

Thanhouser Classics Video Collectors Set

Volume I: The Early Years (1910 to 1912)

Volume II: A Mutual Film Corporation (1912 to 1914)

Volume III: Edwin Thanhouser Returns (1914 to 1917)

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The eight-year history of the Thanhouser Company is set in one of the most important periods in film history. During this era the moving image evolved from the little peep-show box to the nickelodeon screen; mass market and modern national and international distribution systems were established; the studio system developed and the star system took form; and film genres and narrative techniques as we know them today emerged. At the beginning of the era, D. W. Griffith was just beginning at Biograph Studio, and at the end of the period the first permanent Hollywood studios were just being established.

Unlike most studio moguls who typically made fortunes in distribution before founding their studios, Edwin Thanhouser came from a successful career in the theater. Beginning as an actor, Thanhouser formed his own stock companies and became a director, then a very successful theater manager in Milwaukee. Retiring from the theater, Thanhouser turned to the fledgling film business and in 1909 established a studio in New Rochelle, New York, in the New York City area, then the center of motion picture production in the U. S.

Edwin Thanhouser established his studio as an independent, choosing to work outside the Patents trust which attempted to maintain a world-wide monopoly on equipment, film, and distribution, and charged high royalties and licensing fees. The approximately ten "Patents" production studios, except Biograph, turned out technically good but generally uncreative films, while the independents like Thanhouser often were innovative in content and style.

Thanhouser productions avoided assembly-line sameness by attention paid to story and visual quality. The company enjoyed a unique relationship with the surrounding community of New Rochelle; the town took an interest in its most colorful commercial occupant, and provided access to a variety of facilities and locations. In addition, New York City, farm, rural, and Catskill wilderness locations were easily available. In return, the studio opened part of its campus on Long Island Sound as a public park and provided local employment and entertainment — the studio even became a local tourist attraction.

When Thanhouser began, films were one-reel productions, about twelve minutes (as dictated by Patents pressures), featuring familiar stories, books, plays, and even operas as source material. Edwin Thanhouser, on the other hand, was a strong proponent of what he called "natural length" films, running as many reels as necessary. In the studio's last years, feature-length pictures had become common and relied much more on original scenarios. In 1909, actors and actresses had no personal identity, but by 1917 the star system was firmly established. Thanhouser drew from many top New York legitimate actors as well as previous unknowns. Some who worked for the studio were James Cruze (a top Hollywood director in the 1920's), Florence LaBadie, Marguerite Snow, Muriel Ostriche, Mignon Anderson, and Jeanne Eagels.

Founder Edwin Thanhouser sold his interest in the studio to the Mutual Film Corporation in 1912, and Charles J. Hite, a Chicago film distributor, was hired to manage the operation. Thanhouser took his family on a grand tour of Europe, only to be caught up in the turmoil inherent in the outbreak of the First World War. When he returned, he had intentions of setting up a new film studio. However, Hite died in an automobile accident in 1914, leaving the studio leaderless. A long slump lasting several months ensued, accompanied by a decline in quality of product. Mutual, which continued to own the Thanhouser studio until the studio was discontinued in 1917, lured Edwin Thanhouser back to manage it, beginning in early 1915. Productions during the last two years were primarily feature-length films of increasing

importance and greater quality, consistent with the rapid advancement in film production during that period. With a post-war depression in 1917, every movie studio in the United States was operating at a loss, and though financially stable from earlier profits, Mutual's Thanouser studio was one of several that chose to cease operations. The studio's last activity was to lease its facilities to the Clara Kimball Young Film Corporation.

Thanouser pictures enjoyed great demand by both audiences and exhibitors, and were seen world wide. Over 1,000 titles were produced during the Thanouser Company's 1909-1917 span, and they were distributed by various companies. Although Edwin Thanouser decided to destroy the films in the Thanouser archive — he felt that they were dated and of little interest — copies of some films existed elsewhere. Prints used in this videocassette collection were discovered in foreign archives as well as in collections in the United States.

It is difficult to identify precisely all of Thanouser's contributions in film — only 150 or so Thanouser prints are known to exist today. The studio's legacy certainly includes contributing to the erosion and breaking of the Patents trust, maintaining a high standard of production quality, helping to expand the variety of film genres and subject matter, and introducing or adopting new techniques of cinematography. In the last category, film historian John L. Fell attributes Thanouser's *Their One Love* (1915) with the earliest use of "night-for-night" photography, and the flashlight-lit scene in *Crossed Wires* (1915) may very well be an innovation. At the very least, the studio was a major ingredient in the cross pollination among contemporary filmmakers which stimulated the rapid development of cinema in that early period.

— Victor Graf, Portland, Oregon (June, 1996)

VOLUME I: THE EARLY YEARS (1910 TO 1912)

Only in the Way (One reel of approximately 1,000 feet, released January 31, 1911)

Print source: Library of Congress, 12 minutes, 14 seconds.

CAST: Marie Eline (Marie).

Through most of 1910, the first year of Thanouser releases, the studio created vehicles around one of its earliest stars, child actress Marie Eline. She was one of the few movie players to receive screen credit in those early days. Her film role previous to this one was Little Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop*.

The dramatic theme of *Only in the Way* centers on a universal topic, family disharmony. In this film, the parents' treatment of the grandmother affects the little girl who identifies with her grandmother. Thanouser scenarists seemed to have had a special sensitivity for the feelings of children which is reflected in this film. The sentimental approach was expected in 1911.

Titles are used here in an old-fashioned way, simply to describe what was about to happen in the next scene.

Get Rich Quick (1,000 feet, May 26, 1911)

Print source: The Museum of Modern Art, 12 minutes, 46 seconds.

CAST: Harry Benham (bunco artist), Marguerite Snow, Marie Eline (daughter of poor widow).

The moral tale, a staple of early film, observes in this case how an elaborate swindle, the "Utopia Investment Corporation," affects one of its participants. The film challenges the quest for material wealth without concern for those victimized.

A review in *The Billboard* praised Marguerite Snow's acting as being "the most natural we have ever seen in a moving picture, the story as "excellent," and the picture as "splendidly photographed." Another review noted the "novel" technique of "the dissolving picture appearing through the newspaper headlines." The narrative progression is smooth without having to depend on too many titles.

The Coffin Ship (1,000 feet, June 20, 1911)

Print source: Nederlands Filmmuseum, 14 minutes, 37 seconds.

CAST: William Garwood.

Because of 1911 production convention, a sprawling adventure is truncated to one-reel length. Good location work, a strength of Thanouser pictures, creates a visually strong seagoing story of a stowaway and a shipwreck. Long Island Sound locations were near the studio.

A review of *The Coffin Ship* in *The Moving Picture World* criticized at length errors of accuracy in the depiction of the merchant ship and its sailors, and technicalities of sailing and of the shipwreck, despite the good story and its dramatic effectiveness. Such criticism disproves the myth that critics and audiences accepted anything on the screen at face value.

This print's original German intertitles have been replaced by a new English translation.

Cinderella (900 feet, December 22, 1911)

Print source: British Film Institute/National Film Archive, 14 minutes, 23 seconds.

Adapted from the fairy tale by Charles Perrault. Directed by George O. Nichols.

CAST: Florence LaBadie (Cinderella), Harry Benham (the prince), Anna Rosemond, Frank H. Crane, Alphonse Ethier, Isabelle Daintry.

An elaborately mounted version of the well-known fairy tale is interrupted by just a few summarizing intertitles. Although in-camera trick photography is important for the story, it is rather conventional, having been introduced over ten years earlier by French filmmaker Georges Méliès. Costumes, sets, and locations make it a visual feast, and some stylistic skill is used with brief shots and cross cutting to quicken the pace as Cinderella flees at midnight.

The intense competition between film producers of the time is indicated by the near-simultaneous release of this one-reel version by Thanouser, and the release, one week later, of a three-reel version by Selig. A holiday release was just as important then as now — *Cinderella* was produced the previous summer but released at Christmas.

The next step for Thanouser was the move to multi-reel features. The release following *Cinderella* was an adaptation of Haggard's *She*, Thanouser's first two-reel release.

Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (1000 feet, January 16, 1912)

Print source: Blackhawk Films, 11 minutes, 31 seconds.

Based on the Thomas Russell Sullivan stage adaptation (with romantic story added) for Richard Mansfield, of the novel by Robert Louis Stevenson. Directed by Lucius Henderson.

CAST: James Cruze (Jekyll/Hyde), Barry Benham (Hyde in several scenes), Florence LaBadie (his sweetheart), Marie Eline (little girl knocked down by Hyde).

This famous tale, made even more sensational by Richard Mansfield's stage performance, was filmed in at least nine silent versions. Thanouser's was the second U. S. film version, after Selig in 1908, but was the first based on the stage adaptation.

The Thanouser version downplays the horror element in favor of the thematic conflict between the good and evil sides of one personality. Perhaps unique among all Jekyll/Hyde adaptations is using two actors to portray the two aspects of the same character. The credits list James Cruze in both parts, but Harry Benham played the crazed Hyde in several scenes, simplifying production. Transformation trickery was done with careful cuts and quick in-camera dissolves with no changes in lighting.

VOLUME II: A Mutual Film Corporation (1912 to 1914)

The Cry of the Children (Two reels, approx. 2,000 feet, released April 30, 1912)

Directed by George O. Nichols. Photographed by Carl L. Gregory.

Print source: George Eastman House, 30 minutes, 58 seconds.

CAST: Marie Eline (Alice, the little girl), Ethel Wright (the working mother), James Cruze (the working father), Lila H. Chester (the factory owner's wife).

The Cry of the Children is the most famous and best documented of all Thanouser films. In its day it was recognized as one of the most important expressions of the pre-World War One reform movement, in particular child labor. Perhaps because the uncompromising content drew all the attention, the film was not then recognized as the artistic masterpiece it is.

The title and basic outline of the scenario were taken from Elizabeth Barrett Browning's popular poem which was quoted in the intertitles. The antique sentimental quality of the poem contrasts sharply with the gritty realism of the visual images. Likewise, the story contrasts scenes of the mill owner's home life with

that of the poor working family. An unsuccessful strike, poverty, death, and hardship threaten to tear the poor family apart.

Although location work was frequent in those days, the real factory setting was unusual and strikingly authentic. Dramatic depiction of the poor family is largely understated. The remarkably fluid editing foreshadows the editing style that became commonplace in the 1920's. Lap dissolves are used for psychological effect, and subtle and skillful camera tilting follows the actors. Excellent staging usually emphasizes depth and fore-to-back movement, and groups are handled well. Twice as long as films of that period, the picture reflected Edwin Thanouser's advocacy of "natural length" films rather than the standard one-reel film demanded by exhibitors for commercial reasons.

Although some elements of the story are melodramatic, clichés are to be expected from that era. However, the cinematic skill and social importance certainly contributed to a new social-realism style. The film marked the emerging political power of film, and the potential for making contributions to society.

Petticoat Camp (1,000 feet, released November 3, 1912)

Print source: Library of Congress, 14 minutes, 50 seconds.

CAST: Florence LaBadie, William Garwood, the Jordan Sisters (divers).

This comedy capitalizes on the booming pastime of a newly mobile American middle class — fishing and camping. Not only is the woodsy lakeside photogenic, but it also provides a charming locale for a light-handed battle-of-the-sexes comedy.

With a fresh and energetic attitude, the story portrays several married couples vacationing on an island. The boys play and the girls work. The girls rebel and move to an island of their own. The boys scheme to show how necessary they are as protectors, but the plan backfires and a truce is reached.

The accomplished swimmers in one commercially appealing scene were non-actress stand-ins who performed as the Jordan Sisters in aquatic shows.

The Star of Bethlehem (1,000 feet, released December 24, 1912)

Directed by Lawrence Marston. Production supervised by Edwin Thanouser. Scenario by Lloyd F. Lonergan. Original length three reels (3,000 feet); surviving portion one reel (1,000 feet).

Print source: British Film Institute National Film Archive, 15 minutes, 13 seconds.

CAST: Florence LaBadie (Mary), James Cruze (Micah, Joseph), William Russell (Herod), Harry Benham (Angel Gabriel), Justus D. Barnes (Gaspar, one of the Magi), Charles Horan (Melchior, one of the Magi), Riley Chamberlin (Balthasar, one of the Magi), Harry Marks (scribe), N. S. Woods (scribe), Lawrence Merton (scribe), David H. Thompson (Pharisee, rabbi), Lew Woods (Pharisee, scribe), Joseph Graybill (Roman messenger), Carl LeViness (shepherd), Frank Grimmer (shepherd), Ethyle Cooke; total cast of 200 persons.

Thanouser's ambitious *Star of Bethlehem* was one of the first steps toward true feature-length films (more than two reels long). It appeared the year before the Italian epic *Quo Vadis?* was viewed in the U. S., and two years before the first Hollywood feature, *The Squaw Man*. The original negatives were destroyed in the Thanouser studio fire just three weeks after its first release, and no full print is known to survive.

Preparation of this epic was one of the last duties of Edwin Thanouser before leaving the studio that bore his name. He had sold it to Mutual in April of 1912 and continued to work as studio manager until he "retired" in November 1912, only to return in 1915. Thanouser's biggest production up to that point in time, the film required a one-month shooting schedule, employed a cast of 200 (including forty principals), and cost a hefty \$8,000. Special effects alone took a full week's work.

Thanhouser studio's flair for sumptuous costumes, crowds of actors, and rich staging is evident in this epic. Some of the larger scenes reportedly were filmed with two or even three cameras shooting from different angles. The ratio of two-and-a-half feet of film exposed per foot of film used is modest by today's standards, but was extravagant for 1912.

The Decoy (One reel of 1,018 feet, released July 3, 1914, a Princess film)

Scenario by Philip Lonergan. Print Source: British Film Institute National Film Archive.

CAST: Charles Horan (John Henderson/Mr. Vincent). Marie Rainford (his wife), Virginia Waite (Jane Phelps, their distant relative, a widow), Muriel Ostriche (her daughter Muriel, who becomes a decoy), Morgan Jones (a millionaire), Boyd Marshall (Boyd, a businessman, Muriel's lover), John Reinhard.

A rather complex interweaving of romance and crime is squeezed into one reel. A "respectable" couple of city "card sharpers" invite a distant country relative to visit, then use her as a pretty, unwitting decoy to lure rich victims. They flee town a step ahead of the law. At a resort, the innocent girl falls in love with the latest victim, but they help expose and apprehend the guilty parties.

The attractive story is worthy of two-reel-length development, which would probably have been the case under Edwin Thanhouser's management. On the other hand, fast-paced storytelling was a popular new trend in films, thanks to the influence of D. W. Griffith at Biograph.

A Dog's Love (One reel of approximately 1,000 feet, released October 4, 1914)

Directed by John Harvey. Scenario by Nolan Gane.

Print source: Museum of Modern Art, 11 minutes, 12 seconds.

CAST: Shep (The Thanhouser Collie, as himself), Helen Badgley (Baby Helen), Arthur Bauer (Helen's father), Ethyle Cooke Benham (Helen's mother), Fan Bourke (a visitor).

The fantasy centers on a dog and a child, a universally appealing movie subject. The loyal dog's attachment to his little girl playmate is treated with pictorial beauty and simple, honest sentiment. Reviewers of the time praised the double-exposure passages for their dramatic effectiveness.

Baby Helen, also known as The Thanhouser Kidlet, was a precocious child actress who was very comfortable and expressive in front of the camera. Also a regular, Shep, The Thanhouser Collie, was a well-trained member of the studio's repertory company

VOLUME III: Edwin Thanhouser Returns (1914 to 1916)

The Soap Suds Star (One reel of 1,025 feet, released October 28, 1915, Falstaff)

Scenario by Lloyd F. Lonergan.

Print source: Museum of Modern Art, 14 minutes, 38 seconds.

CAST: Carey L. Hastings (Sophie, the star), Reginald Perry (husband).

Theater, particularly vaudeville, has been an endless source of material for movies. This energetic comedy features a down-and-out actor and a funny laundry proprietor who are hired as a vaudeville act. They become a big hit, but when they try Shakespeare, they destroy their showbiz career.

The Soap Suds Star was released under the Falstaff banner, the comedy arm of Thanhouser.

Crossed Wires (aka ***A Telephone Tragedy***) (Two reels, released June 29, 1915)

Directed by Frederick R. Sullivan. Scenario by Philip Lonergan.

Print source: British Film Institute National Film Archive, 30 minutes, 58 seconds.

CAST: Inda Palmer (Mrs. Angell, an old woman), Morris Foster (Will Drake, her nephew), Florence LaBadie (Flo Drake, his sister), Boyd Marshall (Benton, a civil engineer), Ina Hammer (Susan Watson, the housekeeper), Morgan Jones, Ernest Warde

In the spirit of the enormously popular mystery and crime pulps of the day, *Crossed Wires* is a suspense picture with a flair for good storytelling and stylistic innovation, strikingly similar to the later filmmaking style of Hitchcock.

An innocent man is accused and convicted of murder, and when the facts finally surface, the innocent man's sister sets about trapping the guilty party. The courtroom scene, though not unusual, includes a dramatic pan between two closeups for purely psychological effect. Other advances in cinematography are a closeup reaction shot and two insert shots of objects. The surprise psychological climax is also novel. Stylistically, lighting effects for the dark house scenes are very effective, and in one scene a flashlight, the only illumination on the set, is actually shined into the camera. This treatment is decades ahead of its time.

The World and the Woman (Five reels of approximately 5,000 feet, released November 19, 1916, Pathé Exchange)

Directed by W. Eugene Moore. Scenario by Philip Lonergan, possibly based on the play *Outcast*.

Print source: George Eastman House, 1 hour, 5 minutes, 36 seconds.

CAST: Jeanne Eagels (woman of the streets), Ethelmary Oakland (Sunny, her daughter), Boyd Marshall (the man), Thomas A Curran (James Palmer), Wayne Arey (Jim Rollins), Grace DeCarlton (Rollins' wife), Carey L. Hastings (Anna Graham).

The World and the Woman is historically important as the screen debut of legendary actress Jeanne Eagels. The role of a prostitute turned faith healer is suitably challenging for the star.

Edwin Thanouser began phasing down production at the studio in early 1917, so this is a very late Thanouser film. *The World and the Woman* demonstrates many important advances of the previous few years such as feature length, editing techniques (for instance, watch here for camera-position changes in the middle of action), and more complex, expressive, and thoughtful story development. Part of the story is based on one of Eagels' stage successes, *The Outcast*.

Locations, a strength of Thanouser pictures, included Manhattan and the Adirondack mountains in addition to studio interiors. *The Woman and the World* was released as a "Pathé Gold Rooster Play," in accordance with Thanouser's releasing contract with the Pathé Exchange.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

New and original organ music for the Thanouser films in this unique collector's edition was composed and performed by musician Andrew Crow. Mr. Crow holds a Bachelor of Music degree from the University of Redlands and a Master of Music Education from the University of Southern California. While working for Rogers Organ Company in the 1960's, he toured with Virgil Fox in a specially constructed truck with an organ he build specifically for Mr. Fox. Currently, Mr. Crow plays recitals — classical and theatre — particularly in the restored theatre organs around the county. He has composed, written and played a number of musical sores for the silent screen, including Chaplin's *Gold Rush* and *The General* with Buster Keeton.

Mr. Crow performed the music on this video collector's set on the mighty Wurlitzer at Uncle Milt's Pizza Parlor in Vancouver, Washington. This organ has.... Special thanks to Uncle Milt for the use of this organ.

This video collector's set would not be possible without the cooperation of film archives around the world. My sincere appreciation and thanks are extended to the following archives which supplied films used in this collection:

The Library of Congress
Motion Picture, Broadcast and Recorded Sound Division
Washington, DC

George Eastman House
Motion Picture Department
Rochester, New York 14607

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Amsterdam, Netherlands

The Museum of Modern Art
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New York, New York

British Film Institute
National Film Archive
London, England

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Thousands of feet of Thanouser nitrate film still await preservation. A portion of the proceeds from the sale of this video set will go towards film preservation and improved access. If you would like additional information, please contact Thanouser Company Film Preservation, Inc., 8770 NW Kearney Street, Portland, OR 97229, fax (503) 226-7961, send e-mail to feedback@thanouser.org or visit us on the World Wide Web at <http://www.thanouser.org>.