



The Good Old, Bad Old Days!

Honorary member, Reg Sutton reminisces about his time as a newsreel soundman with British Movietone

The days of the cinema newsreels spanned a period from 1895 to the late 1960s, British Movietone News being the last to survive the onset of television.

In those far off days of the 1920s, I well remember going to the pictures for fourpence while the top seats were about one shilling and sixpence, real money! For this, one had a feature film, a supporting 'B' picture, a cartoon and a newsreel. At the larger cinemas there would also be an interlude on the mighty Wurlitzer organ, and even a stage variety show at the Commodore at Hammersmith.

Commercial feature film producers like Pathe and Gaumont, both French companies, subsidised newsreel production as a prestige activity to keep their name on the screen and keep a rival's name off it. With the larger capital investment and expertise involved in the change over to sound in the late 20s, US capital and enterprise began to dominate. So in Britain the new Paramount and Movietone newsreels were produced by the American financed feature film companies of Paramount and 20th Century Fox but the earliest had been the French Pathe and Gaumont. Topical Budget, the first purely British newsreel was not issued until 1911. The major newsreels were Gaumont British, shown in Gaumont Cinemas; Pathe News shown in their ABPC circuit; Paramount News at the

Paramount cinemas and some independents. Movietone News was shown in some Gaumont Cinemas (because 20th Century Fox had shares in them) and independents. Universal News was shown mainly in independents. There were the Odeon and Essoldo circuits which took a sprinkling of each. Pre 1939 war - the newsreels were seen by an average of fifteen million cinema goers each week!

The newsreel changed twice a week, Monday and Thursday with the usual length being around a thousand feet. An average reel would have some six to eight stories selected from the 50 or 60 sent in from home and abroad, The attraction of the newsreel was not that of 'hot news' as this would already be known by the audience but the appeal of seeing it rather than hearing it on the radio or reading about it in the newspapers. A major cinema would have a 'first run' reel and in the late 40's this cost ten pounds per issue.

There would be further 'runs' of the same reel and probably a small independent cinema out in the sticks would be having a fifth 'run' - three weeks old at two pounds an issue.

Newsreels were extended in length on special occasions such as the Derby and Grand National and would be shown in the cinemas in London the same night. For instance all stops would be pulled out for the Grand National and companies would vie with each other to have it showing first in the West End (and usually Movietone were first). The Grand National run at Aintree, 3 pm; twice round the course; approximately twenty minutes; then the dozen crew of each newsreel company at various places round the course would hurriedly unload the magazines, can it, label it, enclose a dope sheet and hot foot it to a central point where a motor cyclist would be waiting to rush it to the nearest airport where a special light aircraft would be waiting to take it to one of the London airports where another motor cyclist would rush it to the particular newsreel he was employed by. The labs would develop it, make a slash print to be edited. It would then be dubbed using the natural sound plus music and the commentator. The edited print and sound tracks went back to the labs for them to match the negative and add the sound and make release prints. So by 9 pm that same evening the Grand National would be showing in the West End cinemas six hours after the race started in Liverpool, two hundred miles

away, quite a feat in those days.

British Movietone News was the first sound newsreel in 1929 following on from the first 'talkie' - The Jazz Singer (US 1927, Piccadilly Theatre September 1928). The variable density sound was recorded on the side of the negative in the camera in advance of the picture by the Fox/Movietone 'glowlamp' method. A source of light modulated by the sound passed through a hairline slit in a quartz strip on to the negative.

Later the light valve system was used with noise reduction. In this case a constant source of light passed through the light valve, a gate formed by two fine wires suspended between the poles of a magnet and modulated by the sound. So in one case there is a varying light passing through a constant slit and the other is a constant light passing through a varying slit and the noise reduction effected by keeping the fine wires or 'strings' closed when there was no modulation. (don't think I am telling you how to suck eggs but it may be interesting to those who don't know!). The original Movietone Wall camera and sound amplifier with the glowlamp system may be seen at the Museum of the Moving Image atop a genuine Reo Truck used by Movietone in the late 20s and early 30s.

A newsreel crew consisted of a sound cameraman and a soundman travelling in a specially adapted private car or shooting brake. Movietone used Humber Super Snipes or Pullmans, the roof was strengthened and covered with ribbed rubber and four tripod clamps fitted to enable the tripod to be mounted either at the front or rear of the roof. The rear seats were removed and a level straight-through floor fitted from the back of the front seats to the tail to accommodate the half ton of camera and sound equipment. An extra dynamo was fitted in order to charge camera and sound batteries on the move between assignments. We used to do an average of 40,000 miles per annum.



There was a good reason for using a private car, specially the Movietone Humbers which to all outward appearances looked like a normal car. The government used Humbers so often we were able to gain entry to places which would not admit a van or shooting-brake. A good example of this was the Derby which the Royals always attended and left soon after the main race. Cameraman Norman Fisher and I were always on the grandstand roof above the Royal Box. Fortunately there was a lift and we were able to de-rig quickly and get the gear to the ground, collect the car from the Derby Stables opposite the stand entrance, load up and keep an eye open for the Royals to leave in their retinue of Humbers, join on the end and, looking like one of them, have a rapid drive back to London as all traffic was held up on route. So we got our film in quick for processing. There used to be a Superintendent of police from Scotland Yard on horseback always in attendance at Royal functions like the Derby. He was known as 'cod's eyes', I don't think he had a mother!; but he used to close his eyes or didn't see us when we joined in the procession at the racecourse.

Newsreel crews were never identified as 'stars' behind the stories and so remained anonymous; the pictures and sound were often memorable, but their creators names unknown. We travelled far and wide. My cameraman, the late Paul Wyand and I, on one memorable assignment, the Royal Tour of the Commonwealth in 1953/54, we travelled 26,757 miles by air in eighteen flights by eleven different airlines, 11,624 miles by

sea, 6,000 miles by road and 1619 miles by rail. Our results, filmed in Eastman colour with an anamorphic lens, stereophonic sound, were not used for news but made in to a full length feature, the first British Cinemascope film, *The Flight of the White Heron*.





David Samuelson joined Movietone in 1941, working first as a projectionist. One of his jobs was to project film for the military and naval censors, including Hilton Craig [qv], and to cut out the shots to which they objected. As he later recalled, 'Lieutenant Craig and I would sit through all these films and whenever there was something like that happening he'd say: 'That's out, that's out, that's out'...I then went back to the cutting room and took out that piece of negative.' In 1942 Samuelson was transferred to the Movietone cutting room. In 1944 he joined the RAF, but he returned to Movietone in 1947 as a cameraman, his first credited story being 'ALAMEIN REUNION 1947' in British Movietone News No.960A of October 1947. In November 1947 he was in the camera team that filmed 'THE ROYAL WEDDING' for British Movietone News No.964. In July 1949 Samuelson was one of the Movietone cameramen sent to cover the dock strike, and his footage appeared in British Movietone News No.1049A as 'DOCK STRIKE - SERIOUS DEVELOPMENTS.' According to the shot list this story begins with shots of 'newspaper boys shouting out Royal Proclamation - Emergency proclamation, etc. various shots.' However, the magazine Impact denounced this as a 'highly dangerous distortion of news,' revealing that when Movietone discovered that the newsboys were not shouting about the crisis, 'cameraman Samuelson manned the breach, grabbed a stack of papers and yelled full into the conveniently placed Movietone camera, 'Proclamation signed...read all about it!' Samuelson's expenses form shows that this fake cost 2s 6d in 'Tip to news boy for loan of papers and pitch.' In 1950 Samuelson filmed with the RAF display team, using an Eymo camera. In 1952 he managed to film the final sinking of the 'Flying Enterprise,' being the only cameraman to get footage, and in June 1953 he was posted in Westminster Abbey to film material for 'THE CORONATION' in British Movietone News No.1252A. Samuelson appeared on camera in 'GIANT CRANE' in No.1288 of February 1954, the shotlist noting that it shows how 'David Samuelson fixes remote control camera to bucket.' Samuelson remained on the staff of Movietone until 1960, his last credit being for 'HENLEY REGATTA' in No.1622 of June 1960. After 1960 Samuelson did occasional freelance work for Movietone, principally on major Royal events. He left the company in 1981. Samuelson also worked with his brothers as a director of Samuelson Film Services Ltd.