

Interview with Phillip Stewart



[Projected History: A Catalog of the National Stories Produced by Universal Newsreel, Volume One, 1929-1930](#)

Phillip W. Stewart

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Reviewed by Richard R. Blake for Reader Views (09/08)

Today, Tyler R. Tichelaar of Reader Views is pleased to interview Phil Stewart, who is here to talk about his new book, “*Projected History: A Catalog of the National Stories Produced by Universal Newsreel, Volume One, 1929-1930.*”

Phil Stewart was born and raised in southern California. He graduated from San Diego State University and joined the U.S. Air Force from which he retired after twenty-one years. Mr. Stewart spent most of his military service involved in TV/video production and multimedia management. He then opened his own video production company, worked as a TV producer-director for a university, managed a cable channel, and currently manages a multimedia facility for Uncle Sam. In his spare time, Mr. Stewart volunteers as a motion picture film researcher for the National Museum of the U.S. Air Force and writes non-fiction aviation and film history books. He is a member of the American Aviation Historical Society, the League of World War I Aviation Historians, and the Military Writers Society of America, among others. Along with his wife and two cats, he lives semi-quietly on the Emerald Coast of Florida.

Tyler: Thank you for joining me today, Phil. I’m excited to talk to you about your new book. To start, will you tell us how you first became interested in writing a book about Universal Newsreels?



Phil: Way back in the pre-personal computer era, while doing some on-site research at the National Archives for WWI-era films (which ultimately resulted in my first two books, “*Battlefilm*” and “*War Wings*”), I found a section of the catalog area set off by itself with

row-after-row of card catalog files. Curious, I discovered that those files contained around 600,000 catalog cards of the Universal Newsreel Library, which was donated by MCA/Universal Pictures in 1974. I spent about a week going over many of the cards and was amazed at the visual history they represented. I made a point to find a way to share my discovery, but it took over twenty years to find the means.

Tyler: Why a volume that only covers 1929-30? Why not just write one book about all the newsreels?

Phil: To ensure that the literary impact of the era came across to the reader, I chose to use the Universal Newspaper Newsreel (as it was known back then) Synopsis Sheets as the basis for the book. There is one synopsis sheet for each issue. Since there are approximately 104 issues every year, two newsreel volumes per book seemed reasonable.

Overall, Universal Newsreel covered the highs and lows of the period 1929-1967, that's 39 volumes that would equate to 20 books for the entire series. If I only wrote one book to cover this historically significant information, it would be over 4,800 pages long, NOT including the index!

Tyler: Was TV the primary reason for the demise of newsreels?

Phil: Most historians agree that the popularity of television during the 1950's, and the advent of color network broadcasts during the early 1960's resulted in a significant decline in movie theater attendance. In addition, this was also the time in which the TV network news organizations were gaining dominance and credibility for news reporting, so there was less of a need to go to a movie house to catch up on world events. Attendance decline of course meant less revenue for the Hollywood studios and as a result, the newsreel budgets were also cut to the point that it was no longer cost effective. The last company to cease newsreel operations was Universal in December, 1967.

Tyler: What about newsreels do you find fascinating?

Phil: To see history as it happened, in glorious black and white!

Tyler: Did Universal try to compete by coming out with any color newsreels in the 1960s?

Phil: It does not appear that they did. Color film and its associated processing was expensive and I would guess that Universal's management chose not to go for color for a product with a lifespan of only three to four days.

Tyler: How do you think newsreels depicted history—were they accurate, or as propaganda or even patriotic renditions of history for the American public?

Phil: Overall, I think the newsreels did a very good job depicting reality. You have to remember that news stories were mostly selected for their entertainment value, but there was a balance. Stories about Lindbergh, for example, tended to be matter-of-fact documentaries of his travels

and successes. On the other side of that coin, a story about an “airplane crossing” road sign was a misrepresentation as the cameraman paid two policemen five bucks a piece to stop traffic to embellish the story. During times of war, particularly WWII, the newsreels followed the same rules as the newspapers; they were patriotic and reported the news from an Allied viewpoint.

Tyler: I assume newsreels started in 1929 because that was soon after the invention of speaking films. What about this first year or two of newsreels stands out compared to later years?

Phil: Without going into a lengthy history, newsreels of the silent variety started in the 1910’s and continued until around 1930. The transition to sound started in the 1927-1928 timeframe. What you see during the first two years of the Universal reel is a start-up company with limited resources, new personnel, an emerging editorial style (when compared to the established studios of Pathé, Hearst, Fox and Paramount) as it explored different sequence combinations, story lengths, shooting styles, and equipment. As the years went on, the management, cameramen, film editors and script writers of Universal became very adept at doing very well with less than their competitors.

Tyler: What are the major or interesting events of the newsreels from 1929-1930? I am guessing the stock market crash of 1929 is a major player?

Phil: Surprisingly no. In the Universal Newspaper Newsreel, the stock market crash was mostly noted in stories about the effects on regular folks, which was relatively mild in 1930. The major interests appeared to be aviation, animals of all types, disasters, and stunts.

Tyler: Phil, you said earlier the newsreels were intended to entertain—will you give us some examples? Were they seeking human interest stories, sports events etc? Would you give us some specific examples from 1929-1930?

Phil: Newsreels were designed to entertain as well as to inform, much as TV news is today. The object was to draw more people into the movie theater thus increasing the daily receipts. To do that, Universal edited together a few international, national and regional news stories, maybe a sports segment, and added a fashion, stunt or humorous story. Variety appears to be the key element. All this was packaged into a tight eight to ten minute running time. Let’s take a look at October 13, 1930 as a specific example.

48 DIE IN FIERY RUINS; DESTRUCTION MARKS END OF ILL-FATED R-101

Cardington, England- Lord Thomson, head of British Air Ministry; Sir Sefton Brancker, Director of Civil Aviation; and other notable aircraft experts, all doomed to die a few hours later, board world’s largest dirigible for flight to India. Frightful toll of human life follows destruction of giant ship by explosion and flame. Only six persons survived.

YANK SCHOONER NIPS CANADA IN FIRST OF INTERNATIONAL RACES

Gloucester, MA- The Gertrude Thebaud, called fastest fishing craft that ever slid off American ways, shows her heels to Bluenose, champion of North Atlantic deep-sea fleet, in inaugural of series for Lipton cup and purse of gold.

DE MAR VICTORIOUS IN 6th ANNUAL MARATHON AGAINST 100 STARTERS

Port Chester, NY- Greatest long-distance runner of athletic history, 44-year-old Bostonian, now living in Keene, NH, adds another laurel to his wreath by capturing 26-miles, 385-yard race from Central Park, New York City, to this city, time: 2 hrs., 46 mins., 15 secs. It is his second victory in this event, and fifteenth of career.

NEWS PARAGRAPHS

- Ward's Island, NY- 7,236 patients crowded into space for 4,885! — Lack of funds declared responsible for deplorable State Hospital conditions.
- San Francisco, CA- Machine-gun server teaches tennis! — Howard Kinsey's new device aids net aspirants.
- Lawrence, KS- Indian babes and lassies in beauty meet! — Jenora Hooper, full-blooded Cherokee, named Princess of America.

SUPREME COURT PAYS TRADITIONAL OPENING VISIT TO WHITE HOUSE

Washington, DC- Led by Chief Justice Hughes, members of the most powerful judicial body on earth notify President Hoover that the tribunal is in session. Ceremony supplies rare historical screen record on notable group together.

CITIZENS OF WORLD'S SMALLEST REPUBLIC HOLD ELECTION DAY

San Marino - Founded 16 centuries ago, this tiny nation only 32 square miles in area, elects two new regents to administer its affairs, with church and military pomp. The latter contributes its world's smallest standing army that adds to impressiveness of event.

DISORDERLY CROWDS MAR BICYCLE FINALS WON BY GEORGETTI

Coney Island, NY- Police compelled to employ force in quelling outbreak of violence among excited spectators at finish of thrilling bike contest, which is captured by young Italian star of six-day race fame and a champion among the sprinters.

Tyler: Thanks, Phil, for those examples. That really shows the great diversity of the stories. What about these newsreels do you think is the most surprising or shocking to a modern audience?

Phil: I would think that today's audience would find it difficult to be shocked about anything they found in newsreels. I believe, however, that they would find it surprising that topics of the headlines back then are very similar to those today, like natural disasters, death, destruction, wars, politics, graft, elections, inventions, etc.

Tyler: Will you tell us about your research in writing this book? How did you collect the information? Did you have access to the actual newsreels?

Phil: Based upon copious notes obtained during my mid-1980's research, I started work on the third book in my Historical Footage Project, "*Aerial Aces of the Universal Newsreel*," about five years ago (unfortunately, it's still unfinished). During this process I found references to the Universal Synopsis Sheets. Since I now lived a thousand miles away from the Archives, I hired an exceptional professional researcher who was able to find them. I now have copies of

approximately 2,000 of them and these are the basis for the “*Projected History*” series of books. I did not have direct access to the individual newsreel films, but National Archives has all the surviving stories on over 700 videotapes in the Motion Picture, Sound and Video Research Room. I was able to review a representative sample of these videos for the book.

Tyler: Phil, what do you think these newsreels from nearly eighty years ago can teach us today?

Phil: I think they give us a moving visual sense of what life was like back then. It shows us the people, clothing styles, transportation developments, American culture, and even politics of that era that we can compare to our lives today. My, how the times have changed!

Tyler: If people are interested in viewing the old newsreels, is there a way to access them? I believe I’ve occasionally seen a few played on the old movie channels on TV.

Phil: Approximately 6,350 reels of edited stories and 8,500 reels of outtakes on 35-millimeter motion picture film are available for your viewing pleasure at the National Archives and Records Administration’s Archives II facility in College Park, Maryland. Most of these reels have been transferred to videotape stored in the Motion Picture, Sound and Video Research Room located in that facility. If you search the web, you will find a couple of sites that have some of the stories available for viewing or purchase.

Tyler: Do you literally intend to carry your series all the way up to 1967? When can we expect the next volume in the series?

Phil: My intent is to complete the Universal Newsreel stories of the 1930’s; so that’s another five volumes of “*Projected History*.” I hope to publish a new volume once a year. Once those books are complete, I’ll take a look at the market and see if there is a need to proceed with more volumes.

Tyler: I understand you consider these newsreels to be valuable to people studying genealogy as well. What is their value for genealogists?

Phil: These newsreel stories are full of moving images of people doing what people do best, posing or performing for the camera. Many of these folks are identified by name in the synopsis sheets and thereby in “*Projected History*.” Can you imagine the excitement of finding out that your Great Grand-Mother was, in June 1930, a seven-year-old wizard astonishing spectators with tricks and stunts at the annual Magician’s Convention in Chicago? And there’s 10 seconds of film showing her do a trick? WOW!!! That’s valuable to anyone interested in family history.

Tyler: Phil, would you tell us more about your own background in the military? Does this background correlate with your interest in history and the media?

Phil: I spent most of my military service in the video production and visual information career areas producing educational, instructional and training videos for the Air Force. I frequently researched and used historic footage from USAF resources in my productions. I like to think that

my programs were effective because of the visual contrast between old and new. That sparked my interest in vintage film and it grew from there.

Tyler: Phil, will you tell us a little about your past books? How is “*Projected History*” both similar and different from your previous works?

Phil: My books are about different motion picture film collections held within the vaults of the National Archives. All-in-all, there is a treasure trove of well over 108,000 titles housed there and unfortunately most of the owners of these films, the American people, don’t even know that they exist. So far I’ve been able to cover the following collections: U.S. Army signal Corps Motion Pictures of WWI, Films of the First Air War, and the Newsreel Stories of the Universal News. Each of the books, “*Battlefilm*,” “*War Wings*,” and now “*Projected History*” approach their subjects with three different styles; summary subject highlights, scene-by-scene shot sheet, and period-specific hyperbole.

Tyler: Phil. Before we go, will you tell our readers about your website and what additional information they may find there about “*PROJECTED HISTORY: A Catalog of the National Stories Produced by Universal Newsreel, Volume One, 1929-1930?*”

Phil: A couple of more notes about the “*Projected History*” books. The goals of this series are many, but primarily fall into the following areas:

- Raise the awareness and use of this excellent historical documentary film resource.
- Provide a comprehensive catalog of all the known Universal Newsreel edited stories that were nationally released in the U.S.
- Present a short description of each story.
- Identify those stories that survive today.

This is the first time that the Universal Newsreel title, description and story availability have been brought together into a single reference resource.

I would like to encourage all those who consider themselves as students of film, history and genealogy, to check out my website at www.pwstewart.com for more information, photos, and a look at some of my upcoming projects.

All my books are written out of a great appreciation for our country’s rich collection of motion picture recorded history and a desire to ensure that it is preserved and accessible for future generations. To see history as it actually happened is enlightening, instructive and often rather dramatic.

Thanks, Tyler.

Tyler: Thank you, Phil, for the informative interview and reminding us of an important part of our nation’s culture and history.