

STATEMENT REGARDING LIBRARY OF CONGRESS  
NATIONAL FILM PRESERVATION BOARD REAUTHORIZATION

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

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City Historian, Grand Rapids, Michigan

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**Blissveldt Romance**, a 20 minute film melodrama produced in Grand Rapids, Michigan in 1915, will never be confused with **Gone With The Wind**, nor held up for future classes of film makers to emulate. However, its preservation, using funds from the AFI/NEA Film Preservation Program, under the auspices of the National Film Preservation Board, was a contribution to Grand Rapids history that went well beyond the archival conservation of a single film.

**Blissveldt Romance's** plot is thin, centering around a young farm boy who seeks his fortune in the big city (Grand Rapids) and after initially being rebuffed as a suitor, saves the daughter of a rich banker from a burning building. The banker then permits the young couple to wed, and they live happily ever after. Whatever its shortcomings as a dramatic film, **Blissveldt Romance** contains the oldest surviving motion picture footage of the city, featuring scenes of downtown street activity, interurban rail connections with neighboring communities, and the resort life that once existed at Reed's Lake on the edge of the city. Since its preservation along with another film depicting the **Annual Street Railway Company Employee's Picnic**, it has been shown in

several local venues, and excerpts from both films have been used in commercial and non-commercial productions.

In addition to AFI/NEA funding for archival conservation of the 35mm nitrocellulose base films, National Film Preservation Board staff members provided information necessary to develop a restoration strategy for the films and helped identify professionals capable of doing the work. Funds and information of this type are not generally available to the small staffs and limited resources of organizations like the Grand Rapids Public Library.

The AFI/NEA \$1,100 grant served to validate the importance of the two films and lend credibility to the Library's collection of motion picture and still images. News of the project resulted in over \$5,000 in additional funds for restoring the two films, and public viewing of the restored films encouraged several other individuals to bring forth additional commercial and amateur films for the Library's collection.

Both the "**Romance**" and "**Picnic**" were discovered several years ago when the Gezon family of Grand Rapids purchased a Lake Michigan cottage once owned local entrepreneur Benjamin Hanchett, who had underwritten the original production of the films. A thorough cleaning uncovered the films in a corner of the cottage attic. After keeping the films for several years, the family decided to give them to the Public Library so they could be enjoyed by the entire community.

Subsequent research revealed the historical significance of the films, and when Library staff members learned of the AFI-NEA

program they decided to seek support for a restoration project. Using the combined AFI-NEA and local funds, approximately 3,000 feet of nitrocellulose base footage was cleaned and repaired, and a 35mm contact negative and trial print were made. Finally, a 16mm reduction negative and print, and a 3/4" video master and 1/2" video user copies were produced to provide researchers with easy access to the films.

While they will never enjoy widespread recognition or a national reputation, films such as **Blissveldt Romance** and the **Annual Street Railway Employees Picnic** are nonetheless important for a full appreciation of America's cinema heritage. At the same time that prominent pioneer film makers were creating features for a growing national audience, lesser known individuals and film companies were taking the new art form to cities across the country. Director O.W. Lamb and photographer W.R. Mayfield of the Paragon Feature Film Company of Omaha, Nebraska, makers of the two Grand Rapids films are also known to have made similar film in Battle Creek, Michigan, and probably other cities as well. In each city, they produced their films with a cast and crew of local residents, thus demonstrating how films were made, and widening their audience. **Blissveldt Romance's** premier produced the largest film audiences Grand Rapids had yet seen. It is important that films such as these are preserved, not only for the local images they contain, but also to document their role in the development of the movie industry.

The critical role of the National Center for Film and Video

The critical role of the National Center for Film and Video Preservation in preserving these two films cannot be overstated. AFI-NEA funds served as the catalyst for matching local funds, and National Film Preservation Board staff members provided professional assistance and technical guidance necessary to develop a proper preservation and conservation strategy. Equally important, the AFI-NEA funds were the seed money needed to generate local matching support, and the publicity created by the project led to the preservation of additional footage that might otherwise have gone undiscovered.

Support to local projects such as the preservation of **Blissveldt Romance** and the **Annual Street Railway Employees Picnic** represents a small part of the total work of the National Film Preservation Board. However, the results produced by such projects are a strong argument for continuing the Board's mission and the importance of its reauthorization to develop a comprehensive national film preservation program.