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Let's Wait for the Newsreel

A bitter struggle impends between the major companies engaged in dispensing "news in motion." The Depression, the growth of chains of theatres, now being broken up, the advent of sound dealt serious blows to the newsreel, from which it is just now recovering. A new answer is expected to the patron's oft-repeated suggestion, "Let's wait for the newsreel."

by Anthony North

IN truth, in recent years not so many of the half-million or more Americans who are reported to go each week to our motion picture palaces and to the second run neighborhood houses have been bothering to wait. Junior's restlessness after seven reels of West, Loy, Gable and/or Hepburn; or Sister's headache after the same dosage, has become acceptable grounds for voiding what once was sacrosanct in American mass worship before the silver screen. That loyalty was implicit in the one-time national apology, "But I only go to see the newsreels."

How, or exactly when, that bromide began to lose its force—and it was a force once so great that it led small, well appointed theatres in a few of the great metropolitan areas to specialize exclusively in the fare of newsreel films—it is difficult to state. The Depression, with the necessity to cut all expenses unmercifully, no doubt had much to do with it. But the boom that went before the fall also contained a kind of deadly virus. In that boom the larger producing companies began to acquire their own chains of theatres as a means to certain and continuous outlets for their super-spectacles as well as for their extremely regular program pictures. From this it was but a step to a decision on the part of the large Hollywood producers to supply the entire program, including the newsreel. Much of the spirit of free competition and rugged individualism went out of newsreel production right at that point. The often denied practice of block-booking, which nevertheless existed as a constant nightmare for the independent exhibitors, began to include the taking of the "big company" newsreel. In many cases it was free, or nearly free, bait. The exhibitor right then began to lose all idea that a newsreel was anything for which he ever should pay good money.

And now that cycle is closing. It is largely a forced closure, growing as it does out of the receiverships and bankruptcies of many of the large Hollywood producing

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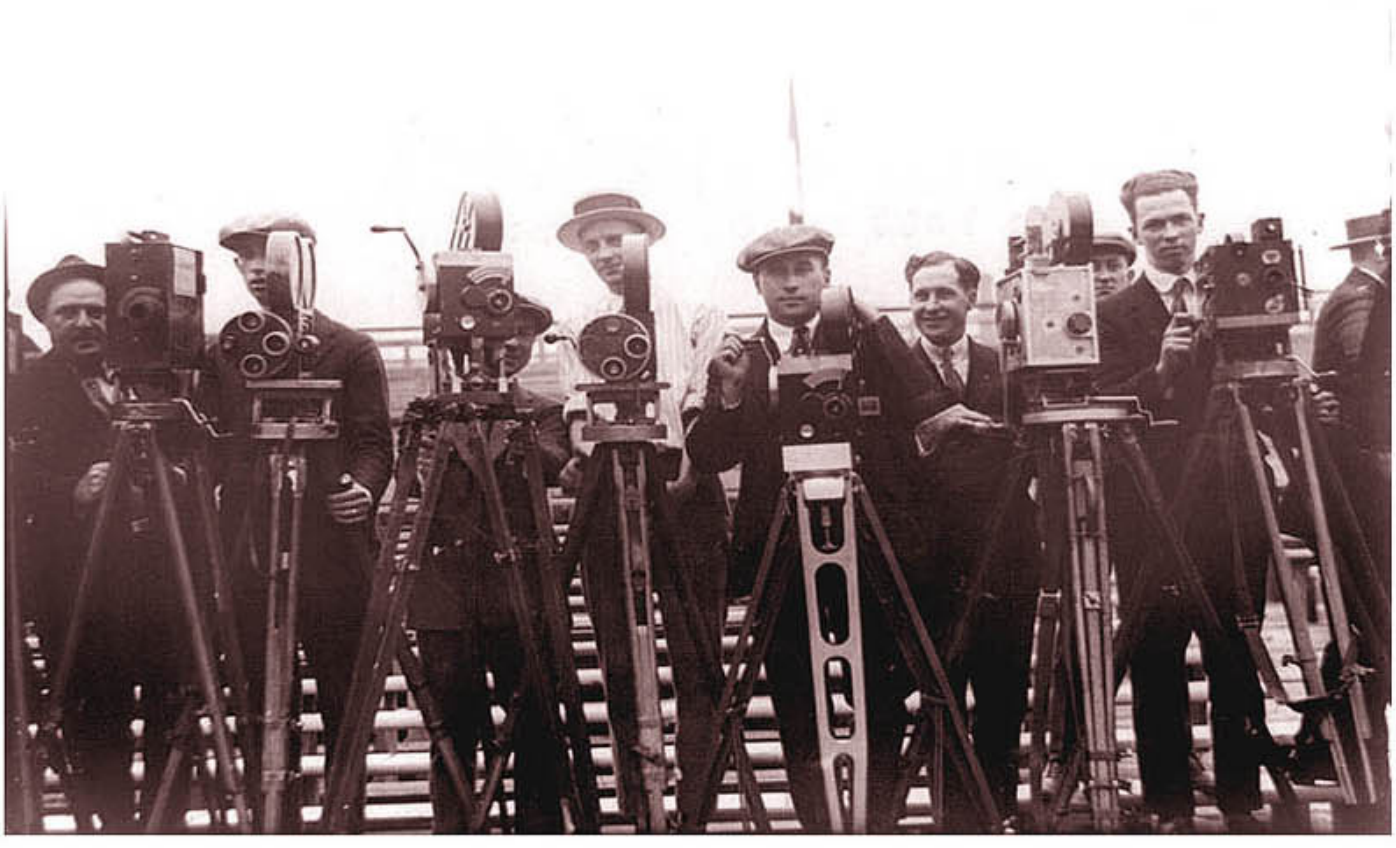

companies, which has been followed by divorcing these organizations from a direct to the consumer monopoly, the break-up of large coast-to-coast chains of theatres and the throwing of many of these houses upon the market. The result of this dissolution and the re-emergence of the private, independent exhibitor are the principal factors in the recreation of a new market for the newsreel. Such exhibitors will have the right once more to pick and choose their screen news pictures.

This fall the newsreels—five of them nationally known—will enter into a real battle to capture this business. Sharp realignments are now in the making in preparation for this war, from which there are many indications that the newsreel may emerge greatly altered, it is hoped improved. Hearst-Metrotone News will branch away from Fox Movitone News. The Hearst organization for many years has purchased its negatives from Fox. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, behind the Hearst outfit largely as distributor, is preparing to establish itself with its own news picture-gathering force. Money, at least in the early stages of this drive, is to be no important object. *"Time,"* recently so successful in a promotion venture into the field of radio, plans to enter the newsreel world as the producer of a new type of newsreel. There is every indication that the business will be blasted wide open in a to-the-death struggle to capture this new, but nevertheless still limited, market.

With all apologies to the sincere and courageous workers in this field, the newsreel remains an extremely phony form. The transition from silence to sound has not been a happy one. It has made possible the screen interview, a type of news-opinion dissemination which it is extremely doubtful that the newsreel ever should have undertaken. In straight news reportage, to be 100 per cent successful the lens should be trained, the crank turning on any and every scene, wherever it may be, when a news event begins to occur thereon. This obviously is an impossible requirement to meet. Courageously accepting this unbeatable handicap, however, the men of the newsreels often move faster, get farther, and spare less expense, than do their cousins of other *genres* of news gathering. On the occasion of the recent marine disaster which befell the *Morro Castle,* a New York evening paper carried a whole column interview with a Pathe cameraman who was one of the first to reach the scene. Unfortunately the news rewrite man who put his venture into print failed to state that the cameraman had gone to the scene by airplane. In the lead of the news story, the camera fellow is just there looking down at the whole tragic scene, an unconscious statement of the strange ubiquitousness of the newsreel man which is, nevertheless, often typical of these workers and which may become more so in the war ahead. But despite this great effort to overcome this time-place handicap, to abolish the phony and the false, a whole new flood of handicaps washed through the work rooms of the newsreel companies with the advent of sound.

The advent of sound a few years ago vastly complicated the entire motion picture business and with it the newsreels.

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The old silent newsreel was all picture, each subject with an introductory title and two or three sub-titles—usually poisonous in their construction—the effort of a would-be author to become articulate. The sound newsreel subject is a combination of picture and sound with, usually, only the introductory title—still frequently poisonously cute.

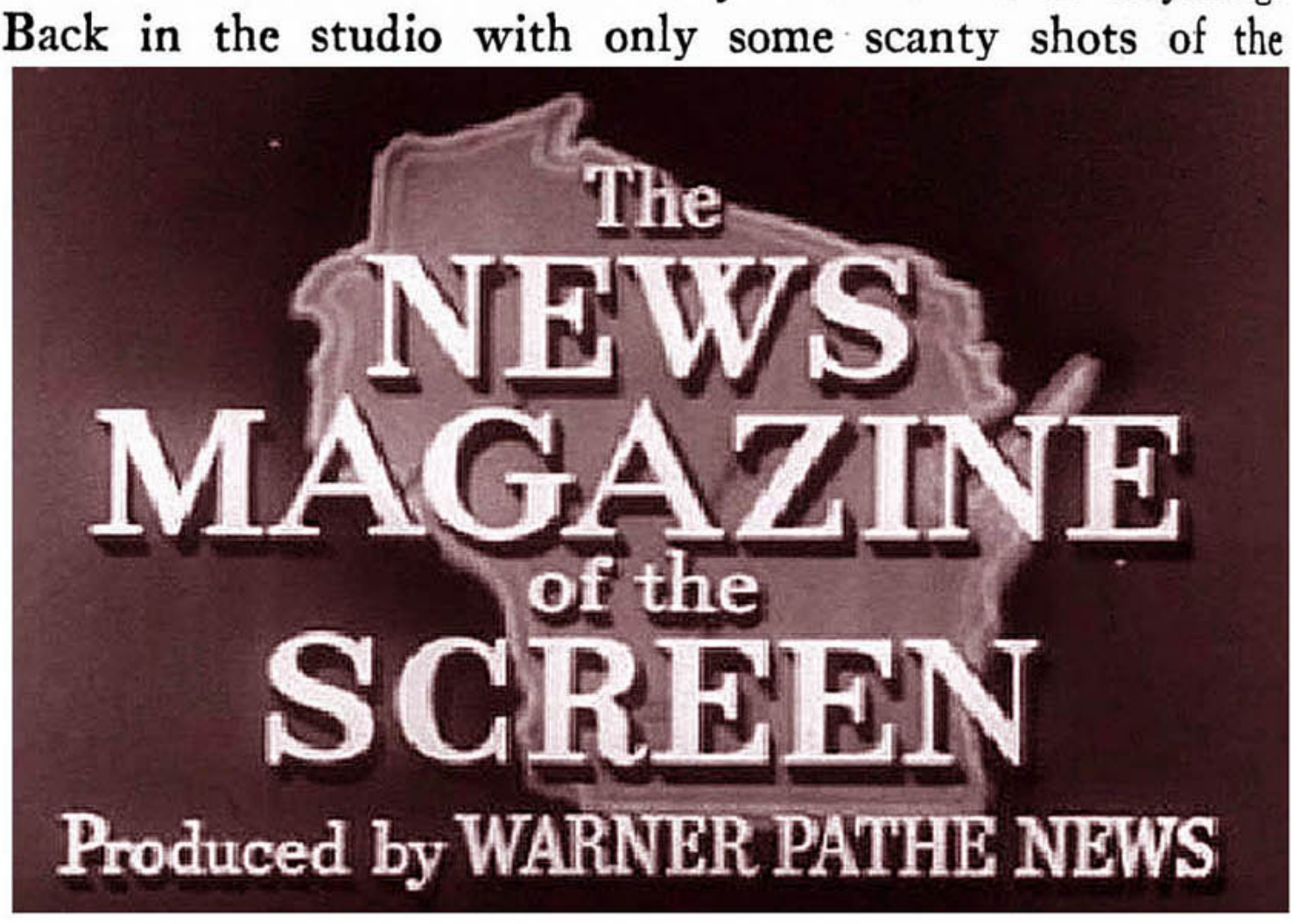
It is safe to say that most of the newsreel pictures you see are not made in sound cameras. That is, the sound which accompanies them is not the actual sound you would have heard had you been present at the event. Sound equipment is cumbersome and very expensive. It requires a crew of two men instead of just a cameraman; and its transportation is an added expense and problem. One newsreel successfully operates with but two sound cameras. Practically the only honest natural sound you hear in this reel is the occasional speaker included in the release.

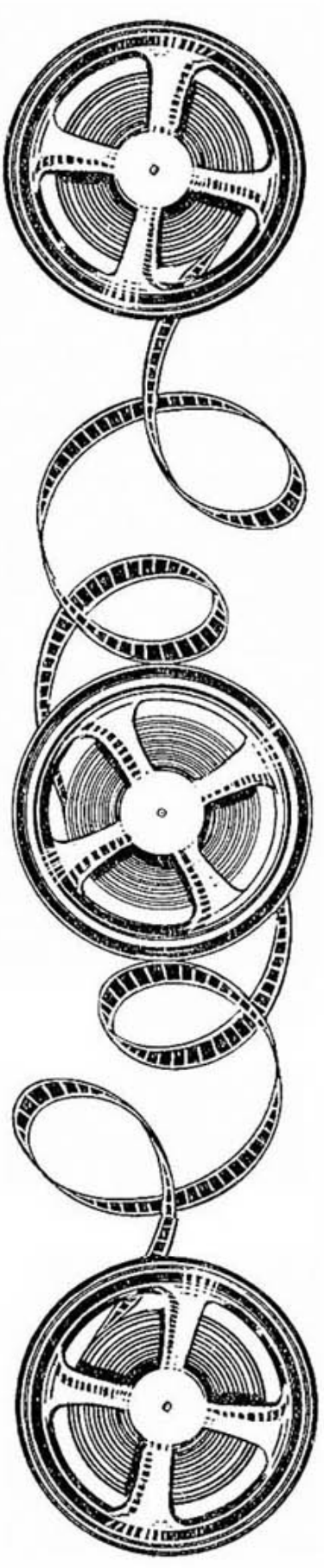
The success of the nearly "soundless" newsreel has had its effect on the entire business. First, the newsreels are becoming more and more expert at faking sound into silent pictures. Several outfits of sound equipment, purchased in the mad scramble when sound pictures came in, have been retired and gather dust in garages around the country. More and more the newsreels have been reducing the overhead by reverting to silent camera coverage with the sound "dubbed" in later in the studios.

A football game will serve as an excellent example of the bag of tricks which the newsreel editor has at his disposal. The game may have been covered by a silent or a sound camera. Time enters into the situation here. One of the newsreels shoots its football games almost invariably with sound cameras. An offstage commentator is sent to the game and he describes the play right along with the taking of the pictures. This enables the editors to save the three or four hours time which it takes to dub on the sound and offstage comment in the studio. Monday is a very busy day in the make-up laboratory of a newsreel. A great many stories are covered and a great deal of film shot over the weekend. The editors are practically swamped with it on Monday mornings. If the time of dubbing or synchronizing the story can be saved, there is a chance that the Monday issue of the newsreel can be finished—ready for release—at a decent hour.

On the other hand the football game is one of the easiest stories to dub or synchronize. About the only sound you would hear other than the comment of the offstage voice is the rising and falling of the crowd's roar. All newsreels have recordings of this typical noise. They just dub it on the silent picture, raising the volume when the play is particularly exciting. Easy?

Last year when Bernard Shaw arrived in the United States on a world cruise the newsreels sent their men down to the boat to get him to say something. Mr. Shaw was diffident, not to say temperamental. He wouldn't coöperate at all. He wouldn't talk. He just wouldn't do anything. Back in the studio with only some scanty shots of the





great Shaw backing and cavorting about the deck, one of the reels dubbed on some very interesting sound. Several of the boys in the studio contributed a running chatter of informal comment. Such shouts as, "Mr. Shaw, can't you stand still a minute!", "Will you stop moving around and let us get a picture!" etc., etc., were heard through a general babble of voices. The critic for one of the leading trade publications in the amusement field was completely fooled and congratulated the cameraman for that particular newsreel for letting his camera run and picking up the informal comments of the exasperated reporters and photographers. All the sound was actually faked in the studio!

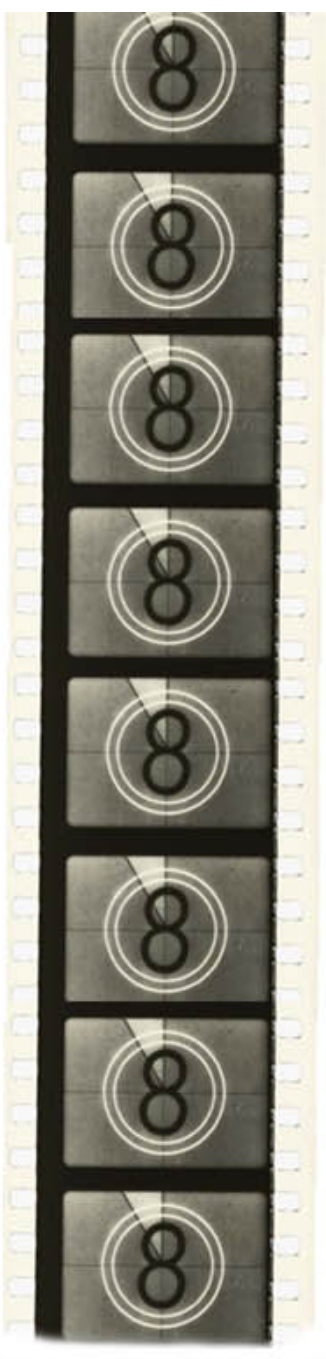
It is only fair to say that most of the sound you hear that *is* faked is taken from recordings of the approximate sound you would hear. That is, the roar of the football crowd is the recording of an actual football crowd. The only thing is that the crowd yelling in the picture of the Yale-Harvard game is quite likely to be the sound from the N.Y.U.-Oregon game of the year or two years before! The faked sound of cars in an automobile race is the actual sound made by racing cars, but it is not the sound made by the racing cars you're looking at.

A well-equipped newsreel studio has several hundreds of records which will permit it to give a fair imitation of almost any sound. These records are just like any phonograph record and the sound is transferred electrically to the film. Of course, there are occasions where the studio hasn't the necessary "canned" sound effect, and in this event strategy is resorted to. It is only fair to warn you that sometimes when you hear pigs grunting in a farm picture, you are actually hearing a record of lions roaring. The record is speeded up on its turntable, changing the pitch and slowing the sound until it is at least a fair imitation of the panting porkers.

Sound pictures opened a wide opportunity for all sorts of trickery. That trickery is not more often resorted to in the newsreels is a tribute to the honesty of the editors. They can and do still play hob with the remarks of speakers because they can change the entire meaning of a paragraph or sentence by cutting great sections out of the film—or even small sections. You have frequently seen speakers apparently twitch or "jump" on the screen. When this occurs you can be sure that some part of the speaker's remarks have been deleted, usually because the speaker has raved on and on, and the newsreel can't under ordinary circumstances give him more than a minute or two of screen time. The sound goes right along with the picture and when part of the speech has to go, part of the picture of the speaker has to go with it.

Concerning the offstage explanatory voice there are several schools of alleged thought. None of them is very pleasing to the listener who has any pretense to learning or background. There is the newsreel employing one of radio's best known announcers. This newsreel plasters the announcer's voice all over the theatre. He scarcely stops for breath, and too frequently he leans heavily on the threadbare pun followed by a self-deprecating *"Oh-oh!"* Then he goes on to a worse one. Being a radio announcer he allows himself either to anticipate the action in a sport event or to fall behind the action. That is, the eye impression registers and then later, along comes the comment pertaining to it.

Another of the newsreels employs, or did until recently, a sort of declaiming thrush who lilts through his comment, sliding up and down the diatonic scale at least an octave. His cheery little melody never varies whether he describes a train wreck in which 100 people are killed or a baby parade at Asbury Park.



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Two of the other reels use commentators too dull to leave any very definite impression, which is probably the best idea. After all, honestly handled and released, the pictures, plus the natural, or even the faked, sound, should tell the story with a minimum of offstage comment.

The fifth newsreel uses a variety of voices. Its editors strive to have a different voice for each picture in the release or at least not the same voice on two successive stories. The recording quality of some of the voices so used has been pretty foul, but the effort to create the impression of on-the-scene comment has been partially successful. This newsreel, too, does more honest on-the-scene sound and voice jobs, eliminating both dubbed sound and voice, than any of the others. How much, if any, of the worst of these practices will be changed in the war ahead remains to be seen.

In assembling the newsreel as a whole, the editors do try to give their product tempo. Taking the available stories for the current issue they try to arrange them in an order which will give pace. For instance, if there are two speeches, they will be separated in the newsreel. The *feeling* of stories is important. Hence a picture of a train wreck would not be placed in the reel near a picture of an earthquake or that of the funeral of a public figure. Sometimes this great desire for pacing, variety, tempo, call it what you will, weakens the newsreel. There have been instances of good stories being left out and mediocre ones used because all the good ones just didn't "fit" together. This, of course, is stupid. The newsreel should attempt an interesting arrangement of its subjects, but this should be secondary. The goal of the newsreel should be, and ultimately will have to be, the presentation of the news whatever the news may be. That will be a new kind of newsreel, a possible result of the new phase which is now beginning.

What to do about censorship is another question which must be answered in the dawning day of revived competition. There is no actual, formal censorship of the newsreel. No board views each newsreel issued and says what may or may not be shown. But there is a very definite two-fold censorship of newsreels—from within and from without.

Oddly enough, the censorship from within is by far the more devastating. First, of course, there are the eliminations dictated by good taste —the same self-censorship imposed by the better newspapers. But this is just a beginning. From there the newsreel powers bejuggle editorial integrity and use or eliminate scenes or entire subjects because of prejudice which is politely cloaked in the nicer word, "policy."

The outstanding example of this *policy* censorship during the past year or more has been the handling of news from Germany. In the case of one newsreel, orders came from the Olympian heights of company presidential and vice-presidential swivel chairs that no news from Germany whatever was to be used in the newsreel unless it was revolution against the Hitler regime. This applied not only to news of a political nature but of any nature at all. The restraining order followed close upon the heels of one of the greatest news pictures ever made—the actual burning of books by the students of a Berlin university. Personal feeling and prejudice aside, viewed cold-bloodedly from a standpoint of news, it was a story which will live forever in the mind of everyone who saw it. Hobgoblins dancing about in the distorting light of a huge bonfire. Danc-

the distorting light of a huge bonfire. Dancing and singing and tossing to the licking flames the fluttering pages of world classics. One shivered as one would shiver at a carnival in hell. An appalling dervish lifted out of the perverted activity of the dark ages! And yet this picture was practically the swan song of German news as far as the newsreel is concerned. "We won't publicize Hitler or Hitler's Germany," was the last word of those who controlled that particular newsreel.

For months this same newsreel had tried to get into one of Germany's famed concentration camps for political prisoners. Then Germany let them in on the occasion of Christmas pardons for several hundred of those confined. A really fine newsreel story was secured *inside* a concentration camp and even though it revealed that only a small percentage of the prisoners were Jewish—that the vast majority were gentile communists and agitators—there was a great cry against using it because it showed Hitler in a favorable light in that the story dealt with the release of prisoners. Editorial integrity! The picture was used and immediately after its release the peremptory no - pictures - at - all - from - Germany order went through.

It is interesting to note, however, that where there was a picture of a non-political nature from Germany—one that revealed no brown-shirted storm troopers, no swastika—it sometimes got into this newsreel *datelined* in Denmark or some unimpressive little European principality. Editorial integrity!

Outside censorship is much less devastating. For a long time Boston would not permit the showing of wrestling or riot pictures. For some months now the newsreels have, with joined forces, been fighting censorship from Chicago's city government which placed a strict ban on all riot pictures. This situation has been partially adjusted.

It seemed incredible that the French Government, from Paris, France, could dictate the newsreel fare of the people of Paris, Ill., or Phoenix, Ariz. But it can be done! Cameramen risked life and limb to photograph the action in the French riots in the *Place de la Concorde* and elsewhere early this year. Frantically, but too late, the French Government forbade the export of these films. At least one newsreel had already shipped them over to England before the restraining order. Before the pictures could be released in England or reshipped to the United States the London company head received a frantic wire from his Paris colleague pleading that the film be destroyed immediately lest he languish indefinitely in an unattractive French jail. The gentleman had the opportunity to join the heroes' host and say, "Jail and be damned!" but he was not of the stuff of heroes. The answer lies in the fact that France could ban the company's entire product, features, short subjects and newsreel, from the country. Ultimately pictures of the French riots *were* released by the newsreels but they were carefully censored. No shots of the actual attack on police and troops were permitted to be shown.

For many years crime in any form was taboo in the newsreel. Newsreel editors calmly ignored it. Here again they met the ever-present conflict between news and entertainment, a conflict which seems certain of definite settlement in the period of unrestricted competition immediately ahead. The first motion picture ever made was of Edison's laboratory assistants and it revealed him in his own words, "making monkey shines before the camera." The motion picture was born in slap-stick. The motion picture remained largely slap-stick because it is the common denominator of human interest, for a depressingly long time. Entertainment values change slowly. New departure in newsreel technique is even slower.

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Some time ago the newsreel began to let its audience in on *nice* crime. Your crime reports, if you got them via the screen, were carefully sifted and even more carefully presented. It dealt with such prosaic events as the dereliction of a cabinet officer or the clean-cut embezzlement of funds. Gradually it progressed, still skirting mincingly the edge of crime that had more human interest.

Raids on particularly big stills during the prohibition era were filmed and released, but these, too, came under the heading of *nice crime*. Latterly most of the nation scarcely recognized bootlegging as a crime anyway.

Along came Two-Gun Crowley and the famous concentration of police in West 90th Street, Manhattan, for his capture. Tear gas, machine guns—action! With an advance tip the newsreels couldn't ignore it. The Lindbergh kidnaping case opened up a new field. The newsreel crime story began to have human interest. Kidnaping followed kidnaping. There were captures. Huge sums of money were demanded and paid. The news screamed from the front pages of newspapers all over the country. The newsreels let down the bars a bit and took kidnapings in.

Then there began a sort of seepage. Dodging unpleasant detail, there appeared short, two-or-three-scene reviews of crimes more violent or touching on previously forbidden subjects. The occasional few shots of a woman on trial for murder. These were confined to pictures of her entering or leaving the courthouse and made no pretense of complete coverage of the news story. Then lynchings became more or less general. A delicate matter. But the audience had been fed its appetizers of kidnapings and other "not-so-nice" crime stories. The newsreels went into the matter of lynchings. One newsreel fished $30,000 worth of its sound equipment out of a Maryland river as a result of its interest in a Maryland lynching. The burghers had resented publicity and had pushed the sound truck into the water to make clear their resentment.

But the lid, if it wasn't off, was definitely askew. Audiences *were* interested in crime. The *didn't* get up and leave the theatre. They *wanted* to see the places where crimes about which they had read had been committed and pictures of those suspected of having committed them.

The trail of Dillinger through the Middle West, following his escape from jail at Crown Point, Ind., was never cold before newsreel sound trucks and cameramen appeared. He led them just as merry a chase as he led the exasperated Federal and state officials. And at each of his stopping places, he left the makings of a newsreel crime story.

The world-famous Scottsboro Case resolved around an alleged sex crime. The newsreels couldn't hurdle this—at first. But as the months dragged on the case took on a secondary significance. Its original value became buried under a welter of widely radiating opinion. It became a *cause*. It ceased to come under the classification "crime" and was moved over under the classification of "social problem." Even then it bit deep into controversy-prejudice. The newsreel dallied with it behind the scenes. It was outlined for coverage. Possible angles of approach and handling were discussed and discarded. Ultimately it was released with the emphasis off the original crime. It was valued—and properly—as a social problem. And it has definitely opened the door for newsreel recognition of other social problems.

So the scope of the newsreel is gradually broadening with the news consciousness—the broad-mindedness of the

public. These are the only considerations that can continue the newsreel on the path of important progress.

Because it is impossible in advance to measure accurately how bitter or how acute the competitive spirit may become in the approaching newsreel war, it is difficult to predict if the "bought story" leading to the "stolen story" will play a return engagement on the American newsreel screen. Possibly it may; but even if it is a closed chapter, it is one worth reviewing briefly.

Stolen stories are, on the whole, a lost art in this country, beyond the few stolen "candid camera" shots of camera-shy notables. Time was when exclusive motion picture rights to news events—usually sport subjects—were sold to one particular company for a financial consideration, which frequently was considerable. The competing newsreels frequently set about to "steal" the pictures. Not the actual pictures made by the buying company but to take their own pictures surreptitiously. This led to no end of fun and, not infrequently, to a few broken heads. Subterfuge and force were nicely blended, usually with more or less satisfactory results. Mostly, everybody got pictures of varying degrees of importance. This had much to do with the wane of the bought pictures, while their stealing was terminated, through certain court actions. Abroad it is still indulged in. Some company usually buys the rights to the big horse races, soccer and rugby games, and the cameramen of the other companies promptly disguise themselves as fish peddlers, peanut salesmen, bearers of oats or liniment and everybody releases pictures of the "exclusive" event. The buying company has the small pleasure of prefacing its release with "Official Pictures," but the victory, more often than not, is a Pyrrhic one.

In the days, forty years ago when the motion picture was born and reached the eye through Edison's Kinetoscope peep show, the prizefight was one of the first things a wondering public viewed. The motion picture prizefight has had a tumultuous history since that early day. So hectic, in fact, that Federal legislation illegalizing their transportation in inter-state commerce has virtually eliminated them as a commercial venture, though outlaw concerns still buy the rights to the big fights and certain of the lesser exhibitors connive in releasing them. The profit, however, is small.

The law which virtually ended the prizefight picture was on the statute books when Jack Dempsey stepped through the ropes at Shelby, Mont., to settle with Tom Gibbons the question of heavyweight supremacy back in 1923. You may recall that the Dempsey-Gibbons fight was the pride and joy of the Shelby Chamber of Commerce and that the little Montana cow town lost a considerable number of dollars in its attempt to be a sort of municipal promoter. The lads out there were a hardy breed and despite the fact that they had difficulty raising Mr. Dempsey's guaranty, Mr. Dempsey thought it wise to go through with his end of the bargain. He did so under the blazing rays of a July sun and less closely, perhaps, under the menacing muzzles of efficient six shooters.

In those days newsreels were interested in prizefights. They couldn't use the actual fighting, but they could cover the fight by showing the locale, the colorful crowds, the principals, the raising of the hand after the decision, or the prone figure after the knock-out—everything in fact, right up to and immediately following the blows struck.

One of the reels had bought the exclusive motion picture rights from the financially harassed Shelby promoters. Due to the fact that the promoters were the entire town, everyone from the mayor and sheriff right on down had a peculiar interest in the Dempsey-Gibbons imbroglio and all financial matters appertaining thereto. In addition Shelby was prepared to protect its rights in the quaintly informal tradition of the West. It looked as though the pictures were going to be hard to steal. One company did it by the ponderous expedient of smuggling in camera and cameraman in a huge lemonade barrel! The crowning

insult was that the "thieves" got their pictures out and on the screen long before the company which had paid for the rights.

One of the last "bought pictures" in this country was of the famous Zev vs. Papyrus horse race at Belmont Park, also in 1923. It was about the last big effort. And though herculean not altogether successful. An army of private detectives was thrown around the park to keep competing companies away. This was hot incentive for the competing companies. Those few who did filter through the guard were annoyed by gentlemen employed to reflect the sun's rays into their camera lenses by means of large mirrors. An airplane smoke screen was actually laid during the race to keep the unlicensed competition from making pictures. But the other reels released pictures of the event just the same.

It remains a thing wholly within the sphere of prophecy as to whether the new force of competition which is just now beginning the re-enter the arena of the newsreel will bring back the exclusively paid for story and the attendant practices of the opposition companies. It should produce a newsier, a more exciting, show. It may be even more "dishonest" in its make-up. It may, for a while at least, let down all the bars of self-imposed censorship. It may improve the work of the dubbed in commentator. If it does but a few of these things there may be a more unanimous and enthusiastic response to the suggestion, "Let's wait for the newsreel."