

The Museum of Modern Art

West 53 Street, New York, N.Y. 10019 Tel. 245-3200 Cable: Modernart

No. 17
Saturday, February 10, 1968
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Kemp R. Niver, the man responsible for restoring the paper print collection of the Library of Congress, will speak at The Museum of Modern Art on Thursday evening, February 29, at 8 p.m. His lecture, "In the Beginning," presented by the Museum's Department of Film with the cooperation of Thomas J. Brandon, will be illustrated with a selection of some of the most significant films from the collection through the courtesy of Brandon Films, Inc., as well as exhibits of the paper prints that Mr. Niver worked with.

As the film showing and lecture are presented as part of the Museum's regular Thursday evening film program, there is no charge in addition to the usual entrance fee (\$1.25 non-members, members free). The Museum galleries are open every Thursday evening until 9 p.m.

Many of our accepted ideas about the pioneering era of the motion picture medium have been based, necessarily, on hearsay and secondary sources. But recently, due to the work of Kemp Niver, 3,000 films made between 1894 and 1912 have been made available to modern audiences. Until 1912, when the copyright law was amended to include motion pictures as a separate category, the only way a film cameraman or producer could protect his work was to make a paper contact print directly from the negative and register it as "still" photographs with the Copyright Office of the Library of Congress. In 1891 Thomas Edison had filed patent applications for two machines--the "Kinetoscope" and the "Kinetograph"; three years later, Edison's project supervisor, William K.L. Dickson, applied for the first movie copyright by filing paper prints of Fred Ott's immortal "Sneeze" with the Copyright Office. On January 9, 1894, a copyright entry was made for the print under its full title, "Edison Kinetoscopic Record of a Sneeze, January 7, 1894."

For decades, thousands of rolls of paper prints reposed in the Library of Congress. In 1952 officials of the Library contacted the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences for advice on identifying and restoring the paper print collection.

(more)

In turn, the Academy entrusted the job to Kemp R. Niver, who had rephotographed 1,500 old nitrate films onto modern stock for the Academy archives. For more than ten years, Mr. Niver and his staff at the Renovare Film Company in Los Angeles worked on the restoration of the Library's paper prints--soaking and redrying the old rolls of bromide paper, then rephotographing each frame onto 16 mm. stock. In addition, Mr. Niver converted all the films to a standard 24 frames per second. Since there was no standardization in either movie cameras or stock at the turn of the century (many cameras were homemade, others were devised with special quirks in order to circumvent the Edison patents), each roll of film tended to present Mr. Niver with unique and unexpected problems.

Initially, the project was underwritten by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences; but as time went by and the project broadened beyond a strictly tentative and experimental effort, there was additional financing from private sources. Finally, in 1958, by an act of Congress, the result of a bill presented by Senator Thomas H. Kuchel of California, public funds were appropriated to continue the restoration program until its completion. Mr. Niver spent another two years preparing an invaluable index of the paper print collection which was published recently by the University of California Press.

Nor more than half a million feet of modern 16 mm. film is in the Library of Congress vaults--the result of Mr. Niver's monumental work of film scholarship. It provides a wealth of material for both film buffs and film scholars--newsreels, advertising shorts, cartoons, novelties, comedies, and dramas from the period of 1894-1912, including all the early work of Porter at the Edison studios and of an ex-actor named Griffith at the American Mutoscope and Biograph Company, as well as many supposedly lost works of Méliès and other European producers.

Kemp R. Niver was born in Los Angeles on October 17, 1912. He was educated at the University of California at Berkeley, the University of Southern California, La Salle Extension University in Chicago, and Southwestern University Law School in Los Angeles, with majors in both public administration and law. He has been an
(more)

aviator, a homicide detective with the Los Angeles police department, the commander of a U.S. Navy destroyer during World War II. Mr. Niver began working as an industrial film cameraman and producer after the war; his interest in the history of film, once an avocation, has now become a full-time career. At present he is working on a number of books on film history and continuing the restoration of early motion pictures. Mr. Niver was the Administrative Curator for the Hollywood Museum from 1962 to 1964, and he is a consultant to many film museums here and abroad. He is an Associate Member of the American Society of Cinematographers and has been the associate curator of the A.S.C. since 1964; he is also a member of the Society of Motion Picture and Television Engineers. At the Academy Awards ceremonies in 1955, Mr. Niver was honored with an "Oscar" for his development of the restoration process used on the Library of Congress collection. He has contributed articles to such publications as the monthly magazine of the A.S.C., International Photographer, Variety, and The Quarterly Journal of the Library of Congress.

Additional information available from Elizabeth Shaw, Director, and Gary Arnold, Department of Public Information, The Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, New York, N.Y. 10019. 245-3200.