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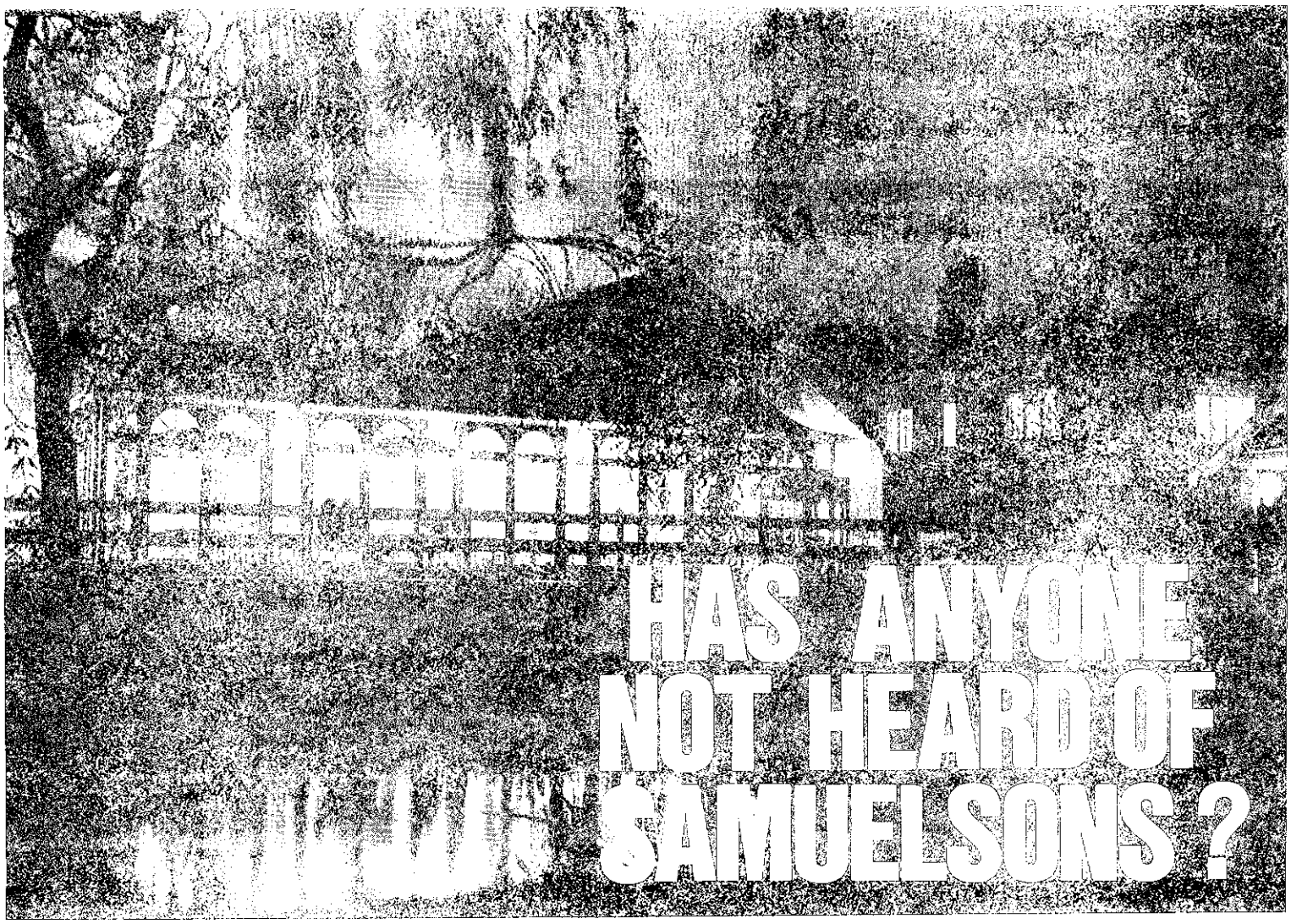


HAS ANYONE NOT HEARD OF SAMUELSONS?

JAMES CLEMENT

Surrounding the walls of his unpretentious offices in Cricklewood, certificates testify to the contributions and innovations that David Samuelson has brought to the film industry over the past thirty years. He was leafing through a bulky file, throwing out dead letters (surely the sign of a good administrator?), when the phone rang. A customer was calling from Hamburg to ask if he could supply an awkward camera and lens combination. 'Not here,' he said, 'but we have one in our Paris branch. I'll be over there tomorrow and I'll call you.'

It was one of six or so international calls he was to take during my visit which would demonstrate his total grasp of the nuts and bolts and the complex operations and minutiae of his sprawling business. For Samuelson's are in the business of hiring equipment to the film and television industry and, increasingly, to the world of stills photography. He will supply anything from a neutral density filter to a fully equipped pantechnicon of lighting gear, with personnel if required, and he will move it anywhere in the world within hours of the order coming in.

It all started twenty-five years ago when one of the four Samuelson brothers, Sydney, bought a camera to enable him to pursue his freelance filming career. When he wasn't filming he hired out his camera to other cameramen and, inevitably, the time came when he was offered work but his camera was out on hire. At that moment Samuelson's Film Services was born and today the Company has become a Group with ten subsidiaries, embracing hire, rental or sales operations in film equipment, audiovisual, television, lighting, freight services, studio facilities, custom built cases, sales of books and still camera hire. With offices in London, Paris, Sydney and Melbourne, Samuelson's is the largest company of its kind in the world.

I open with my familiar, 'Isn't Film dead?' theme and he scorns the suggestion. He trots out the facts: *Superman 1* and *2* take £20 million for production and post production *in this country alone;* at one time his company were servicing twenty-seven major film productions, they have just seviced *Elephant Man,* in anamorphic black and white; his companies continue to mushroom – the question had to be rhetoric.

US production companies tend to use British facilities and technicians disproportionately since Britain accounts for only 4% of the world box office gross in films. The reason, it seems, while acknowledging the superiority of British special effects people and systems, lies more in our methods of employing freelance skills for productions. Thus, for a major production, the best team can be assembled, such as the best matte artist, the best smoke effects man, and the best front projection cameraman while in the USA the best of such men might be employed on a long contract with different studios. And so, Britain came to be the venue for the making of such box office successes as *The Empire Strikes Back, Star Wars, Alien* and the Bond films.

Film, in fact, is being helped by video, with so many new markets – broadcast TV, cable TV, video cassettes, discs, satellites – all creating demand for image origination on film, still the best vehicle. Both film and video, in fact, are increasing. David Samuelson, fond of quoting the Scriptures, peered over his glasses and intoned, 'The more the flesh the more the work'. He catalogued more evidence – more capital investment, new studios. Why, Lees had just converted a derelict TV studio into a *film* studio, Pinewood offered the biggest set in the world, Elstree were rebuilding their stage.

But what of Rank, I asked? Hadn't they just called it a day and packed in film production? David Samuelson snorted. 'So what,' he demanded. 'So, they're not going to make *The Thirty-Nine Steps?*' And there followed a good humoured attack on the press, who, when pressed to write something about the film industry trotted out their 'set pieces'. His remarks were directed at the national press who took the line that the vicar's lantern slide show was dead, whilst he reasoned, the audiovisual scene had taken off in ways that the vicar would never have dreamed possible.

'We have to think internationally,' he said. The only effective way to compete was to have global distribution. And he added a timely comment on the copyright issue. 'We must sell the product for video casssettes in Bangkok and be in on the ground *there* to stop the pirating, much of which is being done by default.' He pointed to the South African example whereby Equity refused to allow British programmes to be sold to South Africa with the result that the European programmes were stealing a lead and British programmes were being pirated and sold openly in video cassette shops. 'We've got to be on the floor in every market place, be it the Philipines, Portugal or Piccadilly,' he warns.

And, commenting on the quality of our British product he said: 'What would John Grierson think of the British documentary today? It is better stuff and much more perceptive on the television but documentaries on nature need to be made on film, although television has the market.' He peered over his spectacles and, with a gentle smile, said, 'People have no vision'.

Any tour of Samuelson's starts at the hub of their universe – the central ordering department, constantly manned by a dozen of the three hundred employees. At any time calls come through for equipment and are handled and dispatched here, with the aid of computerised shipping lists, within hours. The requests are logged (sometimes with 'HOT' labels for urgent attention) and passed to the relevant department – lighting, camera car, film equipment or whatever. The computer can produce instant read-outs on every item of equipment with shipping details of country of origin, size of case, weight, value for insurance and everything that customs and shipping officials need to know. Samuelson's have their own air freight department at Heathrow Airport and an office at the London Chamber of Commerce where a carnet can be raised within minutes. Samuelson's rely on their international reputation and David claims there is not a country in the world they do not service. He showed me the board indicating the equipment out on loan at that moment and he recited the locations being served by his company for major film productions: France, UK, Miami, Elstree, West Germany, Greece, Lyme Regis *(Lyme Regis?)*, Great Hampden, Pinewood, Scotland, Greece, West Germany, UK, Jamaica, UK and the UK again. And that's before we even start on Ghandi, he says.

In the engineering department, the offbeat request is treated as normal. How do you mount a camera close to a horse's hooves, they are asked? We will build you a rig, they reply. What about getting a camera on to a crash helmet, a racing car, a lawn-mower or a lance for a jousting picture? Same again, we will build you a rig. Some ideas prove marketable, like the inclining prism for use with wide-angle lenses to enable a cameraman to shoot at zero height (on floors or benches) with correct image orientation and without loss of quality or effective aperture. Elsewhere, an old camera has been converted into a front projection system. Video conversions to cameras are commonplace, mainly for viewfinders, but sometimes linked up to VTRs so that playback can give a director a good idea of how travelling matte shots might look by playing, for example a video superimposition over a blue backing shot. The company is gradually getting into television broadcast standards. Other engineering feats include the famous 'Samcine' high hats, swan neck adaptors and limpet mounts for mounting cameras onto the sides of cars, by way of example.

All departments are growing concerns but the one with most growth potential is the AV department combining stills, cine and video systems. Apart from the usual requests for the Carousel machines, a facility much in demand is the front projection system and multi-screen units but whole video set-ups can be installed for functions, as for example, on the recent visit by Prince Charles to the Royal Premiere at the Classic, Haymarket, when four cameras carried his progress into the building onto a 16ft screen by front projection, to the waiting audience.

In the service department rows of Elf and Bell & Howell projectors were under repair or ready for dispatch. The ILEA alone will send in, possibly, a hundred for periodic attention. Next to it is a small factory in which about seven or eight men were at work building custom built boxes to carry anything from a Rolleiflex to complete kits for cameras and lighting equipment, each one a one-off to special order and each designed to withstand the severest aircraft vibrations and high-handed bloody-mindedness by other sundry individuals.

Doris Irving was at work in the filter department, that almost legendary department where filters are made up to the special requirements of cameramen and locked away so that no one else can use them, jealously preserving the special skills that cameramen now find is a stock in trade in these days of 'image enhancement'. Most of the filters are Wratten gels with special grads, mounted between optical glass and carefully locked away. Only Doris and the cameraman himself will have keys to his box. But a special order for silk filters, similar to the old fashioned veils, to soften an image, sent Doris scurrying round the fashion houses of Europe to commandeer what was left. These are mounted on rigid frames to fit a number of lenses and five different grid patterns are available. Inevitably, there came a call for rounded corners on the nets, then white material, then multi-coloured material and so, this oddball request became an important service. Little known to stills photographers is the complete set of Cokin filters and various mounts and adaptors which can fit any lens – 75 filters in all, in one box, which can be hired for less than £10 a day.

Though not part of the filter department itself, the Samcine Acrylic Window Filter came about as a result of a request to make up one flat and rigid daylight-to-artificial compensating filter for fitting over windows and incorporating ND filters, so that the number of surface reflections could at least be reduced to one per lamp which, hopefully, could be avoided in filming. Samuelson's overcame that problem in twenty-four hours. Filters in general is a quote-worthy subject for David Samuelson: 'Any fool can get it in focus and get the exposure right. The art is in the way you manipulate, in lighting, filtering and in processing.'

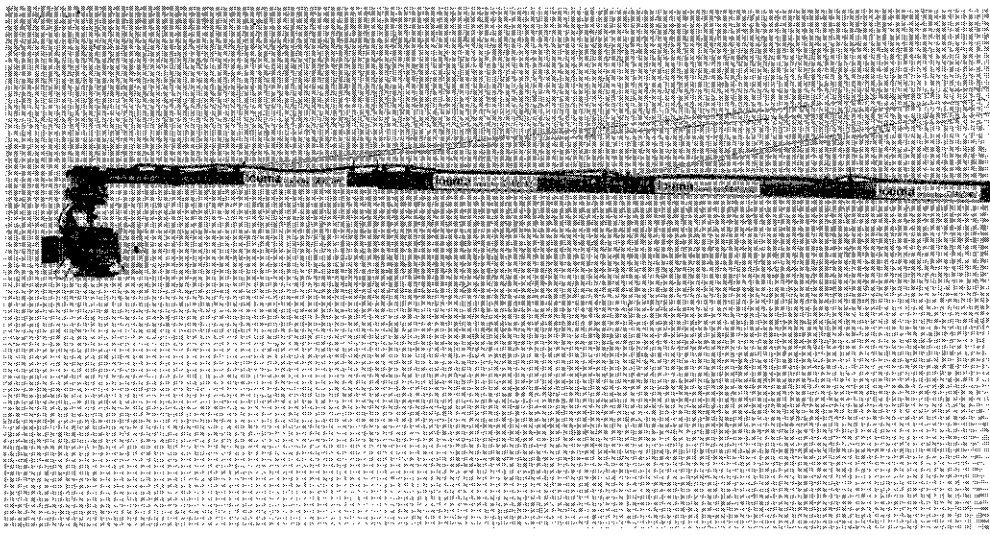
After a while, surprises become routine at Samuelson's and when they tell you they even build their own lenses you are, by this time, immune to its total significance. They don't actually grind or design lenses but, as David says, they 'cobble a lot of lenses together to make specials to our own requirements'. He shows me an obsolete 24mm-240mm lens with a reflex finder which came to be less and less used and which they modified to make a 22-220mm T2.5, making it the widest angle 10:1 zoom and widest aperture 10:1 zoom in existence. Another innovation is the claim to the widest-angle, lightest-weight, hand-holdable zoom lens for 35mm filming with a range from 18-100mm, weighing only 5lb and with silent power zoom. And, of course, the modifications don't stop with lenses. He points to a camera: 'For this picture they want an underwater housing for this camera, to operate at 100fps *with registration pins*, forwards or backwards, and with TV viewfinding and fitted with an anamorphic lens. We had to put a whole new optics onto an Arriflex and we made it all ourselves.' ▶

Transport, of course, is another area. You wouldn't expect a firm like this not to realise the potential of transport. They will provide a camera car with outrigging, camera platforms, dollies, cranes, mobiles, generators, alternators, lighting trucks, delivery vans, anything. Even a rain deflector for keeping lenses free of swirling rain when filming storms at sea. Their fleet of transport vehicles comes to about a hundred and they are all serviced by their own staff.

Typical of the innovations is the development of lighting control units. Since the 1920s the film industry has worked to 110V dc supply systems which were relatively safe with intersnaking cables but with the advent of HMI lighting systems the supply changed to 220V ac and the safety measures immediately became much more stringent. Additionally, the old system only allowed outlets of up to 45A whilst, with the new lighting, single lamps alone could consume 50A. New European standards demand an earth leakage detector and an automatic switch-off of power. Samuelson's had to design a system to meet these requirements, though the switch-off of total power during a take could be ruinous. And so there was born the Samcine lighting power distribution system giving outlets of 16, 32, 64 and 125A and a detection system which in the case of a short gives an immediate cut-out on all circuits, or in a faulty earth on one line, gives an audible bleep, warning of potential problems and where there is an earth leakage on one line, by switching a key across a sensing coil, a flashing light will warn of the faulty circuit. These units are mounted on frames off the floor for extra safety and are now accepted across the world.

The revolution which has overtaken the film industry has been in the nature of newer and lighter equipment affording hand held shots during dialogue and 'walk-about' sequences with lightweight cameras mounted on the famous floating support systems; HMI lamps giving four times more efficiency than their tungsten counterparts; the replacement of lorry loads of sound recording gear with miniaturised and portable high quality tape recorders; and the development of cameras fitted with electronic viewfinders for remote operation. In this revolution the bulky and wieldy crane systems – sometimes weighing ten tons and mounted on heavy 6 wheel chassis – have been quietly superseded by new lightweight booms on which a remote controlled, fully blimped camera with electronic viewfinder, can be fitted and which is as manoeuvrable as any manually operated system previously in existence.

The LOUMA crane is also one of Samuelson's firsts, latterly used in Steven Spielberg's production *1941*.



'It can,' says David Samuelson, 'pass through the narrowest doorway, go through a small window, up a circular staircase, shoot inside a submarine, hang over a cliff or the edge of a tall building, be taken up a mountain trail, be delivered in a small van or by helicopter – or even by mule train.

He was eulogising about this latest piece of their equipment which, he demonstrated for me, was able to aim the camera, control aperture, focus and zoom and view the scene remotely. He was not exaggerating when he claimed that with the new Louma crane you can put a camera where the eye of a man has never been before – 'and then move it around'. Its length (crane) can be varied from 4 to 20ft (25 with special extenders) without vibration or floating effects. Other features enable the camera on the crane to be rotated through 360°, during a shot, without it filming its own support or to dip into an enclosure which is normally only accessible from the top. It is light enough to be carried on a fork lift truck or can be fitted to the end of a giant industrial crane, some of which, says David Samuelson, can reach out for about 250ft. A new dimension, he says, to helicopter shots, without noise, whirl and danger to people below.

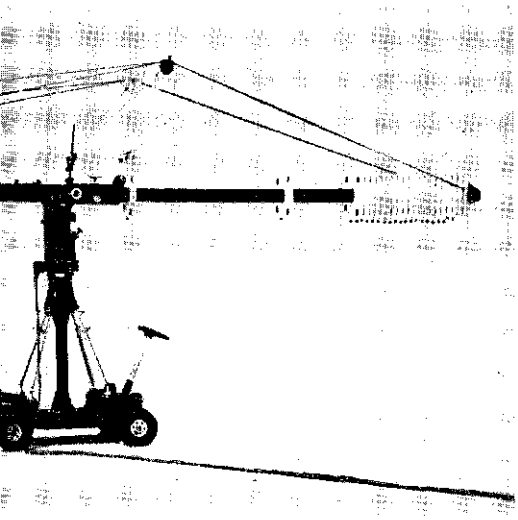
The camera platform will carry most professional 16mm cameras, most notably the Aäton 7 and most of the current 35mm cine cameras such as the Panavision Panaflex. The mounting head remains plumb and level in all positions of the boom arm from almost directly upright to almost directly downwards. Control of the camera is by gyro-assisted servo motors operated by handwheels instead of the conventional joy-stick operation which was not always reliable. Thus, perched on a platform about 20ft high the crane can operate, in a single shot from a height of about 4in to about 45ft.

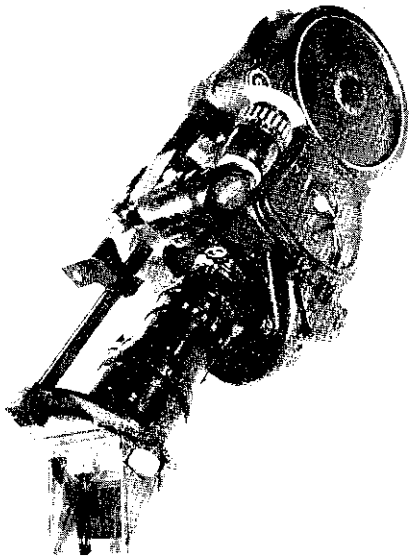
In London's West End, the facility most of interest to stills photographers is Rentacamera where, for example, a 500C/M Hasselblad can be rented for about £3 a day. Here, too,

is Book City, with volumes on film and television technology.

Last year, Production Village opened its gates to a curious clientele. Here, in the heart of Cricklewood, a complete village location is available with studio rental as required. There is a village pond, with waddling ducks, bungalow fronted buildings, two pubs with verandahs overlooking the pond, a restaurant, silversmith's shop, et al. Behind the village pond and centre of life there are offices for hire, dressing rooms, make-up rooms, cutting rooms, recording studio and four massive stages for rental. Gradually, advertising stills photographers are coming to recognise the value of this facility less than five miles from Marble Arch and manager John Baker estimates that about 15% of the bookings are by stills photographers. He told me of one big advertising photographer who planned to move out permanently to the village and to lease accommodation at a rent far lower than West End prices.

Production companies and photographers who use the Village may opt to hire only a studio or to have it painted to their colours. Equally, they may bring in their own





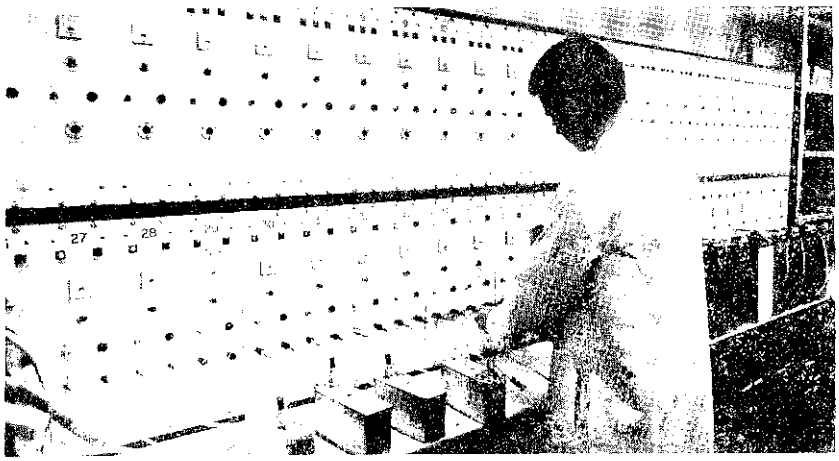
Top left: Louma Crane by Samcine. Left: Equipment manufacturing department. Above: Samuelsons optical department. Near left: Samcine Inclining Prism fitted to a Samcine 18-100mm hand-holdable zoom lens on an Arriflex 35 BL 35mm camera. Below: Battery charging department.

labour or hire specialists from the company's register of skilled personnel. On their books are hairdressers, make-up artists and beauticians, editors, lighting cameramen and a host of other skills.

Both the pubs carry full licences and are open to the public and one of them sports a restuarant and a dance floor which can also be used as a film theatre. The four stages vary in size and are fitted with white cycloramas and are infinity curved at top and bottom. The smallest of the large stages measures 42 x 27ft and the daily rate, inclusive of use of make-up, hairdressing, wardrobe and dressing room accommodation (though not labour) is £100 a day. The largest studio, measuring 185 x 54ft runs at £275 a day. On my visit this was in use for a car advertisement, accommodating with ease five cars and plenty of space around them. Lighting technicians and a battery of overhead lighting combined to make it look like a film set.

In addition to the big studios there are a host of smaller ones, and offices, off the main studios and once ensconced, their usage is up to the client.

David Samuelson is a whirlwind of



energy and, with his brothers, takes a very active part in the day-to-day running of the company. Yet, he finds time to write books on the craft of filming, assume the chairmanship of important committees and he warmly gives up his time to talk on matters of interest. Before I left he had to show me his latest treasure. He is a collector of old and valuable books and had just purchased a volume published in Latin about 1635. Flicking the pages over he excitedly showed me what he believes is the first projector to show moving images. It is a crude drawing of a camera obscura type of device with an oil lamp as the light source with a rotating cyclorama of images passing before it, depicting the life of Christ. There is no date but the book is early seventeenth century and it predates, he believes, the conventional theories attributed to the discovery of moving picture projection.