases consisted of 24 multi-reel subjects based on classic stories and dramas including two four-reel “feature” films, *Moths* and *The Legend of Provence*. This later film was the first of the so-called “Thanhouser Big Productions,” four-reel films to be released on the first of each month, and available on a year-long exclusive contract with exhibitors; four more “Big Productions” were released during 1914. The February 1, 1914 “Big Productions” release of *Joseph in the Land of Egypt* included sheet music from the A. W. Tams Music Library (in four parts to match the four reels) with the names of James Cruze and Marguerite Snow prominently displayed on the cover.

By 1913, Charles Hite was acutely aware for the need for Thanhouser to embrace the “star system” and promote his talent to meet the growing demands of the public and steps

were taken to fulfill this need. Thanhouser’s most popular players were promoted to the public using various mass marketing collaterals. Not only did these items promote the “stars” but they linked these personalities to the all important Thanhouser brand. Figure



Figure 14. William Garwood postcard, 1913

13 shows a one-sheet poster showcasing James Cruze, the best known of all the Thanhouser leading men. He played numerous and varied roles in many films; similar posters of Mignon Anderson and Maude Fealy were also distributed. Postcards were published by Kraus Manufacturing Company that were collected and traded between admiring fans. Figure 14 shows a postcard example of William Garwood who worked for Thanhouser intermittently from 1909 to 1913, during which time he was among the company's most important actors. The postcard marketing strategy was also extended to Thanhouser’s European distribution company located in London. Other

marketing collateral that carried the likeness of Thanhouser personalities included collector stamps, playing cards, cigarette cards and glazed collector plates. Florence LaBadie, who was with Thanhouser from 1911 until 1917, was the company's most

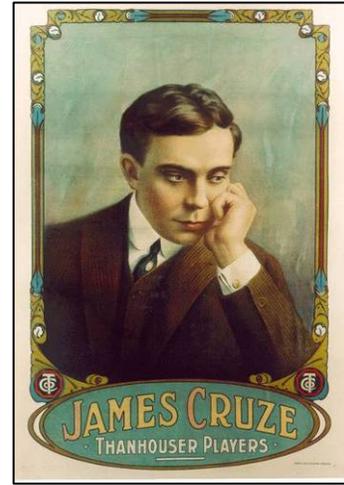


Figure 13. James Cruze one-sheet poster, ca. 1913

Thanhouser: A Microcosm of the Transitional Era in Silent Films

prominent actress during that era and was one of the most merchandized of the Thanhouser stars. In one case, her image was on the Ace of Spades (Figure 15) in a deck of 52 playing cards with images of other well known players on cards of lesser “rank.” Other Thanhouser “stars” that appeared during this period on marketing collateral included Muriel Ostriche, Mignon Anderson, Riley Chamberlin, Marie Eline (“The Thanhouser Kid”), Helen Badgley (“The Thanhouser Kidlet”), Marion and Madeline Fairbanks (“The Thanhouser Twins”), William Russell and Justice D. Barnes.



Figure 15. Florence LaBadie playing card, ca. 1913

On August 23, 1913, in an advertisement in *Reel Life*, Mutual announced that it was forming a new division at Thanhouser, Princess Films, to showcase the talents of Muriel Ostriche and Boyd Marshall. This new production company was a vehicle for Thanhouser to produce and release one additional title each week on the Mutual schedule as well as promote two of its new “stars” (Figure 16).



Figure 16. Princess Ad in *Reel Life*, June 19, 1914

These “stars” were hired in the fall of 1913 by Charles Hite: Muriel had successful screen appearances with Biograph, Eclair and Reliance,¹⁶ and Boyd came to Thanhouser with considerable stage experience, both in musical comedy and vaudeville. Thanhouser released a total of 82 “Princess” brand films between October 1913 and April 1915, all

one-reel in length except for one. Bowers summarizes the importance of the Princess brand to the Thanhouser production output:¹⁷

Reviews of Thanhouser comedies of the period were mostly favorable, and in this category the studio was achieving notable success. The advent of the new Princess films, which were nearly all of a humorous character, was fortuitous. Dramas earned mixed reviews, often unfavorable. Reproductions adapted from standard works of literature often fell short of the mark, due in part to the desire of the typical audience to see modern films depicting modern situations.

Thanhouser: A Microcosm of the Transitional Era in Silent Films

Photography was still a problem, but not as often as earlier in the year. Acting, on balance, was good to excellent. Clearly, the Thanhouser players were holding up their end of the bargain.

Scenarios represented the area of greatest weakness and were often found by reviewers to be illogical, stale, uninteresting, or without substance. While Lloyd Lonergan excelled in writing scripts during the first three years of the studio's output, now with three Thanhouser and one Princess release each week, plus a monthly four-reel production for the Mutual Program, his ideas and energy were being spread thin, and even with the help of his brother Philip the pace of good stories could not be maintained. The Majestic and Mutual films being produced in the New Rochelle studio contributed to the sapping of everyone's energy except, perhaps, Charles J. Hite's.

Another initiative by Thanhouser to capitalize on the demand by fans for more news about their favorite personalities was the publication in the summer of 1914 of the *Photoplay Arts Portfolio of Movie Stars – Thanhouser Edition*. This 20 page booklet included a brief history of the Thanhouser Company, short biographies, pictures and autographs of 17 of the most prominent Thanhouser stars. Figure 17 shows the two pages for one of Thanhouser's most popular stars, Harry Benham; it includes his biography, studio portrait, autograph and a column labeled, "I saw Harry Benham in:" where admirers could list films in which they saw him perform. Press articles frequently referred to him as "Handsome Harry" due to his good looks and popularity with fans.

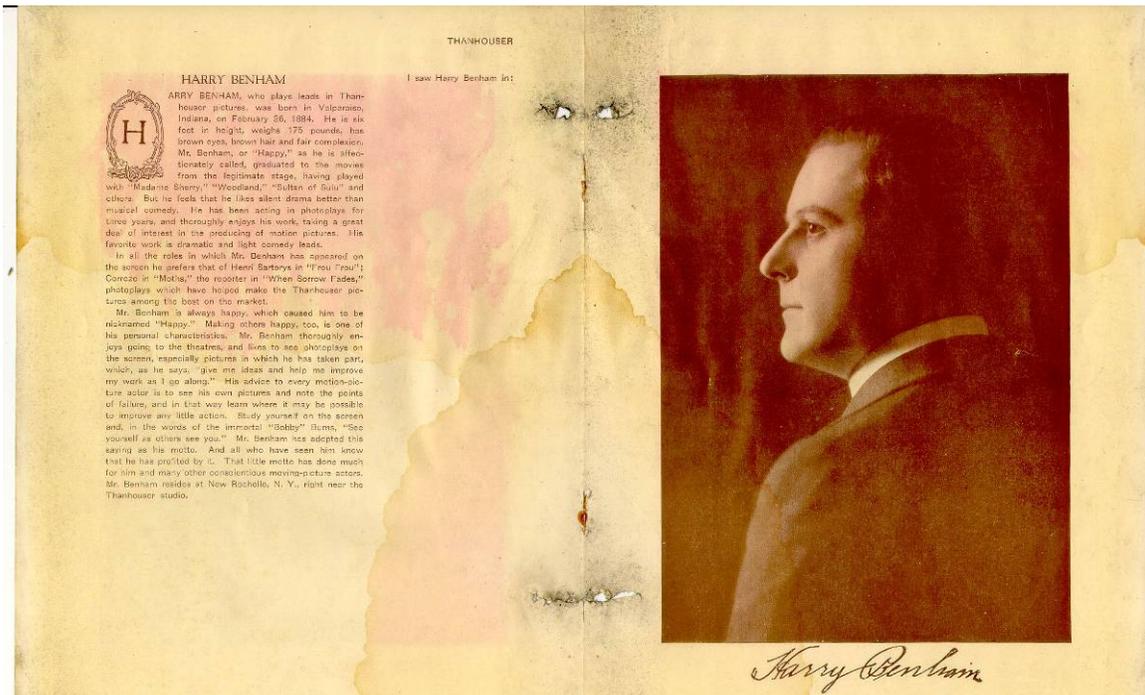


Figure 17. Pages 10 & 11 from *Photoplay Arts Portfolio of Movie Stars – Thanhouser Series*

Thanhouser: A Microcosm of the Transitional Era in Silent Films

In conjunction with the industry shift to promoting “star” personalities over “brand,” Thanhouser glass slides used to announce “coming attractions” were also changing to inform the viewing public not only the brand and title of the next film, but also the names of the actors and actresses in upcoming films. A good example is the glass slide used to entice the audience to return “tomorrow” to see *Mrs. Van Ruyter’s Stratagem* (Figure 18) featuring Harry Benham and Muriel Ostriche.

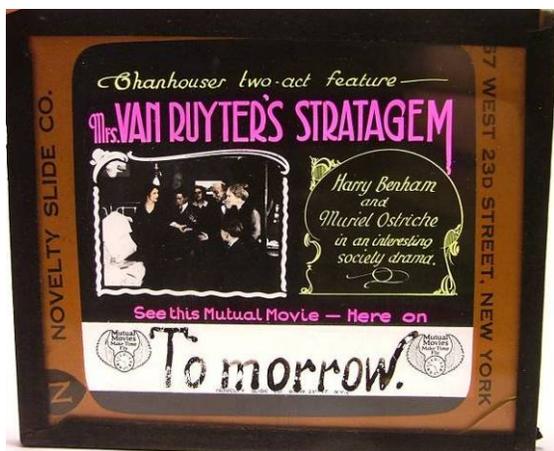


Figure 18. Glass Slide, Nov. 24, 1914

One of the more innovative and successful ventures in 1914 for the Thanhouser Film Corporation was *The Million Dollar Mystery*, a serial that consisted of 23 weekly episodes of two reels each. The first episode, *The Airship in the Night*, was released on June 22, 1914. The concept was similar to the 20 episode cliffhanger serial *The Perils of Pauline* that was released in April 1914 featuring Pearl

White.¹⁸ *The Million Dollar Mystery* created a nationwide sensation and was very profitable earning over two million dollars for the company. James Cruze portrayed Jim Norton, a newspaper reporter, and Marguerite Snow played the “heavy” as Princess Olda, a titled adventuress. Thanhouser would feature the cast of the serial on the cover of promotional heralds distributed to patrons at each screening. The herald for episode #3 featured James Cruze on the cover (Figure 19); the interior of this brochure listed the “All Star Cast” by name. The serial ran through February 22, 1915 when the solution to the mystery, submitted by a loyal fan who won a \$10,000 prize, was revealed in the final episode: *The Missing Million*.

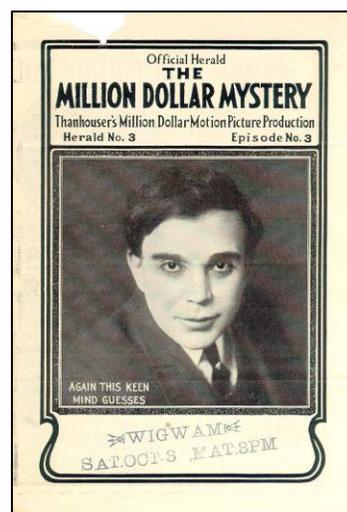


Figure 19. Herald
July 6, 1914

But, 1914 was a pivotal year with an unforeseen tragedy that would forever impact the future of the company. On Friday August 21, 1914, Charles Hite, at the zenith of his career returning from a dinner meeting, skidded off the road and overturned in his new

Thanhouser: A Microcosm of the Transitional Era in Silent Films

roadster; he died the next day from his injuries. This was a critical event that marked the beginning of the end for the Thanhouser film enterprise. Without Hite's creative genius, the leaderless company floundered under the management by a committee of investors who knew little about running a studio in the film business. Muriel Ostriche related to Q. David Bowers in a 1988 interview:

We were all confused, and we didn't know who was in charge. When Charles Hite was here, he took care of everything, and there was no other person who knew what he was thinking or what he had in mind for the coming year. Also, he was very well liked by everyone at the studio, and his passing was a cause for great sadness and grief. Dr. Shallenberger [one of the investors] came to the studio and took over.

Charles Hite liked me and my acting, and at the time he died we were planning a large production of *Alice in Wonderland*, with me as Alice. After he died, many of his plans were never carried through by anyone else, and *Alice in Wonderland* was not made. Eventually, I didn't like the kind of films they were putting me in, and I left Thanhouser, but by that time many others had left, too.

The success of *The Million Dollar Mystery* and a backlog of almost two months of finished films kept the company's finances in the black. This was, however, a time of restructuring in the industry as production and distribution began to embrace "feature" length films consisting of four or more reels. Exhibitors were moving away from the traditional "variety" program compiled from several one-reel "short" subjects and were moving to longer and more sophisticated "feature" programs, which if properly marketed and sold as "events," had the potential for a greater financial return.¹⁹ With many of the key actors, directors and technicians leaving Thanhouser, morale declined. Thanhouser was unable to keep pace with the shift to "feature" productions and its business viability was in jeopardy. Even Lloyd Lonergan, one of the three original founders and prolific scenario writer for the past two years, was dissatisfied with the management and left in December to work for Universal. Thanhouser Film Corporation was rapidly falling behind and it was no longer producing films as one of the pioneering independent studios. As evidence of this lack of leadership to navigate the company into "feature" films, Singer's research shows 20% of all industry output in 1914 was feature length films²⁰ while Thanhouser lagged behind the industry delivering only 9 feature films representing slightly over 4% of its total output.

EDWIN AND GERTRUDE THANHOUSER RETURN (1915 TO 1918)

By a twist of fate, Edwin and Gertrude Thanhouser returned to the United States from their European “retirement” on Monday August 24th (two days following Hite’s death) – their tour was cut short due to the outbreak of the World War. The film industry was in uncertain times with the restructuring of distribution practices encouraging the production of “feature” films, the anti-trust ruling against the MPPC crippled its ability to enforce licenses enabling independents to better compete with MPPC aligned companies, and the outbreak of the World War effectively shut down lucrative international business from the European market significantly reducing revenues. These shifts in the industry resulted in many studios ceasing production or merging with others over the next three years. But, in an effort to keep the successful Thanhouser brand alive and profitable, the Mutual board of directors in February 1915 lured Edwin and Gertrude Thanhouser out of “retirement” to resume leadership of the company they founded six years prior. Signing a three year contract, Edwin stepped back into the role of president and chief spokesperson for the company and immediately took charge. Gertrude resumed her role as supervisor of the scenario department, Lloyd Lonergan returned to his desk at Thanhouser as the chief scenarist and Leon J. Rubenstein, who had been with Thanhouser on and off since 1910, replaced Bert Adler, publicity director, who had left for Universal.

Thanhouser faced many challenges rebuilding the company to adjust to the demands of a rapidly changing industry. The new serial titled *Zudora* was already well into production upon Edwin’s arrived (Figure 20). In a word, it was a disaster. Expectations were high based on the success of *The Million Dollar Mystery*. But this incarnation of the serial was confusing to viewers; exhibitors complained and numerous theaters canceled showings, including the prestigious Loew chain. Hoping to capitalize on the fame of the previous Thanhouser serial, subsequent *Zudora* episodes were re-titled to *Zudora in The Twenty Million Dollar Mystery* in January 1915, and two weeks later it was shortened to just *The Twenty Million Dollar Mystery*; it ran for 20 episodes thru April 5, 1915.

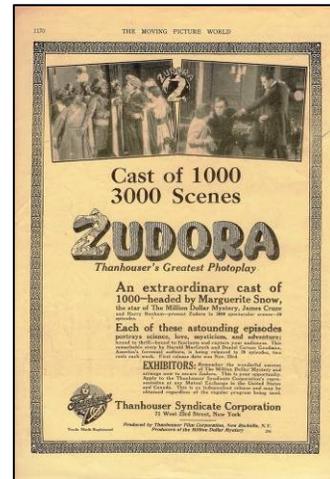


Figure 20. *The Moving Picture World*, ca 1914



Figure 21. Falstaff Poster, April 29, 1916

Zudora was Thanhouser's last attempt at producing a serial – Edwin Thanhouser was focusing his efforts on rekindling what he knew best – “short” productions consisting of three reels or less. With Muriel Ostriche's exit in early 1915, Edwin Thanhouser retired the Princess brand and introduced the single-reel comedy brand “Falstaff” on April 16, 1915 to fill the gap. Humorous alliterations for titles, such as *Willing Wendy to Willie* (Figure 21) were developed by Lonergan who also wrote the scenarios. Posters used to advertise films were now under the Mutual brand with “Edwin Thanhouser” identified as producer and the “stars” called out by name to satisfy the public's appetite for knowing who was in films.

The directors of the Mutual Film Corporation were, however, painfully aware that large profits and a great deal of publicity were going to companies which were turning out multiple-reel feature films, and they decided to jump on the bandwagon. Mutual wanted popular comedies like Chaplin's *The Tramp* and “feature” films with box office appeal like D.W. Griffiths *The Birth of a Nation*. *The New York Dramatic Mirror* reported on March 10, 1915:

The Mutual Company has definitely announced the adoption of a new feature policy. Starting March 22, 1915, two features of four- and five-reel length will be released on the Mutual program every week. The features will be known as Mutual Masterpictures, and all the companies forming the Mutual program will contribute to the feature list....

With multi-reel features now required by Mutual, it introduced “Mutual Masterpictures” in May 1915. Thanhouser produced a total of 23 of these films in 1915 and 1916 that ran four, five and even seven reels. The “Than-O-Play” brand was subsequently announced in September 1915 as three-reel dramas featuring notable personalities, such as *The Valkyrie* starring the Baroness Von De Witz (Figure 22). Again, marketing was under the Mutual banner with Edwin Thanhouser as producer and the “star” of the film prominently



Figure 22. “Than-O-Play” Poster, Nov. 27, 1915

identified. Newly constructed “picture palaces” were being built to seat thousands of patrons to increase the “take” for each showing of a lengthy “feature” film. Theater owners paid thousands of dollars for Wurlitzer, Robert-Morton or other pipe organs as increasingly complex musical accompaniment were expected with more deluxe “feature” film presentations.²¹ The day of the nickelodeon with its five-cent admission to a “variety” program that consisted of single-reel “shorts” was fading in the major cities, although in some remote areas a nickel would still purchase a ticket. Thanhouser

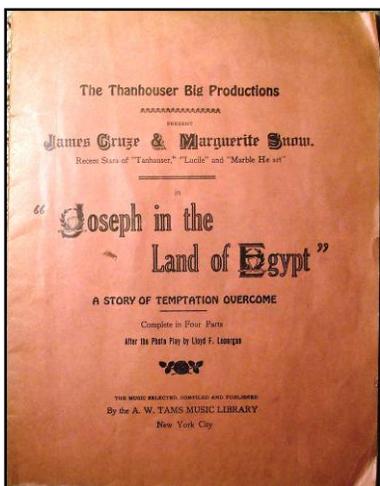


Figure 23. Sheet Music for *Joseph in the Land of Egypt*, ca 1914

commissioned music with A.W. Tams as early as January 1914 for *Joseph in the Land of Egypt* (Figure 23), the second in the series of four-reel “Thanhouser Big Productions.” Music was also commissioned with J.R. Shannon for the *Zudora* series featuring Marguerite Snow as “The Mystic Girl Detective *Zudora*.” While other extant examples of music for Thanhouser films are not known to exist, in all probability these are indicative of materials that were expected by exhibitors to be released with “feature” films. In all likelihood music was also made available for “Thanhouser Big Productions” and

“Mutual Masterpictures.” Anxious to generate publicity for its feature productions, Thanhouser released the five-reel “Masterpicture” *Inspiration* on November 18, 1915 that featured Audrey Munson, a renowned model posing in the nude (Figure 24) that created quite a sensation. The story was billed as “A daring romance...” Edwin Thanhouser took great pains to assure the public that this was art, not obscenity, and the censors agreed. Despite these efforts, Thanhouser was falling behind the industry trend producing “feature” length films of four reels or more.

Thanhouser released 229 titles in 1915 but less than 5% of these were “feature” length while the industry production of “features”

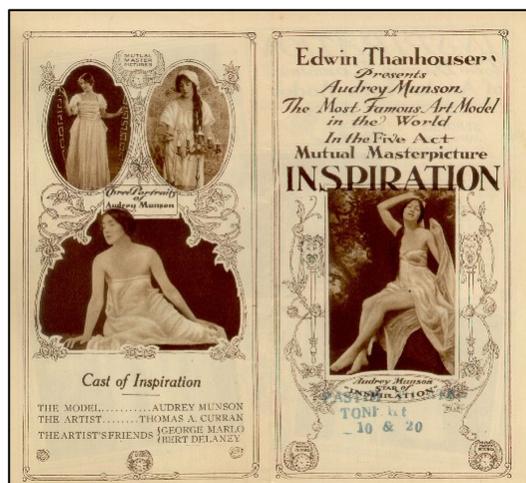


Figure 24. Herald for *Inspiration*, Nov. 18, 1915

Thanhouser: A Microcosm of the Transitional Era in Silent Films

reached almost 25% of total output that year.²²

Entering 1916, competition was fierce with mega-stars like Charlie Chaplin, Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford now considered more important than the brand of the Production Company. Mega-studios like Laemmle's Universal situated in the warm and sunny climes of California dominated the industry. Like many of the other northeastern production companies, Thanhouser opened a studio in Jacksonville Florida (Figure 25) in December, 1915 to boost the production output.²³ The



Figure 25. Thanhouser Jacksonville Studio, ca. 1916

warm climate and longer daylight hours permitted outdoor filming in Florida's tropical settings in the season when New Rochelle was cold and bleak, but of the 29 films produced by the Jacksonville Studio, only one of the titles was of "feature" length.

In June 1916 two dramatic events took place that fundamentally changed the way Thanhouser did business. First, Charlie Chaplin signed a one-year contract with Mutual bringing his star-power to the Mutual brand overshadowing all others, and second, the Mutual board of directors, at the insistence of president John R. Freuler, ejected the Thanhouser program from the regular distribution of films. The reasons leading up to Mutual ejecting Thanhouser from the Mutual program are clear: The death of Charles Hite left six months of uninspired management resulting in the critical loss of talent and a dangerous delay in the transition to the production of "feature" films. This action had a devastating impact on the Thanhouser studio as it removed the guarantee of a revenue stream from distributors who had subscribed to the Mutual program. The impact to the Thanhouser studio was immediate and severe as reported by *The New Rochelle Pioneer* on June 10, 1916:

On top of the announcement made two weeks ago that 20 odd members of the Thanhouser Film Corporation have been requested to sever their connection with the local studio, another startling cut in the working force at the studio took place

Thanhouser: A Microcosm of the Transitional Era in Silent Films

last Saturday afternoon when an even larger number of actors, actresses and other employees were relieved from duty.

One of the reasons for the cutting down of the force is because the policy of the studio has been changed - only feature photoplays to be produced from now on - while another reason is the rumor that after next Tuesday Mr. Thanhouser will be obliged to sever his connection with the Mutual Film Corporation, and if that comes about Mr. Thanhouser will have no output for his pictures, unless he connects with some other distributing agency in the meantime.

Edwin Thanhouser still had another year and a half on his contract with Mutual as president of Thanhouser Film Corporation. He closed the Jacksonville studio and quickly made other arrangements to fulfill his obligations. *The Motion Picture Mail* on July 22, 1916 reported on his progress to find a distribution partner for the "feature" films that would now be 100% of the studio's output:

The Thanhouser Film Corporation, one of the pioneers of the motion picture industry, announces that arrangements have been made with Pathé for the release of two five-reel features per month on Pathé's greater program of Gold Rooster plays, beginning in August. The contract was signed Wednesday, July 12, by J.A. Berst, vice president and general manager of Pathé Exchange, Inc., and Edwin Thanhouser, president of the Thanhouser Film Corporation.

Quoted in this same article, Edwin Thanhouser proclaimed that the new policy for the studio would be "...one-fourth the number of reels with four times the quality." The Thanhouser and Falstaff brands were retired and the first film for Pathé, *The Fugitive*, was released on August 13, 1916. A total of 29 titles were produced and released via the Pathé alliance, all were five-reels in length except for the February 25, 1917 release of *The Vicar of Wakefield* featuring Frederick Warde which was eight-reels in length. Recognizing the need for "star power," Edwin Thanhouser recruited talent for single film appearances in an attempt to provide a box office draw. Typical of these "Pathé Gold Rooster Play" releases were the November 19, 1916 *The World and the Woman* starring noted Broadway actress Jeanne Eagels and the June 17, 1917 *Fires of Youth* with Eagels paired with the famous Shakespearean actor Frederick Warde.

Thanhouser: A Microcosm of the Transitional Era in Silent Films

What a difference a year made: In 1916, 45% of the industry output was “features”²⁴ while Thanhouser lagged with only 20% of this category. Despite these efforts and positive reviews in the press, success at the box office was elusive. *Variety* reported in its June 22, 1916 issue that Pathé was “...dissatisfied with the quality and lack of stars in the Thanhouser features.” With its new production strategy and its distribution agreement with Pathé, Thanhouser’s 1917 releases would be 100% “feature” films. Good examples are the February 4, 1917 *A Modern Monte Cristo* (Figure 26) with Vincent Serrano, formerly with Lasky’s Famous Players, and the July 1, 1917 *The Woman in White* featuring Thanhouser’s most durable star, Florence LaBadie.



Figure 26. Advertisement, *The Moving Picture World*, Feb. 2, 1917



Figure 27. Florence LaBadie
Postcard, ca. 1914

Tragedy again struck Thanhouser Film Corporation on August 28, 1917 when Florence LaBadie (Figure 27) was thrown from her automobile while driving near Ossining, New York with her fiancé, Daniel Carson Goodman, as a passenger. She was hospitalized and died from “septicemia” (blood poisoning) on October 13th. She had been with Thanhouser from 1911 after being hired away from Biograph and became the most famous of Thanhouser’s leading ladies. She performed in dozens of Thanhouser films and was most known for her leading role in *The Million Dollar Mystery*. Losing its most recognizable “star” was the final blow contributing to the decline in the popularity of the Thanhouser brand. *Variety* in its edition of September 21, 1917 told of the winding down of activities in New Rochelle:

Edwin Thanhouser is to retire from active participation in the picture field next spring when his present contract with the Thanhouser [Film] Company expires.

Edwin and Gertrude Thanhouser retired permanently from the film industry in the spring of 1918 leaving the Thanhouser Film Corporation with a positive bank balance, unlike many others of the era, and a reputation of one of the pioneers of early film.

Thanouser: A Microcosm of the Transitional Era in Silent Films

Thanouser's legacy as one of the pioneering silent motion picture studios came primarily from its role as an independent studio producing high-quality "short" films from 1910 thru 1915. During this period, Thanouser failed to transition to the production of "feature" films with the rest of the industry. It was during this critical time in the development of film making (the end of 1914 and early 1915) that several factors forever changed the course of history for the Thanouser film enterprise: the untimely death of Charles Hite and resulting loss of key talent, the emergence of the "star" system that reduced the importance of the established Thanouser "brand" and the rapid transition by the industry to produce "feature" films which Thanouser did not embrace rapidly enough to become one of today's Hollywood studios.

NOTES

¹ Q. David Bowers, CD-ROM: *Thanouser Films: An Encyclopedia and History*, (Portland: Thanouser Company Film Preservation, Inc. 2001), Filmography.

² Charlie Keil and Shelley Stamp, *American Cinema's Transitional Era: Audiences, Institutions, Practices*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 1.

³ Singer, Ben, "Feature Films, Variety Programs and the Crisis of the Small Exhibitor," *American Cinema's Transitional Era: Audiences, Institutions, Practices*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 79.

⁴ Bowers, *Thanouser Films*, Filmography.

⁵ The classification of "feature" films consisting of four-reel or more is intended to provide a macro view of the transition from "short" to "feature" films by the industry during this eight year period. It acknowledged that during the 1910 to 1913 period, any release more than one reel might be considered a "feature" by audiences in the sense that it could not be marketed by established standards. The four reel designation also aligns with the American Film Institute (AFI) for their catalog of feature films.

⁶ Philips, Louis S., *Certificate of Incorporation of the Thanouser Company*, (White Planes, NY: Westchester County, 1909).

⁷ Gunning, Tom, "Systematizing the Electric Message: Narrative Form, Gender and Modernity in The Lonedale Operator," *American Cinema's Transitional Era: Audiences, Institutions, Practices*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 16.

⁸ Sargent, Epes Winthrop, "Technique of the Photoplay," *The Moving Picture World* 9, no. 2, July 22, 1911), 108.

⁹ Keil, Charlie, *Early American Cinema in Transition*, (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2001), 22.

¹⁰ Bowers, *Thanouser Films*, Filmography: She.

¹¹ Singer, "Feature Films, Variety Programs and the Crisis of the Small Exhibitor," 76-100.

¹² Bowser, Eileen, *The Transformation of Cinema: 1907 – 1915*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1990), 103.

¹³ Ibid, 105.

¹⁴ States Rights: The term "states rights" is used for films distributed on a state-by-state basis.

¹⁵ Bowers, *Thanouser Films*, Narrative – Chapter 5: Westward Ho.

¹⁶ Bowers, Q. David, *Muriel Ostriche: Princess of Silent Films*, (New York: Vestal Press), 49.

¹⁷ Bowers, *Thanouser Film*, Narrative – Chapter 6: Princess.

¹⁸ www.wikipedia.com, "The Perils of Pauline (1914 serial)," accessed 12/27/2008.

¹⁹ Curtis, Scott, "A House Divided: The MPPC in Transition," *American Cinema's Transitional Era: Audiences, Institutions, Practices*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 248-249.

²⁰ Singer, "Feature Films, Variety Programs and the Crisis of the Small Exhibitor," 80.

²¹ Anderson, Gillian B, *Music for Silent Films: 1894-1929 – A Guide*, (Washington: Library of Congress, 1988), xv-xviii.

²² Ibid.

²³ Bowers, *Thanouser Films*, Narrative – Chapter 9: New Rochelleans Head Sunward

²⁴ Singer, “Feature Films, Variety Programs and the Crisis of the Small Exhibitor,” 80.