THE PROBLEMS AND PRACTICES OF DOCUMENTARY PRODUCTION AT WOOD-TV, GRAND RAPIDS

THESIS FOR THE DEGREE OF M. A.
MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

NELDA M. STUCK
1969

ABSTRACT

THE PROBLEMS AND PRACTICES OF DOCUMENTARY PRODUCTION AT WOOD-TV, GRAND RAPIDS

By

Nelda M. Stuck

Television documentary production in the United States has been increasing since the early 1960s, particularly on the network level. However, many stations in the medium-sized markets have been reluctant to produce documentaries on a frequent and regular basis. This thesis addressed itself to a study of some of the pertinent problems and practices of documentary production in a medium-sized-market television station. The writer hoped to identify some of the problems which might be encountered in the production of documentaries in comparable stations.

WOOD-TV, Grand Rapids, Michigan, was selected for study. This station emphasizes news programming and produces documentaries at frequent intervals. The author interviewed WOOD-TV personnel and documentary sponsors. In addition, she reviewed eight WOOD documentary films produced 1967 through 1969. The background and purposes, approaches, problems, and reactions to these eight programs were discussed.

The study of WOOD-TV documentaries was most fruitful. The major findings of the study include:

1) Although WOOD-TV management had encouraged documentary production on a regular basis since 1965, a successful combination of elements for production was not found until April, 1968.

2) Since 1968, Wood-TV documentaries have had ample sponsorship. Two Grand Rapids banks have competed to sponsor the programs. WOOD-TV, however, is willing and able to produce documentaries unsponsored if necessary to carry out what management feels is their broadcasting responsibility.

3) The WOOD-TV documentary unit of three men is salaried under the news department budget, but operates as an autonomous unit.

4) Learning from experience, WOOD-TV personnel recognize that documentaries in the medium-sized market are subject to economic and geographic limitations, if such are to be successful. Grandiose films produced in distant locals are now felt to be beyond the limits of practicality for the station.

5) The WOOD-TV documentary unit seeks a local angle for production--the more local the subject matter, the more successful the documentary.

6) WOOD-TV seeks "balance" in documentary films, that is, a fair presentation of the issues at hand, but recognizes that stations have the responsibility of making their views known on any particular subject.

THE PROBLEMS AND PRACTICES OF DOCUMENTARY PRODUCTION AT WOOD-TV, GRAND RAPIDS

By

Nelda M. Stuck

A THESIS

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of Television and Radio

1969

Accepted by the faculty of the Department of Television and Radio, College of Communication Arts, Michigan State University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree.

Director of Thesis

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author is most grateful to Mr. Roderick D. Rightmire, thesis academic advisor, for his many kindnesses extended the writer. Especially does she wish to acknowledge his counseling whereby the thesis was narrowed in scope to specific objectives. Also, through him, introduction to personnel of WOOD-TV were made.

Immeasurable appreciation is expressed to members of WOOD Broadcasting Company whose interest in the project and hospitality made the thesis research an enjoyable task; to Mr. Herbert A. Thurman, who not only spent hours relating the problems and practices of his department but who also arranged for all the documentaries which were produced under him (all of which were available only on video tape) to be viewed through the WOOD-TV color closed circuit system, and who smoothed the way for other related interviews; to Mr. Willard Schroeder, vice-president of Time-Life Broadcast and manager of WOOD-AM-FM-TV, who took time from a full schedule for an interview; to Mr. Richard E. Cheverton, WOOD news director, to members of the documentary unit and promotion department; and to Bill Gill, public relations director of Union Bank and Trust Company, Grand Rapids.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS - continued

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Broadcasters at the network level produce many documentaries which are artistic and financial successes. Also, stations in the major markets take pride in the number of documentaries they are able to produce. But stations in the medium-sized markets often lack the funds or initiative or talent to produce documentaries on themes and problems of importance to viewers in their markets. Why are these medium-sized markets often reluctant or unable to produce documentaries regularly? Seemingly, the stumbling blocks could be easily and economically overcome.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this thesis is to analyze the practices and problems in planning and producing documentaries at a medium-sized-market station that was producing documentaries on a fairly regular and successful basis. In looking closely at the procedures used in documentary production at such a station, some helpful guidelines might be drawn which could prove beneficial to stations which now avoid facing up to the problems of documentary production.

In recent months, a successful medium-sized-market station in out-state Michigan in the news-documentary field has been WOOD-TV, Grand Rapids. As a subsidiary of a news-oriented corporation, Time-Life Broadcast, WOOD-TV has increasingly emphasized the importance of news and public affairs in its total programming. Now after several bleak documentary years and two abortive attempts to produce documentaries on a regular basis, WOOD appears to have found a successful combination of elements for documentary production.

Definition of Documentary

"Documentary," as used at WOOD-TV, is a term that has evolved through years of cinema and television film production. Documentary films, according to the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, are defined as those dealing with significant historical, social, scientific, or economic subjects, either photographs in actual occurrence or re-enacted, and where the emphasis is more on factual content than on entertainment.[1]

John Grierson first brought the word documentary into modern usage when he adapted it from the French documentaire

---

[1]Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Rule 12, Section One: Special Rules of Documentary Awards. A. William Bluem, Documentary in American Television (New York: Hastings House, Publishers, 1965), p. 33.

and employed it to describe a certain idea and concept in human communication.[2] The word implies the presentation of socially useful information to a public. From such information comes knowledge, and from knowledge is derived the understanding which can lead to societal action. Documentaries seek to initiate a process which culminates in public action by presenting information and by making this presentation persuasive. They seek to inform, but above all, to influence.[3]

Years ago Grierson had defined documentary as "creative treatment of actuality." In this decade the word has new concepts:

> Today the term has come to refer to a far wider range of films than its originator intended. The purists rebel and remind us of the original definition. But language is a live, changing thing, and when a word becomes popularized and used by all and sundry, no power can stop it subtly changing and acquiring, as in this case, a wider meaning. 'Factual film' is a more correct description of many of the films described today as 'documentary.'[4]

At the first regular forum of the New York chapter of the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences devoted to television documentary, Lou Hazam reported that

> Pare Lorentz once defined the documentary as 'the dramatic presentation of factual material.' That's a pretty broad term. With that definition you could

---

[2]Ibid., p. 9.

[3]Ibid., p. 14.

[4]W. Hugh Baddeley, The Technique of Documentary Film Production (New York: Hastings House, Publishers, 1963), p. 9.

> take Cary Grant into a Hollywood studio and, on an ersatz set, dramatically present factual material. I would like to try this one: 'A documentary is a dramatic presentation of factual material made on location where the events are happening or have happened and the people concerned (or their equivalent) are doing what comes naturally.'[5]

Gloria Waldron in a report on information films defined documentary as including all factual and information films.

> Originally 'documentary film' meant a film that portrayed real people in real social situations; 'Nanook of the North,' 'The City,' 'The River,' 'Night Mail,' 'Song of Ceylon,' and 'The Plough That Broke the Plains' are fine examples of true documentary. John Grierson . . . is the father of the term and did a great deal in England and Canada to pioneer the use of the documentary technique.[6]

Robinson suggested documentary can have two aims: either it can describe or explain, in factual terms, the phenomena of contemporary life (the expository documentary), or it can express an attitude, formulate a view, enrich people's ways of thinking and feeling. It can in fact help them to interpret that life.[7]

Grierson felt that "the democratic idea, after all, demands no more than that the affairs of our time shall be brought to the screen in any fashion which strikes the

---

[5]Lou Hazam, Appendix I, A. William Bluem's Documentary In American Television, p. 260.

[6]Gloria Waldron, The Information Film (New York: Columbia University Press, 1949), p. 22.

[7]David Robinson, "Looking for Documentary: The Ones that Got Away," Sight and Sound, XXVII (Autumn, 1957), p. 71.

imagination and makes observation a little richer than it was."[8]

Working Definition of Documentary

For the purposes of this television study, a more limited definition of documentary films seems desirable. "Documentary" is an edited taped or filmed news or public affairs program which broadcasts socially useful information. Excluded from this are hard news, regularly scheduled accounts of day-to-day developments, panel discussions, and interview programs. The documentary can be basically informative, it can seek to persuade, or it can initiate a process which culminates in public action for social change.

Documentary as defined above refers to film content. However, the word also can refer to film form, i.e., applying the techniques of news and public affairs documentary films to subjects of a less ponderous nature. While these films using documentary form are basically informative, their main purpose is either entertainment or presentation of information without the element of persuasion.

With one exception (a sailing film) the WOOD-TV documentaries discussed herein relate to "documentary content."

---

[8]Edgar E. Willis, Writing Television and Radio Programs (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1967), p. 237.

Background of Documentary Films

The first important demonstration of the photographer's role in influencing social change took place 100 years ago when William Henry Jackson in 1872 took pictures of Old Faithful and submitted them as evidence in the successful fight to establish Yellowstone National Park.[9]

But Robert Flaherty is considered the father of documentary films. The whole movement had its origins in Flaherty's film, "Nanook of the North." Sponsored by a fur company, in 1922, it was the first American film to use documentary technique throughout.[10] However, Flaherty's was a personal technique rather than a "cause," more documentary form than content.

In the early days of documentaries, there was a good deal of dispute between the "aesthetes" and the "documentarians," between those who were primarily concerned with film as art and an instrument of subjective experience, and those who saw film as the portrayer of social reality. Some overemphasized the intellectual aspects of film. Occasionally aesthetes and documentarians overlooked the necessity for intellectual objectivity and clear, hard thinking.[11]

---

[9]Bluem, p. 18.

[10]Waldron, p. 18.

[11]Ibid., p. 44.

Grierson was influenced by a conclusion Walter Lippman had made--that because the citizen under modern conditions could not know everything about everything all the time, democratic citizenship was therefore impossible. "We set to thinking how a dramatic apprehension of the modern scene might solve the problem, and we turned to the new wide-reaching instruments of radio and cinema as necessary instruments in both the practice of government and the enjoyment of citizenship," he wrote.[12]

Paul Rotha says that in the beginning days of documentary films, mainly because of the sheer lack of money needed for good technical facilities, "we had to make do with the most primitive equipment and a minimum allowance of filmstock, and public transport was the rule for travel." Only imagination and improvization saved them.[13]

The depression of the 1930s was, in one aspect, a rich period for documentary growth. It was a time of social concern when documentarists found important areas on which to make significant comment. "The Plow that Broke the Plains" and "The River," produced for the Resettlement Administration in 1936, were the first American films to present ideas in a visual, emotion-provoking form of documentary to arouse

---

[12]John Grierson, Grierson on Documentary (rev. ed.; London: Faber and Faber, Ltd., 1966), p. 207.

[13]Baddeley, p. 8.

community action.[14]

> These films of social reconstruction and the growing points thereof became a powerful force for the public good. They found their place in the cinemas; they had a vast audience outside the cinemas; they were attracting more and more attention and prestige abroad.[15]

After the social unrest in the Thirties came World War II, and documentarists began to extoll the virtues of democracy instead of excoriating its imperfectures.[16] On almost every side, documentary was deliberately allowed to avoid the existence of the human being as the main factor in civilization, wrote Paul Rotha.[17]

Grierson pointed out that, in addition, obstacle after obstacle impeded the documentary film whenever it set itself to performing a public service. "Sometimes it came in the cry of the censor that the screen was to be kept free of what was called 'controversy.'"[18]

Grierson's statement would serve to prophesy one problem in present television documentary production--fear of interference from FCC, from sponsor, and from overcautious management.

---

[14]Irving Jacoby, Foreword, Ideas on Film, ed. by Cecile Starr (New York: Funk and Wagnalls Co., 1951), p. xv.

[15]Grierson, p. 216.

[16]Arthur Knight, The Decline of Documentary," Saturday Review, XLVI, No. 13 (March 30, 1963), p. 35.

[17]Paul Rotha, Documentary Film (3d ed.; London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1952), p. 111.

[18]Grierson, p. 216.

The Documentary on Television

The documentary was an art when television was still a laboratory phenomenon,[19] but without television, the documentary might be of slight importance in this day and age.

The relationship between documentary films and television is something like the lion being saved by the mouse whose life he had earlier spared. After many lean years in the cinema theaters, the documentary found lifesaving new outlets when television appeared on the scene. Television saved the documentary and now documentaries are carrying a heavy share of the load of keeping television vital.

Television gave documentary two essentials it was lacking--a vast audience and enough money for production. It also gave documentary a good deal of artistic freedom.[20]

For a few stations, the warning that those producing documentaries at the local level must either "dare and lead--or forget it" has offered the easy alternative. They have forgotten it. A 1960 Television Information Office inventory of local-level public affairs programming, based on a survey of 562 stations then on the air, showed that only 264 even felt it necessary to respond. Of 1,038 programs included in the final report, 83 were eliminated because they were

---

[19]Benjamin Burton, "The Documentary Heritage," Television Quarterly, I, No. 1 (February, 1963), p. 29.

[20]Benjamin Burton, preface to Bluem's Documentary in American Television, p. 7.

either straight news broadcasts or syndicated programs. The 264 stations therefore produced a total of 955 programs or series over an 18-month period which they themselves considered outstanding examples of public affairs efforts. While many were identified as documentaries, the great majority were lectures, interviews, and panel discussions.[21]

Television stations might very well have meandered along without much increased attention and emphasis to documentary production had it not been for the impetus given public service and public affairs programming by FCC Commissioner Newton Minow in his "vast wasteland" speech of 1961. Minow's insistent nudging that stations present worthwhile programming may well have been the real cause of a blossoming of documentary efforts in the early '60s.

Bluem also noted, "An important measure of the growing importance and impact of the local station public affairs program was the introduction in 1962 of special category awards for such programming into the annual recognition of the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences."[22]

Burton had predicted 1963 as the year of the documentary:

> Every advance indication points to an unprecedented level of factual programming by the networks and a concomitant upsurge on the local level. Whether the documentary will prove to be a great whale of an idea

---

[21]Bluem, p. 221.

[22]Ibid., p. 225.

> or merely a "minow" in a sea of mediocrity remains to be seen. One thing is reasonably certain: a mere numerical increase in such programs will not in itself provide salvation or solution for television's ills.[23]

But Bluem also pointed out that two years after the Minow chairmancy of the FCC there were still too many American television stations where some concept of the public weal was manifested only in a heavily sponsored half-hour or hour of news, sports, and weather each evening, and two or three overpublicized, artistically weak, and socially insignificant "documentaries" each year.[24]

America's television station owners were hard-pressed to find the range of talent required to produce convincing documentaries, even when they began to demonstrate a public consciousness and desire to present more informational programming.[25] Many stations began to develop such specialists within their own staffs.

Television brought a "team effort" concept to production to documentaries as compared with the one-man product of three and four decades ago. In the early days, with the notable exception of the "March of Time," "the documentary in this country generally was economically beset and sustained chiefly by the ingenuity and dedication of its practioners. A man made a film--not a company, network or

---

[23]Burton, "The Documentary Heritage," p. 29.

[24]Bluem, p. 221.

[25]Ibid., p. 176.

team."[26] Today's documentaries are compiled by many men filming all over the world.

Sponsorship has made possible the steady maturing of documentaries. As a result, cameramen no longer sit in studios and do interviews; they no longer depend on film libraries. Researchers can be hired, locations can be surveyed, money is available for more films, and editors can be more selective. Such is the ideal situation.

> . . . Sadly enough, the quality of a television show bears a direct relation to the amount of money spent on it. There have been many demands to substitute imagination, unusual direction, fancy acting or writing, for a high budget, but in my experience, there is very little leeway in trying to use these things as a substitute for money.[27]

But under our system for profit operation, management's first requirement is to survive, Robert Lewis Shayon points out:

> The widespread notion that a television license is an immediate ticket to fortune may be balanced by this statistic: According to the Federal Communications Commission, of 496 television stations operating the full year 1959, 126 reported a loss. For the successful station, the quality of public affairs broadcasting varies with individual managements. Some stations have ample resources and aggressive policies. Others may be less enterprising or must husband resources and exercise unusual imagination.[28]

---

[26]Burton, "The Documentary Heritage," pp. 29-30.

[27]Charles F. Holden, "Brass Tacks in TV Production," Twenty-two Television Talks, Transcribed from BMI Clinics (New York: Broadcast Music, Inc., 1953), p. 17.

[28]Robert Lewis Shayon, preface to Interaction. Television Public Affairs Programming . . . at the Community Level. Television Information Office (1960), p. vii.

Only within the last three or four years has documentary production on the local level actually been encouraged by management and recognized as a necessity in programming. The question asked is "How many of the television documentaries we now are making will survive the test of time that Flaherty's 'Nanook,' 'Moana,' and 'Man of Aran' have?"[29] Is surviving the test of time the important aim of television documentaries? It would appear that the television documentary's real purpose should be to come to grips with social conditions of the community and to effect action on our indigenous problems.

Some Documentary Concepts

More than any other form of expression, film has the dramatic power to capture the imagination of those people who will not read the serious part of a newspaper and who seldom attend a public meeting, Rotha writes.[30]

Some kind of social usefulness is an outcome sought by all documentaries. The dissemination of such information is purposeful and meaningful in direct proportion to the numbers of people reached and influenced.[31] One of the problems documentary film makers face is that their product must not be dull but must attract and involve people.

---

[29]Burton, "The Documentary Heritage," p. 33.

[30]Rotha, p. 206.

[31]Bluem, p. 15.

Cyril Bennett once asked a prop man what he thought of the documentary they had been shooting. He replied, "It's all very fine, but it's got nothing to do with me." Bennett wonders if we're communicating at all; are we examining problems in terms viewers have experienced and not merely as intellectual arguments?[32]

Newton Minow charges that a broadcaster does not have a license to ruin the reputations of individuals, but he does have federal backing for an honest and thorough examination of the controversial issues that confront an individual community or an entire nation.[33]

A controversial subject raises the problem of whether to present a balanced picture or to take only one side. The question is not one of objectivity, but responsibility, Reuven Frank says. "Objectivity is a screen we hide behind. It's just a word. These programs cannot be done by computer. They have to be done by people. People must react. People who have no interest aren't worth anything at all to you."[34]

Allan Elkan says the whole art of the writer of actuality programs is to get the program or item to <u>say</u> something,

---

[32]Cyril Bennett and Peter Morley, "Presenting Actuality," <u>Television: The Creative Experience, A Survey of Anglo-American Progress</u>, ed. A. William Bluem and Roger Manvell (New York: Hastings House, Publishers, 1967), p. 220.

[33]Newton N. Minow, <u>Equal Time, The Private Broadcaster and the Public Interest</u> (New York: Atheneum, 1964), p. 120.

[34]Reuven Frank, quoted by Bluem, <u>Documentary in American Television</u>, p. 104.

to make a point.[35]

> Having made the investigation, and being satisfied that it has been done thoroughly and fairly, then I think it is the responsibility of the producer to draw conclusions from the information. I do not think it is right to be a professional fence-sitter; no one in life is like this. . . . Having drawn some conclusion, I think one's view and conclusion should be evident from the program and should not be disguised.[36]

Hugh Baddeley claims it is very seldom possible to produce a successful film for more than one type of audience. Two points must be considered in preparing the treatment: what is the purpose of the film and for what audience is it intended?[37]

Conviction on the part of the documentary creator is one element for success. In the "See it Now" series, Edward R. Murrow noted that most of the good writing was done by professionals ad-libbing what they knew and believed. Under the pressure of the moment and armed with the conviction born of conflict, they composed compelling literature, Murrow said.[38]

Lack of money should not necessarily mean local-level documentary production is impossible. Bluem reports that even though "CBS Reports" was budgeted for $100,000, one of

---

[35]Allan Elkan, "Scripting Actuality Television," Sight and Sound, XXVII (Winter, 1957-18), p. 121.

[36]Tim Hewat, quoted by Norman Swallow, Factual Television (New York: Hastings House, Publishers, 1966), p. 87.

[37]Baddeley, p. 14.

[38]Bluem, Documentary in American Television, p. 96.

the finest studies on a local community problem, entitled "Urbandale, U.S.A.," was completed by WMSB-TV, East Lansing, Michigan, for $150.[39]

Arthur Barron wonders why there are not today more documentaries that are "personal films," i.e., the total creation of one man. He says that the union hang-up might be part of the trouble, but "the FCC, I suppose, is another reason why personal films aren't made."[40] A station must inform on the vital issues of the day, which is quite a task in itself, he says. However, at this point in local documentary production, the personal film appears to have no place. The stations do not have the time nor talent for this luxury. Documentary units are barely keeping their heads above the basic pressures of production, it seems.

Our very familiarity with everyday surroundings prohibits us from forming a true estimate of them. That is why the documentary film has an important purpose to fulfill in bringing to life familiar things and people so that their place in the scheme of things which we call society may be honestly assessed.[41]

---

[39]Ibid., p. 222.

[40]Arthur Barron, "Toward New Goals in Documentary," Film Library Quarterly, II, No. 1 (Winter, 1968-1969), p. 22.

[41]Rotha, p. 26.

CHAPTER II

WOOD-TV, GRAND RAPIDS

Station Growth

Grand Rapids, settled by Hollanders, is the county seat for Kent County and the home of more than 800 manufacturing concerns, the most famous of which produce furniture. Every crop grown in Michigan (except sugar beets) is grown in Kent County, and the fruit industry is a multi-million dollar business. Grand Rapids, an All-American City in 1960, has an art museum, a public museum with planetarium, a symphony orchestra in its 41st year, a community concert series, a civic theater, and a zoo. The city and county support three accredited four-year colleges (Grand Valley State, Aquinas, and Calvin) in addition to Grand Rapids Junior College.[1]

WOOD began broadcasting in 1924 as WEBK, the first regular commercial radio station in Grand Rapids. Late in 1925 their financial backers--Furniture Manufacturers Association

---

[1] "Greater Grand Rapids for Business and Pleasure," Chamber of Commerce pamphlet, 1968.

of Grand Rapids--requested a change of call letters to the more significant and easily remembered WOOD.[2]

In 1933, the owners of WOOD and WASH, in a joint transaction, leased operation of their radio stations to King-Trendle Broadcasting Company, Incorporated, of Detroit.[3] WOOD-WASH was Grand Rapids' only radio station until September 1940 when WLAV came into existence.

King and Trendle owned and operated the WOOD Broadcasting Company until May, 1946, when they announced the sale of WOOD and WXYZ in Detroit for $3,650,000 to American Broadcasting Company, Incorporated, then newly formed. But the FCC refused approval of the sale, and WOOD was finally purchased in May, 1948, by Harry M. Bitner, owner of radio stations in Indianapolis and Evansville, Indiana.

Bitner applied to the FCC for a commercial television station license on August 5, 1948, but ran into the FCC allocation freeze. After waiting until 1951 in vain, he finally bought WLAV-AM-TV's television license and station and WOOD-TV began broadcasting on channel 7 on October 19, 1951.[4]

---

[2]Joseph D. Graziano, "Local News Operations of WOOD-TV." Unpublished Master's Thesis, School of Journalism, Michigan State University (1961), p. 9.

[3]Ibid., p. 10.

[4]Ibid., pp. 16-17.

Time, Incorporated, purchased WOOD-AM-TV along with six other radio-television stations on May 23, 1957, and created Time-Life Broadcast, Incorporated, as a subsidiary. In addition to WOOD-AM-FM-TV, Grand Rapids (NBC affiliate), the other Time-Life television stations are: WFBM-AM-FM-TV, Indianapolis, Indiana (NBC); KLZ-AM-FM-TV, Denver, Colorado (CBS); KOGO-AM-FM-TV, San Diego, California (NBC); KERO-TV, Bakersfield, California (UHF, NBC).

Until 1962, WOOD-TV's only competition was WKZO, Kalamazoo, which began broadcasting June 1, 1950.

In 1962, WZZM, channel 13 (ABC affiliate) began broadcasting in Grand Rapids. Today, although the strong CBS programming of WKZO-TV provides network competition for WOOD, the local news programming of WZZM offers more competition to WOOD news.[5]

WOOD promotes Grand Rapids as the 36th largest market, according to the listing of Areas of Dominant Influence (ADI).[6] The Grand Rapids Metro area includes 514,800 persons; the Kalamazoo Metro Area has a population of 191,200. These two prime markets together with other cities and rural areas provide a total of 400,670 in the Grand Rapids-Kalamazoo ADI.

---

[5]Interview with Willard Schroeder, vice-president of Time-Life, Incorporated, and general manager of WOOD, August 26, 1969.

[6]Based on Standard Rate and Data Service, January 1, 1968, Consumer Market Data estimates and latest American Research Bureau County ADI assignments.

Of these, 96.3%, or 385,990 are television households.[7] Other cities in Grade A range include Battle Creek, Lansing, and the southeast outskirts of Muskegon.

Approximate average prime time viewing figures for documentaries on WOOD-TV are 72,000 viewers, 5,800 households.[8]

Development of the News Department

At WOOD-TV, the documentary unit is an integral part of the news department. The documentary staff salaries are budgeted under news, and the working rapport is close, even though a growing spirit of independence exists in a three-man documentary unit.

The WOOD-TV news department has had only two directors since the station began telecasting in 1951. Robert N. Runyon was hired in 1949, and the department consisted of one "rip and read" news announcer. When WOOD-TV came on the air in October, 1951, a second reporter and a reporter-cinematographer were hired.[9]

The station's management urged editorials from the news department, but Runyon preferred depth reporting of

---

[7] Spot Television Rates and Data, LI, No. 5 (Skokie, Illinois: Standard Rate and Data Service, Inc., May 15, 1969), pp. 23, 37.

[8] WOOD-TV promotion department.

[9] Graziano, p. 21.

majo

place

in 19

at Mu

in Er

he le

Other

tisin

launc

Harbo

years

direc

Mason

direc

organ

devel

also

out i

had a

and p

major local news stories. No other major changes took place until Richard E. Cheverton took over as news director in 1955.[10]

Cheverton was born in Joliet, Illinois, and educated at Muscatine Junior College and Monmouth College, majoring in English. Lacking two credits, and running out of money, he left college for a job on a Bronx, New York, weekly paper. Other jobs included one with a Newport News, Virginia, advertising weekly, reporting on PM, and editing the newly-launched PM Sunday supplement, Parade. Following Pearl Harbor, Cheverton served in the Navy for three and a half years. After the war he joined KWPC, Muscatine, as news director and then moved to Iowa's KWCR, Cedar Rapids, KRIB, Mason City, and WMT, Cedar Rapids, each time as news director.[11]

Cheverton joined WOOD in 1955. "The station had no organized schedule of newscasts, only two cameras, no developing equipment, one motion picture photographer who also covered news, and an office boy who sometimes helped out in the news department," according to Cheverton. "We had a man and a half."[12]

"Most of the dramatic changes in theory, philosophy, and practice in news has occurred since 1960," Cheverton

---

[10]Ibid., p. 22.

[11]Ibid., p. 24.

[12]Ibid.

said. The old traditional "beats" were discarded and new areas of interest substituted. In addition, the immense problems of education were beginning to be noticed following years of ignoring the affairs in the ghettos and minority communities. Total news coverage increased greatly until WOOD began producing the 90-minute 6 p.m. news program July 1, 1968.[13] In 14 years as news director, Cheverton has seen the department expand to 24 members, including the documentary department.[14]

Development of the Documentary Unit

During the early part of the 1960's little thought was given to documentary production at WOOD-TV. The situation was typical of stations in medium-sized markets across the country. Since television was new, audiences sought entertainment and shunned factual shows. In the initial stages the "audience was unsophisticated and Milton Berle was ginger-peachy."[15]

Those interviewed for this study at WOOD were not able to recall any documentaries dating as far back as the early

---

[13]Letter from Richard E. Cheverton, WOOD news director, September 17, 1969.

[14]Cheverton interview, August 26, 1969.

[15]Schroeder interview, August 26, 1969.

'60s.[16] However, one program which bordered on our working definition of documentary, "The Wasted World," was discussed in a 1961 thesis on WOOD news operations.[17] Thus, locally-produced "news specials" were not totally unknown at that time. "The Wasted World," presented in prime time on March 15, 1960, was a half-hour program of slides and edited tape obtained by WOOD reporter Del Blumenshine during a 10-day foray into Grand Rapids' "bums row." Cheverton introduced the show, and announcer Alex Dillingham and Blumenshine discussed the situation on lower Monroe Street. Due to adverse lighting conditions, only 22 of the 35 slides Blumenshine took during the 10 days could be used, but four and a half hours of tape were edited to 17 minutes for the show. For his work Blumenshine received a special RTNDA citation, the Grand Rapids mayor praised WOOD-TV for its coverage of the problem, and appropriate civic committees were set up to cope with such concerns as sanitation in the flophouses.

In 1961 came FCC Chairman Minow's indictment of the television industry for its poor use of broadcasting. After network television initiated the trend to documentary production and documentaries on the national level began to

---

[16]Perhaps the reason is that no news specials or documentaries on tape or film completed in the "black and white era" of WOOD-TV exist in the files. No documentary completed more than two years ago was available for viewing and study for this paper.

[17]Graziano, pp. 60-64.

prove they could make money and draw audiences, interest in production on the local level began to increase.

No doubt, an early impetus to the production of documentaries at WOOD (in addition to the already mentioned news-oriented atmosphere) was the result of a survey commissioned by the station and completed by the Communications Research Center of Michigan State University in 1962. Until that time WOOD held a monopoly in the television market in Grand Rapids, but WZZM-TV, channel 13, was nearly ready to begin broadcasting. "We wanted insight into what people felt about WOOD before getting clobbered by our competition," Schroeder says.[18]

The survey studied three general groups of viewers: 1) civic leaders, 2) general adult public, and 3) WOOD-TV advertisers.[19] Each respondent was asked to evaluate a list of programs carried by WOOD-TV and WKZO-TV (CBS affiliate) as to which programs he and his family would like to see on the new channel coming to the Grand Rapids area. Given six categories (children's, men's, women's, popular entertainment, quality, and local programs), all types said they wanted to watch the quality programs. Combining the three types of respondents, the results indicated all types

---

[18]Schroeder interview, August 26, 1969.

[19]Malcolm S. MacLean, Jr.; Thomas Danbury; Jack G. Prather. "Varieties of Public Images of WOOD-TV in Grand Rapids," Part I, Television Program Preferences--Typologies, mimeographed study, Communications Research Center, Michigan State University (October, 1962).

generally wanted to watch:

David Brinkley's Journal--David Brinkley presents news documentaries and features of places around the world.

Eyewitness to History--film documentaries of great moments in current history.

Armstrong Circle Theater--dramatized documentaries on timely subjects.

DuPont Show - Drama--special dramatic and documentary productions with varied subject matter.

In addition, group "A" included in second place "CBS Reports"--news documentaries on current explorations in the sea, on land, and in space. The MSU study also indicated reasons respondents might have for naming "high quality" programs as those they would like to view on a new channel when viewer rating surveys usually indicate preference for pure entertainment programs. Despite the reasons, no station could overlook the strong indication that local viewers were interested in documentary programs.

The drive to today's level of documentary production began to pick up some motion. WOOD's heart was in it, but somehow personnel and structure brought only confusion.

News Director Cheverton says, "We never really got into the documentary business. Like Topsy, it just grew. We'd assign a newsman to film a subject and turn out one or two documentaries a year. There was no planning or foresight." Under this system, an extraordinary amount of time was required to put a documentary together. Ideas went by the board as no one had time during the news crises to work on any documentary on the subject. The quality of early

documentaries might best be indicated by Cheverton's off-hand comment: "I don't remember any of them."[20]

Four or five years ago the station felt they should be producing more documentaries. Jeff B. Davis, a member of the continuity department (no longer with WOOD-TV), was made available for documentary production under the program department in an informal arrangement. Since equipment was not assigned to him, he rented his cameras by the job. The photographer who was hired was described as having come "out of the east," as though his ideas on filming documentaries were strange and incompatible with WOOD-TV conceptions. Cheverton objected to the expensive double sound system used at the time and the "slow, very arty" way of doing things.[21]

Schroeder also indicated the problem faced at that time: "In an increasing number of stations, the documentary unit is separate. Documentary personnel don't have the pressures that news and programming staff members have--to be on the air at a certain time. You take deadlines off people and they procrastinate till they drive you to drink."[22]

Documentary production was then organized in 1966 under Cheverton's news department with Armond Nobel in charge. Management anticipated a minimum of six documentaries a year,

---

[20]Cheverton interview, August 13, 1969.

[21]Ibid.

[22]Schroeder interview, August 26, 1969.

but it appears that the documentary people only managed to come up with one film now and then.

Cheverton says one problem was the emphasis on production rather than content. He described the documentaries as innocuous. The subjects concerned local level problems, but the "right formula" was lacking. "To make a documentary gel, you need the right combination. Before you shoot film, you've got to know where you're going." One problem at the time was that the station didn't have anyone with enough experience in the documentary field to recognize and solve the difficulties.[23]

WOOD-TV was only reacting to developing subjects rather than initiating ideas and programs. One example Schroeder gave was a documentary "that was thrown at us" on the airport controversy. The problem was whether the airport should be 1) left at its 28th street location, 2) constructed on a new site west of town in order to serve a tri-city area, or 3) be constructed on a site southeast of town to serve Kent County. The documentary "pulled information" from people and the production was a pretty good one, but the objection was that the film presented only a reaction to a developing subject and "not something we set up."[24]

---

[23]Cheverton interview, August 13, 1969.

[24]Schroeder interview, August 26, 1969.

Other examples of "reacting, not initiating" were documentaries on a Grand Rapids orthopedic surgeon, Dr. Al Swanson, who spent time helping civilians in Vietnam. Although reports on the original documentary conflict, a second documentary on Swanson was aired from film by a WOOD cameraman compiled on a trip to southeast Asia.

Another globe-trotting WOOD documentary was commissioned by a drug company and produced by the program department. The film centered on a group of doctors (including two from Grand Rapids) who were on assignment in underdeveloped areas of India and Pakistan--a sort of pre-Peace Corps group. The drug company paid for the production costs and air time and in turn were given a print of the final film.[25]

Cheverton felt those working on documentaries were not being realistic to their limitations. One idea presented, to which he objected, was a study of the Amish. He questioned how they were going to get film of people who refuse to be photographed. Another idea mentioned as an example of documentary thinking at that time was "unidentified flying objects." Cheverton's reaction was "That's all right, but what do you do with UFO's unless you're lucky enough to sight one and interview the captain."[26]

---

[25]Interview with Herbert A. Thurman, WOOD-TV documentary production chief, September 18, 1969.

[26]Cheverton interview, August 13, 1969.

With documentary production under the news department, and the desire to produce good films stronger than ever, the station finally arrived at the right combination of elements in May, 1968, when Herbert A. Thurman took over.

Thurman was actually hired in February, 1968, as chief photographer for the news department, and it was not until May, 1968, that he was placed in charge of documentary production replacing Armond Noble who left for Rapid City, South Dakota.

Thurman was born in Chattanooga, Tennessee, in 1930, and attended high school there where he was president of the camera club and photographer of the newspaper and yearbook. In 1948 he enlisted in the Air Force for four years and completed a 36-week still-photo and a 21-week aerial-photo school near Denver.

Assigned to the Air Pictorial Service, he was transferred to Japan to cover the Korean campaign. The unit's responsibility was to report the major news stories in Okinawa, the Philippines, Guam, and Korea. Among the stories he covered were the Panmunjom peace talks, the B-29 raids over the Yalu River, and the change of command from Gen. Mathew Ridgway to Gen. Mark Clark.

In addition to the major stories, the Air Force wanted 40- to 45-minute films made of each base in that area.

Thurman left the service as a staff sergeant and enrolled at Los Angeles City College and the University of Southern California where he graduated in cinematography.

Subsequent employment included producing industrial films for Associated Missile Products Corporation and for Parthenon Pictures, establishing his own film company, and three years in film sales. In 1967 Thurman was with WTHI-TV and then WTWO-TV, both Terre Haute, Indiana, in the news-documentary field before joining WOOD-TV in February 1968.[27]

After four months as WOOD's chief photographer, Thurman was assigned to head documentary production. "I was a one-man department," he said, "although in theory I had a reporter and camera from the news staff."[28] Not until nearly a year later in April 1969 were any permanent personnel assigned to make a unit. Until that time, reporters and equipment were assigned from the news department on a temporary, per-film basis. On occasions, regular news reporters would do extended work or research for the documentary department, but when their regular work suffered, they were returned to their usual news beat.

Aware of past problems in documentary production at WOOD, Thurman felt if they were going to be successful, they had to work in terms of getting the shows sold.

"Under Herb [Thurman], things took a decided step upward," Cheverton said. "Before, none of these shows ever sold; they were a drug on the market."[29]

---

[27]Thurman interviews, August 13, 26, 1969.

[28]Thurman interview, August 13, 1969.

[29]Cheverton interview, August 13, 1969.

While some documentaries had been sponsored, the last documentary under production before Thurman took over had not. Thurman noted that his working to get the first documentary sponsored was an internal job with WOOD's own sales department. Once the first show was sponsored, a major roadblock was overcome.[30]

A second overall problem Thurman faced was bringing documentary production into some sort of scale. He had just completed editing the mass of film taken by WOOD in Vietnam and felt the station was working too far afield. He felt that productions had been too elaborate, that they had to be put on a minimum scale with something to say. In other words, he aimed to cover a local area of concern, and do it well rather than inadequately film some far-reaching place or subject. Thurman also felt WOOD production could not hope to compete with network documentaries even though he said management liked to think that the station could be on the same footing.[31]

Thurman had been head of the documentary department 11 months and had produced a half dozen films when, in April, 1969, Union Bank and Trust Company contracted for a five-part series on environment (see page 100) and as a result, a WOOD documentary unit was set up under Thurman's supervision.

---

[30]Thurman interview, August 13, 1969.

[31]Ibid.

Mike Ferring (who had reported on the WOOD documentary, "New Style in the Statehouse") was made a permanent member of the unit along with cameraman Michael Grass.

Ferring, 25, came to WOOD-TV in February, 1968. After graduating from the University of Iowa in 1967 in political science, he worked 13 months at KCRG-TV, Cedar Rapids, Iowa, as reporter, photographer, and on-air newsman.[32]

Grass, 24, a Grand Rapids native, was hired by WOOD in November 1968. During four years at the University of Colorado, Boulder, he edited a monthly student newspaper and worked for a professional photography studio doing wedding, fraternity, and modeling pictures. After graduation in June, 1968, with a degree in journalism and German literature, he joined a documentary crew in the Orient. In two and a half months he visited nine countries as assistant photographer on two documentaries being produced by an independent Los Angeles company.[33]

Thurman started as documentary head with the confidence that management would back him. WOOD has established a reputation as a news organization that understands the importance of news. The station manager is journalistically oriented; thus the news department has more time on the air, better equipment, and more manpower.[34] General Manager Schroeder

---

[32]Interview with Mike Ferring, documentary unit news reporter, August 13, 1969.

[33]Interview with Michael Grass, August 26, 1969.

[34]Thurman interview, August 13, 1969.

says that because of his background and real interest, he is a journalist first and a businessman second.[35]

"Bill Schroeder and Dick Cheverton want a successful documentary unit, so I'm given free reign," Thurman summarized.

Role of Documentaries at WOOD-TV

News-Editorial Presentation.--The role of the documentary film at WOOD-TV has a direct relation to the news orientation of the station, because the documentary unit is made up of newsmen, not programmers. The productions reflect News Director Cheverton's definition of documentary as "an enlargement of a news story." He adds, however, "Most documentaries are a series of editorials on a subject."[36] These two concepts--news and editorial--figure prominently in WOOD documentaries.

Documentary Producer Thurman does not agree wholly with Cheverton's emphasis on documentaries being an "extension of a news story." A documentary must have a point of view, he says. Documentaries are usually about an important issue, but every documentary does not have to have total social significance, Thurman says.[37]

---

[35]Schroeder interview, August 26, 1969.

[36]Cheverton interview, August 13, 1969.

[37]Thurman interview, August 13, 1969. One WOOD documentary, "An Atlantic Adventure," which showed the ocean sailboat crossing of a Grand Rapids family, was planned and presented simply for fun.

Documentary unit reporter Mike Ferring disagrees with Thurman. He says there is a midpoint in interpreting and "we don't cross that line to editorialize that often." He adds he would not be opposed to doing so, however. The unit must select an important topic and make a significant comment on it, he says.[38]

WOOD General Manager Schroeder notes some distinctions between editorials and documentaries. "A documentary can be more complex. You can't be as strong on advocating a subject for a half hour as you can in a two-minute editorial," he says. Schroeder cited the example of an editorial WOOD broadcast concerning an electroplating company that wasn't meeting its deadline on anti-pollution measures. "That made a good editorial, but it would be sheer boredom to list such companies for a half hour documentary," he says. He points out that when Cheverton is on the air for an editorial, he will have time to effectively make only one or two crucial points. A documentary can include many aspects, e.g., numerous facets of pollution of the Grand River.[39]

"The best role for documentaries is that of simply informing our public and giving our view," Schroeder says. "For example, what is significant in the black community? Is it health, jobs, attitudes, or education? I don't see our role as a voice for the loudest militant or some senile black

---

[38]Ferring interview, August 26, 1969.

[39]Schroeder interview, August 26, 1969.

minister." As a journalist, Schroeder sees WOOD's news job as informing the community as a whole about various segments. "Broadcasting is like the medical or legal professions," Schroeder says. "The integrity of the individual is important. We have constantly tried to have better news." He sets the same role for WOOD documentaries.[40]

Balance.--A word that occurs frequently in discussion of the role of the documentary at WOOD is "balance," a facet of content which is spoken of with a certain amount of pride at the station. But balance, when working under the restrictive fairness formula of the FCC, can be a misunderstood word. Willard Van Dyke comparing television documentaries today with those films of the 1930s and '40s complains that stations now "take positions, but not strong stands." He says they usually qualify their position by saying "on the other hand" thus attempting to balance their presentations.[41]

Balance can connote the giving of equal weight to the pros and cons of a problem, as in the case of WOOD's documentary, "Watchdog Comptroller," where three men favoring the city finance officer were vis-a-vis three men who opposed him. Balance can also mean giving all factions of a problem an opportunity to voice opinion, whether the documentary results in a one-sided presentation or not. Thurman aimed

---

[40] Ibid.

[41] Willard Van Dyke, Appendix I, A. William Bluem's Documentary in American Television (New York: Hastings House, Publishers, 1965), p. 256.

to give as many black factions as possible an opportunity to speak out in "Tell it Like it is"--leaders, followers, men, women, militants, Uncle Toms. He said, "If there was any merit to the show, it was a balance between the blacks--it wasn't militant or Uncle Tom." And yet Thurman felt that although the black Grand Rapids documentary made the most comment of any, "we at WOOD didn't make the point, the people did."[42]

"Tell it Like it is" was highly editorial in Cheverton's opinion, but the editorial was from the black point of view "which no one had ever bothered to get before."[43]

Schroeder feels "Tell it Like it is" had better balance than the national news stories and documentaries on racial tension.[44]

"New Style in the Statehouse," a biographical documentary on Governor-designate William Milliken, was almost completely one-sided. A controversy was difficult to arouse concerning Milliken since he had yet to state his plans for his administration that might cause any discontent.

The problem of balance and partiality in a documentary is related to whether a television station on public airways has the responsibility or the right to express a lengthy view

---

[42]Thurman interview, August 13, 1969.

[43]Cheverton interview, August 13, 1969.

[44]Schroeder interview, August 26, 1969.

on any subject. Not all of the documentary subjects produced under Thurman have required the expression of a point of view. "Watchdog Comptroller," the one film most in need of a point of view, however, did make a definite conclusion.

"Harper ['Watchdog Comptroller'] is a beautiful example of why you do a documentary," according to Cheverton. "Here we supposedly had a guy on a white horse against city hall. But we knew otherwise. There wasn't time in an editorial or in the news to tell the story. In the show we were objective, but to make it meaningful, we had to conclude with our side."[45]

Thurman theorizes that if the documentary staff, as astute newspeople, have done the research, then their conclusion should be apparent in the finished film.[46]

To inform or arouse.--Schroeder sees the role of the station as being an informer rather than an element which would arouse people. He adds that if the documentary does a proper job of informing the viewer, then the viewer will be aroused. "We think our viewers and listeners are smarter than the politicians and newspeople think they are. Therefore, if we inform them on Pine River pollution, there should be some reaction. You could get on the air and beat the drum like a commercial, but you would not get as much positive reaction as if you did an informative documentary," Schroeder says.[47]

---

[45]Cheverton interview, August 13, 1969.

[46]Thurman interview, August 13, 1969.

[47]Schroeder interview, August 26, 1969.

Making people think.--Documentaries have a role of being a "think piece" for the viewer. In "Student Revolt and Jim Dukarm," a film on one student's part in campus unrest, the documentary unit felt that because of the negative reaction maybe they did get under some skin and make people think.[48]

Ferring, in striving toward this goal of making people think, likes to quote from Due to Circumstances Beyond Our Control . . . by Fred Friendly in which he refers to the Ford Foundation plan for public broadcasting. Friendly had been discussing the Ford Foundation plan for public broadcasting and quoted from the London Economist: ". . . like a good Harvard examination question, it will force the Federal Communications Commission to think harder than it had planned to do."[49] Thus, one role of WOOD documentaries would be to force viewers to think harder.

Measure of success.--An element in the success of a documentary film is whether there is a change in the situation or problem which the film attempts to explore. If the documentary is informational, then people should start thinking; if its purpose is to put across a point of view, then the point should be clearly stated.

But success in the final outcome of the situation and producing a successful documentary are, hopefully, not one

---

[48]Ferring interview, August 26, 1969.

[49]Fred W. Friendly, Due to Circumstances Beyond Our Control . . . (New York: Random House, 1967), pp. 324-25.

and the same. If such were the case, WOOD's batting average would be low. Two days after "Tell it Like it is" was aired, racial tension broke out, four whites were beaten, and martial law was put into effect. One week after "Watchdog Comptroller, Yes or No?" was aired, the electorate voted five to one in favor of Harper (against WOOD's premise). Thurman's view is that such a vote result "represents a significant thing even though you know you're on the losing side."[50]

Success cannot be measured by audience response, for (with rare exception) most responses are negative ones, according to Thurman and Ferring. "We're professionals. We know whether a show is good or not. We have to satisfy ourselves. If we feel we've done a good job, then it's a successful show. We're hard to please."[51]

Success might be measured by one letter from the right person. Thurman says a three-page letter from Judge William Frankhauser of Coldwater, some 90 miles from Grand Rapids, made the black ghetto documentary a success for him. He adds, "'Tell it Like it is' was a success despite lack of awards."[52]

Awards are not the mark of a successful documentary either, according to the film unit. Yet somehow the men know how to rank awards in importance (beginning with

---

[50]Thurman interview, August 26, 1969.

[51]Ferring-Thurman interview, August 26, 1969.

[52]Thurman interview, August 26, 1969.

Sigma Delta Chi, Peabody, and Emmy followed by Sloan and RTNDA).[53] The problem with awards, according to Thurman, is that a station may often tailor its script and shooting to meet certain categories. Therefore, he claims he is "not overly impressed with awards."[54]

Fulfill FCC regulations.--Documentaries are one of the fundamental reasons for a station's being, according to Schroeder. In addition, a major role of the documentary is helping a station meet the FCC regulations on public affairs programming. Broadcasters admit that a good part of the increase in documentary production on the local level has been due to FCC regulations on public service programming. "As far as the industry is concerned, the FCC is viewed as a policy-making organization which does exert pressures on television stations to do certain kinds of programming," says Schroeder. However, he adds that "FCC pressure is not going to make a good documentary program. You've got to have conviction. Make documentaries properly, then your commercials and sponsors will come along."[55]

Schroeder contends it is not desirable for the FCC or any outside organization to set yardsticks for all stations. He feels that the FCC which makes up regulations for the industry as a whole is not competent to say what WOOD in

---

[53]Thurman-Ferring interview, August 26, 1969.

[54]Ibid.

[55]Schroeder interview, August 26, 1969.

Grand Rapids should do. Schroeder feels the individual members of the FCC have backgrounds that differ so from the education and experience of broadcasting personnel that the regulations in many instances worsen the situation on public affairs broadcasting. "The majority of stations share my attitude," he said. "Many who don't just want their gross money in any given year--which is bad business on a long-term arrangement." Schroeder questions whether or not the FCC or Congress can improve those stations simply by applying rules. He wonders if more harm than good isn't the result.[56]

Jim Atkins and Leo Willette also claim that the FCC seems to be an unintentional enemy of the first-class documentary:

> The FCC is not crippling locally-produced documentaries on purpose, but this federal licensing agency places undue emphasis on bulk public service programming--not on quality.
>
> According to the FCC, community public service includes 'talk, discussion, and religion.' It also includes the laboriously prepared documentary. So, by FCC standards the one-hour documentary rates the same toward license renewal as the one-hour 'discussion.' In other words, a station could air a one-hour talk with any local loudmouth who walked in off the street and be just as well-off at license renewal time.[57]

WOOD management is not concerned with turning out documentaries to impress the FCC. "The log looks nice on the FCC report,

---

[56]Ibid.

[57]Jim Atkins, Jr., and Leo Willette, Filming TV News and Documentaries (Philadelphia: Chilton Books, 1965), p. 131.

but that is not why we're doing documentaries," Schroeder says. WOOD is influenced by the basic news orientation of parent company, Time-Life, and is encouraged in its documentary production, but the station feels no pressures or requirements in their documentary programming.[58]

Problems

Unions.--One of the problems that the WOOD documentary unit has had to face is the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers contract signed this year which required that all synchronous sound film must be shot by a union sound man. "The unions are so new, we don't know what they will do," Thurman says. On at least one occasion in 1969 a union man refused to run a documentary promotion spot that had not been dubbed by a union sound man.[59]

Schroeder says the union will make no difference in documentary production other than make it a little more costly.[60] But Thurman is not so sure. "If the man is good, we want him along." However, just to take along anyone to fulfill a union contract does not appeal to Thurman. He points to some instances where a small crew is not only preferable, but almost necessary. The more people you have at the filming

---

[58]Schroeder interview, August 26, 1969.

[59]Thurman interview, August 17, 1969.

[60]Schroeder interview, August 26, 1969.

location, the more confusion and disturbance occurs, he feels.[61]

Budgets.--Up to now, budgeting has not actually been a problem as the salaries have all been paid under the news budget. As the documentary department proves it can attract and hold sponsors and is no longer regarded as an experimental project in infancy, budget restrictions may become more established and adhered to.

Selectivity.--Schroeder points out that documentary subject matter is as broad as the world. Thus, one of WOOD's problems is selectivity. Most ideas originate in the news department and come out of regular reporting beats. Thurman says he gets many suggestions that he does not have time to consider. He is open to suggestions from all sources and has even met with groups who wanted to discuss a particular idea with him. One example was a meeting with the "Save City Hall" proponents. (The old Grand Rapids city hall is an ancient stone building, an eyesore in Grand Rapids' new high-rise urban center. The city hall is slated to be torn down, amidst protests of various groups.) Thurman said he was willing to listen to the "Save City Hall" group, but when they could come up with no concrete plans for a use for the building, he was no longer interested.[62]

---

[61]Thurman interview, August 26, 1969.

[62]Thurman interview, August 13, 1969.

While timidity does not enter in a description of Thurman's approach to documentary subjects, he is aware that certain subjects he would like to cover would be totally unacceptable to Grand Rapids viewers. Thurman's favorite network documentary is Charles Kuralt's CBS report on "The Business of Religion," but he realizes a locally produced film in a similar vein would not be popular "in this Christian Reform community."[63]

Competition.--Competition has not been a problem for WOOD-TV, especially competition in the documentary field. The two stations with which WOOD (NBC) competes are WKZO-TV channel 3, Kalamazoo (CBS), and WZZM channel 13, Grand Rapids (ABC). WKZO is described as having little local advertising but reaching out for the national advertising. Schroeder wants to have the insurance of local revenue in times when recessions cut back national advertising (e.g., automotive). Thus, if WOOD seeks local advertisers, management will encourage locally produced shows, i.e., documentaries, to appeal to local buyers.[64]

Schroeder describes WKZO as "almost no competition," but says channel 13 is. He says in the beginning WZZM-TV was young and small, the underdog with no place to go but up. "A station like that, if it has one or two good men, can

---

[63]Ibid.

[64]Schroeder interview, August 26, 1969.

effect some good programs. Channel 13 does a better news job than WKZO," he says. "Our news people are pretty egotistical," Schroeder says, "but we have 60 percent share of audience on our local news; we have more time for news; we have the only full hour of news; and we have three times the manpower of the other stations."[65]

Cheverton agrees that the documentary department has no local competition. "WZZM doesn't have the manpower to do a job fast. They just do the basic things. Their idea of a documentary is to tape a panel of people talking about something."[66]

Approach to the subject.--One problem any documentary unit faces is the point of view to take on a subject. "Perception is everything," says Robert Lewis Shayon, "and time for perception will have to be made at the head of the assembly line as well as at the end."[67]

Cecile Starr in her article "Films with a Purpose" says that in trying to please everyone you won't please anyone very much. In dealing primarily with facts and points of view, the documentary film must have a purpose, a direction. She claims too many audiences are asking themselves, "What

---

[65]Ibid.

[66]Cheverton interview, August 13, 1969.

[67]Robert Lewis Shayon, "Biography's Backyard," Saturday Review, XLVI, No. 26 (June 29, 1963), p. 22.

on earth was that film about?"[68] Thurman knows what purpose each documentary serves, even if that purpose be "just for fun."

The most difficult time in documentary production is establishing a point of view for the overall show, according to Thurman. "We knew we wanted to do a program on campus revolt. But how to say something meaningful within our limitations is the question," he said.[69] Ferring added that you make or break a show by how you decide to put it together. Usually that decision comes on an inspirational basis, he says.[70] Cheverton asks, "What do you have to say? After we decide the issue we must get some film to back it up. Making it visual takes the know-how."[71]

Scheduling.--The time slot for airing a documentary can be a problem--and the documentary unit has little, if any, control over that aspect. "The Quiet Majority" high school panel show (not a documentary, but produced under Thurman's department) would have appeared on Sunday afternoon following "Meet the Press" if the option had not been picked up by a sponsor. Since it was sponsored, the program was aired in prime time, Thurman said.[72]

---

[68]Cecile Starr, "Films with a Purpose," Ideas on Film, ed. Starr (New York: Funk and Wagnalls Co., 1951), p. 53.

[69]Thurman interview, August 13, 1969.

[70]Ferring interview, August 26, 1969.

[71]Cheverton interview, August 13, 1969.

[72]Thurman interview, August 13, 1969.

WOOD-TV does consider good viewing patterns on programs preceding and following the documentary. The problem is that all but one WOOD documentary have been half-hour shows, and the choice of half-hour slots in the NBC network programming is somewhat limited. A narcotics program was tenataively scheduled for Thursday, September 11th, until WOOD received word that an NBC special was to be shown. In addition, the scheduling problem was exacerbated because NBC Week programming began Sunday. To pre-empt during this week would be unheard of. So the documentary was scheduled Saturday, September 13th. Also, WOOD documentaries are never scheduled during bi-yearly Nielsen rating periods.[73]

On-camera ease.--The person who appears very unnatural on camera is common. Thurman described one subject as "a little bit terrified." You do the best you can with that kind of film, he says. He attempted to show a family situation at some length in "Tell it Like it is." The wife was particularly out-going and expressive, and the children went through their antics as planned. But the crew was not able to get any usable footage of interviews with the husband. He appeared only as a background figure in the final film.[74]

Another example of freezing on camera came when the crew photographed a secretary to Governor Milliken. They finally

---

[73]Thurman interview, August 17, 1969.

[74]Ibid.

resorted to recorded comments over silent film showing her at work.[75]

Thurman prefers not to film children because they tend to freeze on camera. He found that the only thing that saved his panel show of high school students was a good moderator.[76]

Refusals to appear.--There have been frequent times when persons refused to appear on camera. Thurman says it is impossible to get "white bigots" to express their views. In putting together "Tell it Like it is," one Negro, whose views would be important to the documentary, refused to appear when he found out he could not dictate the show. Thurman had to glean the man's point of view from film the news department had on file. While there was a decided difference in photography from this news footage and the rest of the documentary, Thurman felt the man's point of view should be expressed. Thurman later heard that the man, after seeing the documentary, had threatened him saying, "He'll get his."[77]

Crew shortage.--Shortage of manpower has proved a problem at times. An example is having to draft passers-by to hold reflectors when filming interviews in bright sunlight.

---

[75] Ibid.

[76] Ibid.

[77] Ibid.

Program pace.--The opening minute to a minute and a half is vital to a documentary. Even if the film is shown in prime time, your viewer will switch to an entertainment program, Thurman says. But this problem is not peculiar only to documentaries. "Even your entertainment shows give you the meatiest part before the first commercial." Thurman has used startling statements, fast-paced music, and flashing graphics. If no natural interest grabber results from filming, he manufactures one with the help of the graphics department.[78]

The pace of the documentary must be fast enough to hold the audience. An official of Union Bank, which sponsored the student revolt show, objected because he thought it was dull. Some subjects by their nature force a fast pace. Thurman said that they tried to cover 23 questions in 25 minutes in the Milliken show.

Titles.--Documentary titles, although a problem, do not seem to concern Thurman to any degree. He is more influenced by his own feelings for a title phrase than by the reaction to it of his associates. His own choice was "New Style in the Statehouse" over the suggestion "Meet Mr. Milliken."[79]

After considering "Not Right Here in Grand Rapids" as the title for the narcotics documentary, Thurman decided to

---

[78]Ibid.

[79]Thurman interview, August 26, 1969.

drop the "not" and used "Right Here in Grand Rapids." To combat arguments that the prospective viewer would not know what the show was about, Thurman answered, "They will when I get done promoting it."[80]

"Tell it Like it is" is one title Thurman especially liked. He believes he was the first to use it in a documentary and, since then, he has seen it several times. "When we used it, the phrase was new and fresh. By the time the film was reviewed a year later in competition in Ohio, the men judged the title 'unoriginal.'"[81]

Sound.--Richard Cawston points out the importance of sound on television. The picture is small and may often be of poor quality on the home receiver. He compares the sound quality to the cinema where the picture is excellent but the sound has to compete with a large auditorium. "I'm all for using synchronized sound, for exploiting natural dialogue between people who are not actors, and for getting rid of commentary," he says.[82]

However, silent film can be simpler and cheaper, and sound on film has been a frequent problem for WOOD documentary makers. Prior to Thurman's arrival, one of the problems concerned the expense of using double-sound equipment.

---

[80]Ibid.

[81]Ibid.

[82]Richard Cawston, Aubry Singer, John Elliot, "The Individual Approach: Television Actuality," Television The Creative Experiment, ed. Bluem and Manvell, p. 203.

"Poverty is the mother of invention," Cheverton says. "We're now getting into the double system through the back door by duplication of it with A-B roll."[83]

Time.--Time works against documentaries. "It would take a minimum of two weeks to write a script and string together newsfilm for a documentary," Cheverton claims. "In this minimum time you really haven't created anything. Topics get stale. We could have a blazing controversy that's forgotten in a week. That's not for documentary. Controversial topics simply don't sustain themselves," he says. He contends that it pays to get on the air with a subject while you're excited about it. "We've wrestled too long with some subjects before they go on the air and then they look tired."[84]

About three months are needed to put out a WOOD documentary. In this schedule Cheverton takes into consideration a five-day week. He includes seven to eight days of bad weather and a week to a month for research. "Therefore, three months is not very long," he says. "Networks take a year and a half waiting for the right light."[85]

The documentary as art.--WOOD-TV has had disappointing experiences with documentaries that have been attempted in an "arty" style, and Cheverton avoids them. "The arty subject

---

[83]Cheverton interview, August 13, 1969.

[84]Ibid.

[85]Ibid.

is tough to do," he says. It takes a good photographer and even then, if it's not good, it's not arty. Most TV stations don't have that kind of art around."[86]

Paul Rotha says style is purely a question of personal character and inclination, of how strongly one feels about satisfying private artistic fancies or communal aims. He compares the romanticism of Flaherty's early documentaries with the realistic approach to material today.[87]

Thurman finds it takes too much time to be arty. His original plan of an impressionistic film on black Grand Rapids quickly disintegrated when he found how much time it would require.[88]

Beauty is one of the greatest dangers to the documentary. Beauty of individual shots is not only insufficient but frequently harmful to the significant expression of content, according to Rotha.[89]

Cheverton mentioned a network documentary on the Nile River as one of the finest he has seen. It was arty, it cost $300,000, and it took a year and a half to complete. "You can get arty if you wait for the right light and the

---

[86]Ibid.

[87]Paul Rotha, Documentary Film (3d ed.; London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1952), p. 114.

[88]Thurman interview, August 13, 1969.

[89]Rotha, p. 153.

right day. Thus, arty pictures are potentially beyond a station like ours," he says. He feels WOOD is photographically news oriented and says that being fairly creative is not good enough for an arty show.[90]

Sponsors.--Cheverton recalled the problem WOOD faced in producing documentaries good enough to attract local sponsors.

> We tend to equate yesterday with today. We didn't have anyone then to do documentaries. Management wouldn't throw out 'Beverly Hillbillies' to put on an inferior show for nothing. And we in news sort of went along with it. Then networks led the way and could do documentaries well. Local television said maybe we can do them well. Now you can get a blank check from a sponsor, so resistance on documentary production ceases overnight from TV stations. Unfortunately you have to put the product out first with a track record of a year or so showing solid production and content. If the documentaries are on a fairly frequent schedule, somewhere, someone sees it, but you never get back what you spend. For years we couldn't sell documentaries, ever, even for $50. Now we have sponsors competing.[91]

Cheverton notes there aren't many businesses in Grand Rapids which could sponsor documentaries. He estimates there might be 15 in all (big department stores, banks, a utility, or service company). Spot advertising is not considered for fear a deodorant commercial might interrupt the continuity of the message.[92]

Mini-docs.--Another station reports that in this hurried civilization, viewers want shorter and shorter news reports.

---

[90]Cheverton interview, August 13, 1969.

[91]Ibid.

[92]Ibid.

WJRT, Flint, avoids documentary production saying their viewers will not sit still long enough to see a half-hour program. Their trend is to the "mini-doc," a five-minute lengthened news story that supposedly appeals to upper class viewing.[93]

Cheverton completely refutes this mini-doc theory as not making sense. He says that news is the greatest success story of television. While entertainment shows and women's shows go by the wayside, news is the only program that continues to grow. WOOD has converted to the 90-minute six o'clock news program. "If every day you ask the public to watch 90 minutes of news, why won't they watch a 30-minute documentary once a month?" Cheverton asks.[94]

Documentaries and programmers.--Cheverton, a strong newsman, feels that one of the worst stumbling blocks in documentary production has been programmers who say "you have to have show biz and razz-ma-tazz." He claims you don't have to put bells on documentaries.[95]

Grierson had called "documentary" a clumsy description but said to let it stand. At one time Bosley Crowther suggested "think films." Since then the semantic argument has persisted. Recently one producer complained that the

---

[93]Lilyan M. Alspaugh. Unpublished report to Dr. Thomas Baldwin, Michigan State University (November 2, 1968).

[94]Cheverton interview, August 13, 1969.

[95]Ibid.

title "documentary" frightened viewers, inhibited sponsors, and made network executives see red ink. In its place he recommended a title of "non-fiction programming." Others have suggested "telementaries" and "actuality dramas."[96]

Broadcasters fear that the word documentary has a connotation of "dull and dreary." Thurman at one time considered using the designation of "Project 8 Presentation" on each release as a special identity, but settled on "WOOD-TV Documentary Unit Production," apparently unalarmed at the possibility of frightening off Grand Rapids viewers.[97]

The whole truth.--The newsman has the eternal problem of whether to withhold information that might be damaging to others not directly involved. "I try to be basically honest in my show and my relations with people, but I don't try to tear anyone down," Thurman says.[98]

Thurman ran into a problem on his narcotics documentary when he discovered one of the youths in the rehabilitation group was the son of a WOOD employee. A brief mental debate took place on whether to throw out the material that included this one boy. Thurman finally edited as planned: "I didn't feel I could not use what the kid said and still

---

[96]Benjamin Burton, "The Documentary Heritage," Television Quarterly, I, No. 1 (February, 1963), p. 33.

[97]Thurman interview, August 17, 1969.

[98]Thurman interview, August 13, 1969.

be true to the group."[99]

Salaries.--WOOD-TV is in a relatively unique position regarding the documentary unit and salaries. On the bright side, news-documentary salaries are higher than for news departments in television stations in the same sized market. (To find a documentary unit in a market the size of Grand Rapids for comparison is unusual.) However, salaries for documentary film producers in industry and major television markets are considerably higher and an ever-present enticement to medium-sized market personnel.[100]

Equipment.--The availability of the right kind of equipment at the time it is needed has been a problem in the past for the documentary department. In earlier days before Thurman took over, special cameras and equipment were hired for individual documentaries using a double sound system.[101] When Thurman came, he had to borrow cameras from the news department. The documentary unit now has its own Bell and Howell silent camera and a six-month-old Auricon with synchronous sound and a 12 to 120mm zoom lense. The Auricon is equipped with two 400-foot magazines. Ektachrome EF 7242 film is used for indoor shooting and Ektachrome MS 7256 outside. The unit has its own power pack, lights, reflectors and related equipment.[102]

---

[99]Thurman interview, August 17, 1969.

[100]Thurman-Ferring interview, August 26, 1969.

[101]Cheverton interview, August 13, 1969.

[102]Thurman-Ferring interview, August 26, 1969.

Consequences of the job.--If a documentary staff becomes overly involved in a subject, consequences can be alarming. While preparing the way for a sequence for the documentary on black Grand Rapids, Thurman says he had a strong exchange of words with one man who subsequently put a clip in his gun, pointed it at him and said, "This is the only power you guys respect." Another day after filming a family scene for the same documentary, Thurman felt obligated to participate in an extemporaneous dinner of greens, fried cornbread, and ham hocks, a real effort on his part since he is a professed abhorrer of soul food.[103]

Improving performances.--A documentary director often has the creative urge to improve the on-camera appearance of his subject but the journalistic sense to let the meaning and naturalness of the person show through. The question always is, "To speak up or not to speak up?"

Robert Drew points out that re-enactment is a bad thing, not simply in the interest of honesty, but because when you ask a person to do something, you ruin the chances that he will be true and natural. "I wouldn't ask the man to move one inch forward out of the shadow for fear he would wonder next time, 'What does that man want me to do now?'" Drew says.[104]

---

[103]Thurman interview, August 13, 1969.

[104]A. William Bluem, Documentary in American Television (New York: Hastings House, Publishers, 1965), p. 263.

Thurman felt he improved Governor Milliken's essential character by asking him to be less modest at one point in the interview. In the student revolt show, Thurman frequently had to prompt Dukarm to speak up for better sound quality, and when Dukarm read his conclusion, Thurman asked that he put into his voice the conviction that the words had on paper. In "House Upon a Rock" Thurman had asked Union Bank president, Edward Fry, to refrain from his natural inclination to use the word "colored" in his speaking about Negro housing. Changing speech patterns is not an easy matter, and Thurman noticed at one point a slight hesitation as Fry groped for a substitute word.[105]

Tact.--Diplomacy can be a problem. In filming an important feminine personality, the lady's slip strap fell down on her arm, unnoticed by her. Thurman stopped the filming and thoughtfully suggested she and another lady might like to freshen up. When they returned from the ladies room, the feminine VIP with a smile told Thurman "Everything's secure now," and the filming continued.[106]

The elements.--Added to the problems of weather and lighting in outdoor filming is that of noise. A sequence in one documentary was shot three times when a youth thought it amusing to run his motorcycle up and down the street where they were filming.[107]

---

[105]Thurman interview, August 17, 1969.

[106]Thurman interview, August 13, 1969.

[107]Thurman interview, August 17, 1969.

Filming errors.--Not the least of problems is the trouble that can develop with film or camera. No matter how competent the photographer, the chance for some miscalculation always exists. One example at WOOD was an important sequence in one day's shooting which was spoiled when a lens filter was improperly inserted.[108]

Practices

Specific policies or practices evolve over a period of time at all television stations. One practice of WOOD's news and documentary departments has been to take advantage of the station's association with Time-Life. WOOD has access to the suggestions and experiences of the other four Time-Life Broadcast television stations. Recently, Thurman attended a T-L meeting of all five stations to discuss production capability available in the various stations. Representatives from the company-owned magazines also attended. Time-Life in New York has produced "The World we Live in" series and may be interested in certain sequences of WOOD's pollution series.[109]

All WOOD-produced documentaries have been half-hour films with the exception of Thurman's first on black Grand Rapids. "I think networks have gotten hung up on 90-minute programs," he says. Length is not necessary to get your

---

[108] Ibid.

[109] Ibid.

point across, he feels. If you have a half-hour of things to say, use a half-hour; if one hour, use one hour of film."[110]

Thurman has one practice to which he adheres strictly: his work consists totally of production and direction. He feels his voice is not good for broadcasting and he does not appear on camera. Now that his department is a permanent unit, he uses Mike Ferring consistently for interviewing.[111]

Freedom of expression and no fear of censorship are two elements of production that are valued highly by the documentary unit. Ferring goes so far as to describe the "no restriction" atmosphere as a fringe benefit of the job. "If that benefit were taken away, the staff would work elsewhere. You have to sort of earn this freedom a little bit," Ferring says, "but when it ceases to exist, whatever you enjoyed in the job ceases to exist."[112]

Thurman says, "I'm given free reign. I've never approached production with any inhibited feeling, and I've never been told to cut."[113]

The unit describes itself as "autonomous." "Management doesn't know what we're doing. We're hired to do it ourselves." The documentary team members feel they are not

---

[110]Thurman interview, August 13, 1969.

[111]Ibid.

[112]Thurman-Ferring interview, August 26, 1969.

[113]Ibid.

expected to have to ask if they can do a show. They first get into production and then alert management and sales as to the upcoming program.[114]

Cheverton agrees that the documentary department works by itself. "I've been trying to sell the documentary department on a Great Lakes theme for a year now," he says, half in jest. However, Cheverton as head of news, has been described by Thurman as the place "where the buck stops," so if there were any drastic mistakes or miscalculations by the documentary department, Cheverton would have the ultimate responsibility for them. Cheverton, on the other hand, expresses his confidence in Thurman: "We hired a man who knew what he was doing."[115] The news department also gave him enough help and WOOD-TV has given the documentary unit recognition.

The content of a film must never be subject to a sponsor's censorship, according to WOOD-TV practices. Union Bank's Public Relations Director Bill Gill has said that the bank would have to react if public opinion ran too strongly against their sponsorship of WOOD documentaries, but that reaction would not take the form of censorship of individual programs.[116]

---

[114] Ibid.

[115] Cheverton interview, August 13, 1969.

[116] Gill interview, August 26, 1969.

A WOOD documentary practice is to present balance and a point of view. Documentaries under Thurman have in all cases had local point of view and impact. However, this fact does not exclude topics that are also of national interest, according to Thurman. He says that while last year was the "year of the ghetto problems" for documentaries throughout the United States, "this is the year of environmental pollution." The series of five programs to be shown on WOOD-TV in January-February, 1970, while localized to appeal to Grand Rapids viewers, would be of interest on the national level, Thurman points out. The WOOD documentary unit was able to interview Dr. Joseph Hickey, well-known national authority on wildlife ecology and ornithology in Wisconsin, for the pollution series, whereas Dr. Hickey had refused a previous network request to appear. He said he felt the networks were too sensational, but WOOD's approach was more realistic.[117] The unit, thus, does go outside the immediate area to cover a story, and will go to Kentucky for the Monsignor Bukowski story. However, Cheverton's theory is that the local interest decreases in proportion to the distance the documentary unit travels away from Grand Rapids.[118]

An area subject would have top priority. A documentary on Vietnam is described as "icing on the cake" by Cheverton.

---

[117]Thurman interview, August 26, 1969.

[118]Cheverton interview, August 13, 1969.

"If you have six months to spare, go and do Vietnam." But WOOD apparently was satiated with grandiose, overseas documentaries after their experience with "My Bac-Si Swanson," a documentary Cheverton aired reluctantly and only because "we had put so much in it."[119]

Another practice the WOOD-TV news department follows is to use "talent" as announcers rather than news reporters. But Cyril Bennett has pointed out the rejection of the actor-commentator with his good looks and "television" personality, and the move toward the journalist commentator with a university education rather than good looks, a man whom the viewer realizes is directly involved in the business of public affairs.[120] Thus, for narrating the documentaries Thurman prefers to use news reporters who have actually researched the script.

Schroeder, who expects a documentary from the unit nearly every month, objected in the past to men who "needed a thumb on them all the time."[121] Yet Cheverton, more directly responsible that documentaries evolve, says they haven't put the productions on any schedule except for the pollution series. "We do as many as we can do but do them well. Some documentaries are quickies--blazing at the

---

[119]Ibid.

[120]Cyril Bennett and Peter Morley, "Presenting Actuality," Television: The Creative Experience, ed. Bluem and Manvell, p. 219.

[121]Schroeder interview, August 26, 1969.

moment."[122] Naturally such subjects are filmed and edited in much less time than one needing lengthy research before filming. Interest in controversies can override technical problems of films.

Honest criticism appears to be the practice among documentary unit members. Little attempt is made at hiding feelings about how a project is going or how another's work is progressing. When Thurman was able to get his narcotics film after having to keep silent about the possibility of it for some time, he naturally was somewhat jubilant about the results. However, when Ferring finally got a look at his boss's film, his comment was that he thought the film was going to be better. Thurman's answer: "We're our own worst critics."[123]

A small minority of documentaries are purchased by WOOD from other stations.[124] Two exceptions to the station's practice of airing only locally-related documentaries were "The Face of War" (on Vietnam) and "One Nation Indivisible" (on racial problems).

"The Face of War" was shown without sponsorship. Both Old Kent and Union Bank were informed of the program, but WOOD recommended that neither company sponsor it.[125]

---

[122]Cheverton interview, August 13, 1969.

[123]Thurman-Ferring interview, August 26, 1969.

[124]Schroeder interview, August 26, 1969.

[125]Ibid.

The film had originally been produced for movie theater distribution and depicted life in a marine battalion. Schroeder felt it was necessary to introduce the program and warn viewers that it was not for children or the squeemish. The reaction was more negative than positive. Some said the film was too raw for television and others felt that the film showed the reasons the United States should get out of the Vietnam war.[126]

"One Nation Indivisible," a three-hour program on racial strife, was purchased from Westinghouse's Group W stations. It was aired as a single block and was supplemented by one hour of locally-related programming.

WOOD broadcast a series of 12 educational documentaries on "The World we Live in." The films were produced by Time-Life 8, a company subsidiary, and the five Time-Life stations were encouraged to run them. Although the series was shown on NET and in the foreign market, for some reason the series did not appeal to commercial stations in this country.[127]

---

[126] Ibid.

[127] Ibid.

CHAPTER III

RECENT WOOD DOCUMENTARIES

At the time of this study, the documentaries in WOOD-TV files that were available for viewing included one on film and seven on video tape. All eight were produced from 1967 through 1969 and were in color. Those documentaries that were produced in black and white earlier in the 1960s, no longer of use to the station, had been discarded, according to News Director Cheverton.[1]

The author viewed the eight available documentaries to discover the background and purpose, the approach, the problems, and the reactions to each program.

"Close-up: George Romney"

Background and purpose.--The only documentary completed before May, 1968, which is still in the WOOD-TV files is "Close-up: George Romney, the 'Walking Man' on the Run." Produced and directed by Jeff B. Davis and photographed by Arthur Bleich, the intent of the half-hour film was to show the fast-moving existence of the governor of Michigan at a

---

[1]Cheverton interview, August 13, 1969.

time when his name was just beginning to be mentioned in national circles as a presidential possibility.

Approach.--The film showed Romney shaking every hand in sight at the Blossom Festival, playing golf, literally devouring his breakfast, meeting high school students and Girl Scouts in the statehouse, lunching on chicken in his car en route to another appointment, telling a group conferring on highway problems that "you can't be that selfish," dining with Mrs. John Eisenhower at a Civic Center banquet, talking with his family in their East Lansing and Bloomfield Hills residences, and leading a crowd of Michiganders in singing "America." The film also included brief shots of, and comments by, Governor Romney's speech writer, assistant press secretary, and administrative assistant, all of whom naturally gave very positive comments concerning the administration. Closing with shots of a glorious sunset, the narrator said, "Romney has a magnetic personality, honesty, intelligence, almost overwhelming vigor. But can he overcome his lack of knowledge of foreign affairs if he runs? Lesser men have. Watch the walking man go."

Reaction.--Cheverton's criticism was that the documentary was a "whitewash job for Romney." WOOD showed the program to Time-Life who questioned the approach, but the station went ahead and aired it. Cheverton said Governor Romney could not have had a better promotional film if the Republican party had paid for it themselves.[2]

---

[2]Ibid.

Thurman criticized the Romney film for gross technical errors, e.g., "a photographer never shows a subject eating." In his documentary on Milliken one year later, Thurman tried to give more balance to the overall picture even though at the time there were few people who found fault with the governor-designate.[3]

The Romney film is important in that it shows the trend documentary subjects would be taking under the influence of the news department.

"Tell it Like it is: Black Grand Rapids Speaks"

Background and purpose.--Thurman's first documentary after taking over as director centered on the Negro ghetto and was entitled "Tell it Like it is: Black Grand Rapids Speaks." Looking back, he said the summer of 1968 was the summer of riots, ghetto housing, and integration problems, so a film on racial conditions in black Grand Rapids served as an important beginning.[4]

"The ghetto was a big subject. The networks almost invariably followed the same pattern," Thurman said. "They would feature the white reporter, interviews in the slum houses, and rats in the buildings. Then the network would come back and give you the solutions. Frankly, I didn't

---

[3]Thurman interview, August 26, 1969.

[4]Thurman interview, August 13, 1969.

think I was that smart and I was darn sure I didn't know the answer."[5]

Thurman's aim was to give balance by including as many of the voices in the black society as possible. In his filming and editing, he let the blacks tell the story. "Narrative explanations would have been interesting, but they wouldn't have added that much to the viewership and wouldn't have let the blacks speak for themselves," he said.[6]

Approach.--People speaking for black Grand Rapids included Lyman Parks, a Congregational minister and commissioner in the city government; Carl Smith, militant; Raymond Tardy, director of the Sheldon Complex, the inter-city black complex for persons seeking aid and counsel; a housewife and her family; a college student; a grandmother rearing the six children of her two daughters; a retired construction worker with strongly evident religious convictions; the chairman of the Black Unity Council, and a middle-aged woman Thurman met coming out of a laundramat. He used several film segments of one erudite man whom he stopped on the street and who was later identified as a pimp (although never identified as such on the air; the man subsequently served a jail sentence on other charges).[7]

---

[5]Ibid.

[6]Ibid.

[7]Ibid.

Thurman said he originally had the idea of doing the show on a 24-hours-in-Grand Rapids theme using an impressionistic technique. He shot some footage in this vein and quickly came to realize if he continued, he would need a year to complete the production. "The reason I abandoned my impressionistic idea was not for any great social consciousness. I just wanted to get started," he said.[8]

"Tell it Like it is," with black Grand Rapids telling its story, is described as "an eye-opener, especially to a community which had already experienced one summer of racial unrest and was about to have another." Thurman wanted the Negro study to come across without the interpretation of a white reporter. Although much of the research was done by reporter Doris Jarrell, assisted by black intern reporter Rich Brown, no newsmen appeared on camera as interviewers. The technique was to avoid asking questions because they elicited only dangling answers. Instead, Thurman drew responses by tossing out phrases to each respondent (e.g., What does black power mean to you? or housing? or black-white relations?). As a result, the respondent frequently and unwittingly repeated the phrase and answered with fairly complete sentences. The film editor had an easier job sorting out the various subjects for continuity.[9]

---

[8]Thurman interview, August 26, 1969.

[9]Thurman interview, August 17, 1969.

CBS network reporter Mike Wallace has asked, "Wasn't it Ed Murrow who once said that people armed with their own convictions can compose compelling literature while they are speaking? That's TV at its best--in a talk, a documentary, an interview--anything. Conviction."[10] In his first documentary Thurman captured this spirit Wallace describes by letting the Negroes voice their convictions.

As a "grabber," Thurman used film of a Negro addressing a meeting concerning the school situation. The man shouted, "You're putting a rope around our neck . . . What we've got here is a little Mississippi . . . a little Mississippi." This opener was followed by a one-minute commentary by Cheverton preceding the commercial. To again gain the audience's attention and give the show a fast pace, Thurman began the main portion of the program with the loud beat of Lou Rawls singing "Lifetime."

As the filming and editing went on, Thurman realized he had about 38 minutes of good major interviews. He was not satisfied with the total content, considering it "too pulpy," so the crew went to the streets for grass roots interviews. Trying for a more spontaneous feeling in this footage, Thurman held the camera on his back in order to be less obtrusive. The problem of unstable camera was evident in

---

[10]Mike Wallace and Hugh Downs, "The Craft of Interviewing," Television: The Creative Experience, a Survey of Anglo-American Progress, ed. William A. Bluem and Roger Manvell (New York: Hastings House, Publishers, 1967), p. 173.

those shots, and Thurman thereafter took time to set up the tripod.[11]

Problems.--As the documentary neared completion, Thurman was confronted with a situation which became crucial in this, his first, production for WOOD: the station sought to air "Tell it Like it is" as part of a total evening on urban racial problems. The station had been concerned the whole summer with urban problems. Time-Life wanted each owned-and-operated station to run an inter-city-related documentary. WOOD decided to use a Group W-produced documentary, "One Nation Indivisible," three hours total programming. After a five or six-minute introduction to the evening's programming by Schroeder, the evening proceeded with reports of progress in various United States cities, interviews with Mayors Lindsey of New York, Stokes of Cleveland, and Alioto of San Francisco. To fill out the evening's programming, management wanted to feature a local segment with local issues and problems. A natural solution would have been Thurman's documentary. He was well aware of the comparisons that would have been inevitable between "Tell it Like it is" and the Group W production, and was glad his documentary was not ready in time.[12]

---

[11]Thurman interview, August 17, 1969.

[12]Ibid.

Reaction.--Sponsored by Old Kent Bank, "Tell it Like it is" was aired in prime time Wednesday, July 24, 1968, at 9 p.m. One or two unfavorable letters came back to the news department and to the sponsor, but one letter from Coldwater (Michigan) Municipal Court Judge William H. Frankhauser in praise of the documentary was encouraging. Thurman felt that if he had thus "influenced people who influence people," then the documentary had been a success.[13]

An event having a possible relationship to the show took place two days later on Friday when four Grand Rapids whites were severely beaten as they drove through the ghetto area. The area television stations attempted over the week-end to play down the beatings, but the following Wednesday, July 31, 1968, Cheverton presented an editorial to clarify the situation--an editorial which later received the Sigma Delta Chi, national journalism fraternity, citation.[14] Cheverton said:

> . . . The story has not been completely told . . . and we hesitated to tell it tonight because of the immediate emotional reaction that you may have. We decided that it should be revealed because, in a larger sense, unless both blacks and whites can control this sort of thing, the civil rights crusade in this country is dead. . . . Last Friday night, Lieutenant Colonel Johnson, his wife, along with Colonel Johnson's brother and wife, drove onto Franklin Street. On the porch of a restaurant at the corner of Franklin and Jefferson, a group of Negro youths between 18 and 25 were sitting. As the Johnson car approached, someone threw a brick at the car. The

---

[13]Thurman interview, August 26, 1969.

[14]Richard Cheverton, "For Those Who Care." Printed pamphlet of WOOD-TV editorial presented July 31, 1968.

> windshield shattered. Blinded, Colonel Johnson almost lost control. As he slowed down, the group left the porch and surrounded the car. They beat in the windows with paving blocks and bricks. Then, they reached through the windows and battered the people inside. It was like shooting fish in a barrel.

Cheverton also reported on the second car. Two men approached and slowed down when they saw the glass. The men realized what was happening ahead, but the engine stopped and the gang was upon them, Cheverton said.

> . . . We tell (the event) because there has not been such an unprovoked attack of such viciousness and violence upon innocent people in modern Grand Rapids history. We are, in particular, talking to the black people. . . .

Thus, on one Wednesday the Grand Rapids blacks "told it like it was" in documentary form, and one week later a news director editorialized from a white point of view. Thurman says he does not think his show had anything at all to do with causing the problems. "Our documentary was blacks talking to whites. In theory we do a show to try to cool off these situations, and then this happens."[15]

"House Upon a Rock"

Background and purpose.--Meanwhile, continuing production in "the summer of the ghetto," another subject was brought up. Thurman's next documentary concerning three privately financed housing projects for the ghetto was

---

[15]Thurman interview, August 26, 1969.

entitled "House Upon a Rock," a half-hour show on August 15th. General Manager Schroeder had originally passed on the germ of the idea--a newspaper clipping about a group in Muskegon that was working on the housing situation in that city some 30 miles northwest of Grand Rapids and well within viewer range and interest. "But there really wasn't a story to put together until a similar group in Kalamazoo and the Freedom Homes project in Grand Rapids were tied together," Thurman says.[16]

Thurman's aim was to show the progress being made in improving Negro housing with the help of civic-minded organizations and financial institutions. The title was taken from the Biblical story of the houses built upon sand and rock.[17]

Approach.--The intro and closing music were themes from "West Side Story." Opening scenes consisted of "before" and "after" shots of several houses which the three projects had assisted. Almost the entire film consisted of interviews by WOOD reporter Brook Stanford with persons involved in the housing projects: the executive directors of Freedom House in Grand Rapids, the Lift Foundation in Kalamazoo, and appropriate representatives from the Muskegon Area Development Council, Ott Chemical (private industry assisting the project), Union Bank and Trust Company, Lumberman's Bank and

---

[16]Thurman interview, August 13, 1969.

[17]Ibid.

Trust, and American National Bank.

"House Upon a Rock," with a two-to-one film ratio was sponsored by Union Bank and Trust Company, as were the next four documentaries Thurman produced. Commercials for this program, specifically written to match the mood and content of ghetto and core city housing improvement, described how Union Bank was helping finance new housing. One commercial told of Union's conversion of a parking lot into a basketball court.[18]

Problems.--Thurman did all the photography and editing. "I'm not necessarily saying this is good," he says, "but this way I wouldn't disrupt the news department and I could get the show on the air."[19] Thurman had also been covering the Chicago Democratic convention and was feeling the pressure of turning out documentaries on a fairly regular basis. He realized the production suffered some from his having to do his own camera work and direction.[20]

Reaction.--For the ordinary listener the documentary was dull. Thurman explained some of the technical problems: "I had to grab Brook half days; we worked without reflectors which caused dark eye shadows in one sequence. The jump cuts were bad. One time Brook would be seen from a distance

---

[18]Ibid.

[19]Ibid.

[20]Ibid.

alone on top of the hill and the next shot would show him interviewing someone."[21]

"My Bac-Si Swanson"

The documentary aired in October was not a Thurman product, although he did much of the editing of it along with Cheverton. "My Bac-Si Swanson," compiled from films taken by a WOOD cameraman in Vietnam, was finally edited and shown. The documentary, by this time, was not one that the news department was anxious to air, but management felt they had spent too much time on it not to use it. The original director had left for another job and the news department was left with the script. They had trouble shortening the film to an hour show, were irritated with the editing problems, and described the situation as "a mess."[22]

"New Style in the Statehouse"

Background and purpose.--"New Style in the Statehouse" was considered a coup for the WOOD news staff who approached Lt. Governor William Milliken before competing stations were able to and persuaded him to appear in a documentary of his rise in politics. Union Bank had said they would buy the show even before Milliken had been asked to do it, so

---

[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid.

Cheverton in Grand Rapids called Thurman, who was at the capitol, and urged him to "get the governor to do it. We've got a sponsor already!"[23]

The intent of the film was to present information on the little-known lieutenant governor who was soon to replace Governor George Romney who had been appointed by President-elect Nixon as the new secretary of Housing and Urban Development. The documentary, promoted as "an exclusive personal close-up," was broadcast the night of Milliken's pre-swearing in, State-of-the-State message (Thursday, January 9th at 9:30 p.m.). The program pre-empted "Dragnet" and ran between "Ironsides" and the "Dean Martin Show."

Thurman aimed to produce an informational program rather than a promotional one, as he was well aware of the criticisms made of the Romney film. He tried to picture "Milliken the man" for the first half and then deal with politics during the second part. That left five to six minutes for Milliken to say what he had in mind for Michigan, since the documentary was keyed to the news peg of the State-of-the-State address. "I wanted to find out 'Who is Milliken, where is he going, and what's his tenure going to be like?' I wanted him to talk about the problems he faced," Thurman said.[24]

---

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid.

Approach.--The documentary crew worked with Governor Milliken over the Christmas holidays in the capitol building and at his home in Traverse City. The governor-designate was shown climbing the statehouse steps and being interviewed in his office by WOOD reporter Mike Ferring. Throughout the film, the sound track from the interviews was used over film of scrapbook photographs, persons, places, and events Milliken described. Milliken had set aside a two-hour time slot one week before Christmas for filming and interviewing his family at their Traverse City home.[25] The documentary crew realized they had to work fast, so while one member was filming Milliken, another was off to one side with Mrs. Milliken sorting through scrapbooks for still photos. These scrapbooks were loaned to the WOOD crew, and that night in a Traverse City hotel the crew (knowing what recorded sound they now had) filmed scrapbook shots to match. The next morning the crew filmed an interview with Curtis Alward, general manager of the Traverse City department store owned by Milliken, and an interview with Michigan Senator Thomas Schweigert who came down from Petoskey for the occasion. "I was glad he came to us," Thurman says. "The roads were snowy and bad that day."[26]

The interview in the governor's office was based on 23 questions which Milliken did not know in advance, although

---

[25]Ibid.

[26]Ibid.

he was briefed on the general areas to be covered. The filming proceeded well until, nearing the end, Ferring asked him to relate how, in only eight years in politics, he had become governor of Michigan.

"This was the only time I stopped the camera to make a suggestion to him," Thurman said. "I was feeling very uncomfortable with his answer. After nearly two minutes of filming I called 'cut,' and Governor Milliken, realizing the problem, said, 'That wasn't going well, was it.' I told him he was just too modest, that a person doesn't get to be governor wholly on the work other people do." With that, Thurman said they started filming again and the segment came off well.[27]

Thurman realized he was working with a man who had not yet been exposed to the demands of television and the cameras. "Milliken had not used make-up before and he had a heavy beard, as did Ferring, so I had them use pancake make-up. I suggested the governor keep it for future use. The next week a secretary stopped me and said, 'You gentlemen left your make-up in the governor's bathroom last week.' It showed how naive the governor's staff was about his appearing on television," Thurman said.[28]

Thurman sought some balance to the documentary, "but it was hard to find a person who didn't like Bill Milliken,"

---

[27] Ibid.

[28] Ibid.

he said. "There was quite a bit of speculation at the time whether Milliken was hard enough for the job, so we worked to word a question effectively on this subject. Although he didn't know the question was coming, he fielded it well."[29]

The crew also filmed an interview with William Ryan, House Democratic speaker, to give the documentary some balance. Thurman wanted Governor Romney to appear in the program, but felt Romney's comments didn't add anything, so decided against using that segment.[30]

When the time came to edit the film, the question arose about the proper title for Milliken in the narration and for superimposition. The rumor was that Romney would resign the governorship a few days before taking over as HUD secretary in order that Milliken might make the State-of-the-State address as actual governor. Thus, the WOOD documentary would have appeared out-dated if it referred to "governor-designate Milliken" when he actually would have been sworn in as governor by the time the film was shown. Thurman called Milliken's office and was assured that Milliken would not be sworn in earlier than had been announced.[31]

Of 3,000 feet of film exposed for the statehouse film, about 1,600 was used on A-B roll for the final documentary.

---

[29] Ibid.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Ibid.

For this documentary, the audio track was also run on WOOD-AM although minor additions had to be made. Since the radio listener could not see who was talking, narration was inserted to introduce each speaker.

Reaction.--Some time after the film was shown, Mrs. Milliken told Thurman that she felt the crew had captured her husband's personality in the footage they showed.[32]

As a result of the "New Style in the Statehouse" documentary, and the favorable rapport that WOOD built with the governor's office, Milliken agreed to reinstate a monthly "Meet the Press" format show on WOOD. "The Governor's Report" with George Romney had been disbanded some 18 months prior to that time when Romney felt his schedule too busy to continue the show. Governor Milliken agreed to come to Grand Rapids to do the live-on-tape show which is aired the first Sunday of each month as a public service program. He is questioned by leading reporters from throughout the state. The show is supplied without charge to other stations in the state. While far from being classified as a documentary film, the job of producing "The Governor's Report" each month has been relegated to Thurman.[33]

---

[32]Ibid.

[33]Ibid.

"Watchdog Comptroller, Yes or No?"

Background and purpose.--"Watchdog Comptroller, Yes or No?" was shown February 10, 1969, pre-empting "I Dream of Jeannie" at 7:30 prior to "Laugh-in." The documentary resulted from problems in city government. Grand Rapids is one of a minority of cities with an elected comptroller in place of a director of finance appointed by the council or commission. For several months, Comptroller Jack Harper had been a sharp thorn in the city commission's side because he refused to pay bills the commission authorized. In other words, he set himself up as the watchdog of the public monies. An amendment to the city charter to abolish the office of comptroller as an elected position and to establish in its place a comptroller appointed by the commission was proposed for the ballot in February.

Thurman sought to present both sides of the proposal, but allotted the concluding two and a half minutes to a strong editorial by Cheverton in order to make clear the station's viewpoint that Harper was impeding the normal function of city government. The station had been saying previously in editorials that a comptroller should be appointed and should be made accountable to the commission.[34]

"I was 99 percent sure our position would be defeated at the polls," Thurman said. "It's much easier to back a winner, but we felt our position was right." With freedom

---

[34]Ibid.

from censorship either by management or the sponsor, the documentary film proceeded.[35]

Approach.--Thurman had no "grabber" for this film, so he had to manufacture one. Opening background music was heavy with throbbing drums. Visuals consisted of a series of quick cuts from one face to another which were interspersed with bright-colored "yes" and "no" cards.

Thurman purposely balanced the documentary by editing three "pro" and three "con" interviews. Fred Wright who headed the citizens group for Harper was balanced by a man named Bylsman who headed the citizens group for the charter amendment (i.e., against Harper). Comptroller Jack Harper's statements were counterbalanced by present City Manager Orr. Former Mayor George Welch, supporting Harper, was lined up opposite former city commissioner Leonard Anderson.

Thurman rightly described the unfolding documentary with this comment: "What you're getting here is a great deal of confusion--which is how the situation was." He also noted that even though there was a great deal of intermingling of comments from the six people on the screen, he felt the Grand Rapids audience had had enough pre-conditioning and exposure on those same people and the situations they represented to follow easily the unfolding documentary.[36]

---

[35]Ibid.

[36]Thurman interview, August 17, 1969.

After the mid-point commercial in the half-hour show, Thurman sought to bring the documentary into perspective. A seventh person, governmental consultant Don Oakes, was asked about the validity of the watchdog theory. His reply was that the theory was no theory at all--just propaganda.

Cheverton's closing remarks were not labeled editorial at all, but simply "A News Special." He explained that the apparent reason for electing a comptroller, instead of having him appointed by the men in office, was so that he could be responsible to the electorate and not to the commission or mayor. Then Cheverton challenged, "How many of us care enough to watch the watchdog?" He said that the ordinary citizen does not take the time to keep tabs on the comptroller who should, therefore, be under the jurisdiction of the council.

Reaction.--Two definite responses followed the broadcast: 1) The ballot box citizenry said "we support Harper" by defeating the proposal five to one, and 2) former Mayor Welch threatened to sue the station.[37]

Schroeder said, "What we didn't recognize was the extent that Harper was the white knight keeping tabs on city hall."[38] However, Thurman said they were aware of this aspect of the problem but they did not expect such resounding approval of Harper at the polls.[39] Schroeder said that even had they

---

[37]Ibid.

[38]Schroeder interview, August 26, 1969.

[39]Thurman interview, August 17, 1969.

been aware of viewers' beliefs favoring an elected comptroller, the station's stand in this documentary would have remained the same.[40]

The second result of the documentary was that former Mayor George Welch threatened to sue WOOD and Union Bank for production costs and air time. He gave notice that he intended to bring to the attention of the FCC the actions of the station. Thurman said Welch wanted Harper to join him in the suit before the FCC, but Harper declined. However, Harper did ask for, and was granted, an opportunity to respond to the two-and-a-half-minute editorial at which time he replied to the criticisms of the documentary. The response was broadcast just prior to the elections on the charter proposal. After Harper's overwhelming success, nothing more came of Welch's threat to bring action through the FCC. However, Thurman was taking no chances; he had gathered up all the original material on the documentary and locked it away, just in case the FCC should investigate.[41]

Thurman said that for a time after the February voting, the city bills were paid regularly by Comptroller Harper. Then, in late summer he again refused to pay certain bills, and Thurman suggested to Cheverton it was time for WOOD to editorialize, "we told you so."[42]

---

[40]Schroeder interview, August 26, 1969.

[41]Thurman interview, August 17, 1969.

[42]Thurman interview, August 13, 1969.

"The Quiet Majority"

In March, Thurman produced a show on a relatively safe subject called "The Quiet Majority." Since the half-hour show was a taped discussion program about attitudes among local high school finalists for the Rotary Citizenship Award, and thus falls outside our working definition of "documentary," only mention of the program will be made here.

"An Atlantic Adventure"

Background and purpose.--On Sunday, April 20th at 8:30 p.m., pre-empting "Mothers-in-law" and just before "Bonanza," the documentary crew presented a show "just for fun." They realized they were programmed against Ed Sullivan but hoped to take advantage of the "Bonanza" audience. "An Atlantic Adventure" was the voyage of a Grand Rapids family crossing the Atlantic in their 42-foot sailboat. Thurman had learned of the trip and persuaded Jim Porter to shoot film and tape record events of the trip for a program.[43]

If the film had any significant point, it was the fact that a Grand Rapids man sold his home, gave up his occupation, and set out to enjoy life with his family. The trip represented a dream many viewers might have liked to fulfill.[44]

---

[43] Ibid.

[44] Ibid.

Approach.--Thurman gave Porter 2,500 feet of film and some lighting equipment for his in-cabin shots. "I planned to give him a print of the show and the original film," Thurman said. "I didn't have the budget to really pay him." He noted that, in addition, Porter would be able to get even more mileage from the film by showing it to social and civic groups when he returned from his lengthy trip around the world via sailboat.[45]

Porter shot footage of stowing away supplies in New York, of storms at sea, mealtime outdoors and in, ship activities, sighting land, and their reception at the Royal Cork Yacht Club in Cork, Ireland. The film also showed the Porters presenting a "burgee" or flag from the Grand Rapids Yacht Club to officials of the Royal Cork Yacht Club.

Jim's wife on occasion took her hand with the camera and Thurman admitted that "some of Alice's footage was better than Jim's."[46] Edited into the Porter film were maps drawn up by the WOOD graphics department to trace the voyage and indicate passage of time.

"An Atlantic Adventure" was the first documentary Thurman did that had any real need for music. The opening and closing themes were from Richard Rodger's "Victory at Sea." There were many places where "in and out" music might have added to the mood of the voyage. One especially good

---

[45]Ibid.

[46]Ibid.

visual Thurman wanted to use, which lacked appropriate narration, could have been run with background music. However, other than opening and closing themes, no additional music was used. Thurman felt that "sneaking music in might have obliterated Jim's comments." The authenticity of Porter's narration was an important aspect of the film and Thurman felt viewers would wonder where the Richard Rodgers music came from.[47]

Problems.--Before Porter left for the East Coast, Thurman had outlined some scenes he wanted in the film and also taped instructions for him. He noted that Porter was successful with the film on preparations for the trip, but that when the storms became too rough, Porter had enough troubles with his boat, with the result that photography and tape recording were on a "catch-as-catch-can" basis. Thus, when Porter had photographed one day and recorded a description of events a day or two later, the two did not always coincide. As a result, editing became a real headache for Thurman. "I could only work with what I had," he said, describing one segment with visuals of family in heavy sweaters while remarking what a hot day it was in New York.[48]

The main problem with the production came with the sound recording. The battery-powered recorder varied the quality of the tape at times, and the description of events did not

---

[47]Thurman interview, August 17, 1969.

[48]Ibid.

always match the films. A fortunate opportunity presented itself as Thurman was putting the film together. Porter returned to Grand Rapids briefly from Majorca for business affairs and was available to retape some of the narrative. "The new narrative fell flat," Thurman said. "You could hear the tiredness in Porter's voice." Thurman decided to stick with the original recordings even though it meant more hours of work on the equalizer.[49]

Reaction.--The film might well have been improved had other members of the family served as narrators in some segments. But, Thurman said that with all the other complications, editing several voices would only have added to the difficulties.[50]

Thurman described the show as "one of those things you sort of worked on in between times." The film was actually shot in June of what Thurman refers to as the "do good" summer of 1968--a summer full of concerns about documentaries on urban black problems. Porter's rough film came back from Europe in August when Thurman was involved in reporting the Republican and Democratic conventions in Miami and Chicago. Then with the arrival of winter, the season was not right for airing a sailing film. The promotion aspects were easier in the spring, and "An Atlantic Adventure" was aired in April.[51]

---

[49] Ibid.

[50] Ibid.

[51] Ibid.

The viewer response to the program is a good example of how inadequately letters and phone calls measure the success of a documentary. One person wrote in that he enjoyed the program. This minimal figure is particularly interesting since the promotion department had sent a special mailing to 165 members of the Grand Rapids Yacht Club advising them of the upcoming broadcast. At a subsequent Yacht Club party Thurman said 15 to 20 persons told him they had seen and enjoyed the program, even to the extent of saying it was the best sailing film they had seen.[52]

"Student Revolt and Jim Dukarm"

Background and purpose.--After the documentary crew was established as a team, or unit, in April, 1969. Thurman wanted especially to complete at least one production for two main reasons. He wanted the unit to gain some experience before they started the upcoming environment-pollution series and he wanted a documentary finished so they would have some leeway timewise once work began on the series.[53]

Although the networks were filming a good deal in the area of student unrest, Thurman felt everything was "overwritten and overlong." He decided to find a student revolutionary and center on him as a sort of microcosm.[54]

---

[52]Ibid.

[53]Thurman interview, August 13, 1969.

[54]Ibid.

Instead of filming more scenes of rock throwing, the documentary's aim was to look past these results to the cause of the student revolt.[55]

Approach.--The campuses at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor and Michigan State University in East Lansing were considered. The fact that there was no rioting to speak of at either school did not affect his plans, according to Thurman. The University of Michigan was ruled out because they were starting exam week the first part of May when the documentary unit was ready to film.[56]

The next problem was to locate an articulate student, one who did not mind saying what he felt. Thurman contacted Michigan State News Editor James Crate, told him of the plans, and asked for his suggestions of likely candidates. The documentary crew finally decided on Jim Dukarm who happened to be an editorial writer for the State News.[57]

Dukarm had been a straight "A" high school student, was a national Merit Scholarship winner who had been wooed by Michigan State (he later dropped his scholarship in protest) and became a mathematics major.

A WOOD promotional piece described Dukarm as "expecting to see the nation and its colleges collapse under attack from oppressed Blacks, victims of American imperialism, and

---

[55]Ibid.

[56]Ibid.

[57]Ibid.

students." Dukarm found the university designed "only to fit people into slots of the machine."[58]

Thurman said Dukarm seemed amazed that WOOD was going to put on television what the State News would not allow him to print. While the documentary unit did not fear censorship by WOOD management nor by the sponsor of the film, Thurman said he made sure in the editing not to include any "I will overthrow" statements by Dukarm.[59]

"We didn't say Jim was right or wrong. We tried to be indifferent," Thurman said. "We tried to cut through the emotion and anger of the college rebellion to bring the situation down to reasons and people." He said he basically disagreed with Dukarm.[60]

The opening music of loud strumming guitars playing the theme from "Wild in the Street" accompanied striking visuals of Dukarm taken from an extremely high-angle view. The immediate impact of the "arty" photography set the tone for the remainder of the film. Thurman explained the visual difference as a "three-way thing": He felt that previous to that time, when he had the camera assigned to him for one day at a time, he had no time to sit down and plan the photography with the crew.[61]

---

[58]WOOD "News Release" from the promotion department.

[59]Thurman interview, August 13, 1969.

[60]Ibid.

[61]Thurman interview, August 17, 1969.

The documentary showed Dukarm in various locations on campus, frequent shots of him walking (with recorded interviews on silent footage), and arguing points of view with State News Editor Crate over a pitcher of beer at a nearby bar. There were shots of a May Day rally on campus, a protest rally in front of the administration building, and the boycott of the Wilson dormitory dining hall. The most interesting sequence of photography showed Dukarm at the newspaper office typing an editorial. The audio of Dukarm reading the editorial was heard over shots of office confusion, of fingers pecking away on typewriter keys, and of Dukarm, concentrating intently.

Problems.--A real problem the unit faced was working around Dukarm's schedule of classes. He was carrying 20 credit hours in addition to his work on the State News.

Dukarm had written out a three-minute conclusion for the program which summarized his feelings about society. "But Jim was so understating his true attitude in his conclusion on camera, judging from what we knew of him, that we told him to make it sound like the words he had written," Thurman said. In other words, in order to bring out what the crew felt was Dukarm's true character, the documentary unit coached him. Thurman admitted they had problems with sound because Dukarm had a hard time speaking up, but Thurman avoided constantly prompting him about it. He wanted a

natural subject, not an actor.[62]

Reaction.--Following the broadcast of the film, WOOD received half a dozen letters in addition to phone calls, as did Union Bank. This was considered quite a reaction--and it was completely negative. Thurman said one writer called him a communist. "People don't look past the fact that television doesn't make things. I didn't make Jim Dukarm," Thurman said. In answering complaints, he used the analogy of the car with the flat tire. "Do you get out and admire the three good tires or do you do something with the flat?" he asked. He believes his role as documentary director is to look past the 95 percent of "good" students to find the problems confronting the others and do something about them.[63]

"Right Here in Grand Rapids"

Background and purpose.--After making a contact with the leader of a narcotics rehabilitation group in Grand Rapids, Thurman began working somewhat surrepticiously on a narcotics story. His secrecy was due to two factors: 1) he feared the group of youths would shy off and he would be unable to get his film, and 2) he did not want to bring any unnecessary law enforcement attention that would interfere

---

[62]Ibid.

[63]Thurman interview, August 13, 1969.

with the story he wanted to present. He used cameraman Larry Robison (with whom he had worked on "New Style in the Statehouse") so that Ferring and Grass could continue their work on the five-part pollution series without interruption.[64]

"'Right Here in Grand Rapids' was not an exposé, unless you could call an exposé the fact that we were saying to the city 'you've got the narcotics problem,' which the police didn't admit," Thurman said. "I could easily have refuted the police department. We had news film of them saying there is no problem in the city. But nothing was to be gained there. Thurman's aim was to show that Grand Rapids did have a narcotics problem and there was a local organization trying to cope with it that needed support. He felt the publicity generated from the documentary would be good for the project.[65]

Approach.--The therapy group involved was Project Rehabilitation, a non profit organization with board of directors that included some doctors from the Kent County Health Department. Their leader, Dick Gilmore, was a full-time social worker and former drug addict.

The opening shots showed police assisting a female heroin addict who had been found barely alive in a Grand Rapids cemetery. The narrator was saying, "It's the kind of thing you don't hear about" and went on to comment that the ones who live do not make the headline news.

---

[64]Thurman interview, August 17, 1969.

[65]Ibid.

The show was made up of three main segments: 1) Gilmore addressing a civic group of teenagers and adults, describing the behavior of drug addicts, 2) individual interviews between Gilmore and former heroin users, and 3) a therapy session of marijuana users who talked about why they started using drugs and why they no longer did. One woman at the meeting was "high" on drugs at the time, and the group was arguing with her to stop before her nine-year-old son began to imitate her.

Problems.--At one point during production Thurman thought he might be involved in some filming of a pot and acid party. With FCC charges against WBBM-TV, Chicago, filming a pot party fresh in mind, WOOD-TV was fearful of being charged with compounding a felony, so contacted their local attorneys and those of Time-Life. Thurman found out later that he would not have been allowed to bring a tape recorder into the pot party let alone a camera, so there would have been no need for legal excitement.[66]

Four members of the therapy group of some 12 persons were photographed with their backs to the camera; they wanted to participate in the discussion but did not want to be photographed. Thurman had checked with station attorneys concerning clearance sheets for all those in camera range. The answer the attorneys gave was that since (a) the session was

---

[66]Thurman interview, August 26, 1969.

a regular Thursday night meeting, (b) it was semi-public, and (c) all attending were 19 and older, no clearance would be necessary. Thurman up until this time, had never used a clearance on anyone. Nonetheless, as a precaution he did have a release signed by one heroin addict who was shown in full-face interview.[67]

The finished film was also shown to WOOD-TV lawyers before it was broadcast in order for them to spot potential legal problems.

In order to keep their unit as inconspicuous as possible when filming the therapy session, no union sound man was used. Since all film shots were planned for sound on film and, under the WOOD-IBEW contract, a union sound man was required, Thurman realized the potential objection from the union. To avoid trouble, he and Cheverton had an extensive talk with those union men involved, whereupon they found that the contract actually allowed for some instances when it was not mandatory to use union sound men.

Reaction.--"Right Here in Grand Rapids," broadcast Saturday, September 13, 1969, at 8 p.m. pre-empting "Get Smart," was aired sans sponsorship. Union Bank had sponsored the narcotics documentary on WZZM-TV four days previously, and Old Kent Bank apparently was not interested. To fill the commercial time slots, WOOD ran NBC promotions for the new network shows. Afterward, at least one WOOD staff member

---

[67] Ibid.

criticized the procedure of inserting the loud, flashy promotionals in a serious documentary.[68]

After the broadcast, WOOD-TV had a half dozen requests from schools wanting to obtain the film for classroom use. Since the documentary was on video tape, the station arranged for transferring it to tape suitable for the Sony video tape recorder owned by the school system. Several other phone calls were received from viewers asking how they could help Project Rehabilitation.[69]

"The Quest"

Thurman was also working on a documentary for airing on Thanksgiving Day. The situation calls to mind Edward H. Murrow's "Harvest of Shame." Murrow's documentary pictured the plight of migrant workers and was shown on a Thanksgiving afternoon as viewers settled back after enjoying the bounty provided by migrant pickers. Thurman's program entitled "The Quest" will focus on Monsignor Arthur Bukowski, former president of Aquinas College located in Grand Rapids. Bukowski was expected to have moved up in the Catholic Church hierarchy, but instead chose to go down to Berea, Kentucky, to work on a project with the poor in the Appalachian Mountains. The WOOD-TV documentary unit including director, reporter, cameraman, and sound man were scheduled to go to

---

[68]Thurman interview, September 18, 1969.

[69]Ibid.

Kentucky for 10 days during the last of October, 1969, to film Bukowski's work.[70]

"Deadline 1990"

Background and purpose.--Work began in earnest in June and continued throughout the summer on the pollution series for Union Bank which was scheduled for airing in January and February, 1970. The bank had approached WOOD-TV in a letter dated February 6, 1969, to do a series of separate documentaries for them on a list of suggested topics. The specific documentaries would be decided upon after discussion with WOOD, and the list enclosed in the letter was intended only as suggestions. The nine topics included:

1) Parochiaide. At that time, the legislature was debating the pros and cons of state aid to non-public schools.
2) Buster Mathis. Local Grand Rapids fighter who had made a name in national boxing circles.
3) Alexander Calder. A new, huge, vibrant red stabile by this master of mobiles was about to be dedicated in the new Vandenburg Center in downtown Grand Rapids.
4) Lake Michigan. The changes taking place in the lake due to pollution were leading to its ruin as a recreation area.

---

[70]Thurman interview, August 26, 1969.

5) Pollution in the Grand Valley.

6) County Vocational School

7) Camping in State Parks

8) Bloss vs. Grand Rapids. Bloss was a local distributor of pornographic literature. The city commission was bearing down on him, and the bank felt it looked as if Bloss' legal rights were being usurped.

9) The Public's Right to Know. Seven months after this list was proposed, the bank spokesman could not recall what was intended by the above title.[71]

After some discussion, the documentary team agreed on five films based on environment-recreation. Not long afterward they realized that the need was not for documentaries on recreations, but on the pollution that was so quickly contaminating Michigan recreation areas, as well as those of the whole nation. Thurman felt that a film on skiing and snowmobile recreation would do nothing more than promote the tourist industry for the state.[72]

About that time Thurman had attended a conference on the greater Great Lake Megalopolis at which he heard University of Michigan President Harlan Hatcher's speech entitled "Deadline 1990." That same title became the name of the

---

[71]Interview with Bill Gill, public relations director, Union Bank and Trust Company, August 26, 1969.

[72]Thurman interview, August 26, 1969.

WOOD pollution series.[73]

Approach.--The documentaries are scheduled for viewing at irregular time periods, one film every two weeks. The subject division for the five films is expected to be:[74]

1) General theme of the environment pollution problem, how the land has been used up, the urbanization of both coasts, possibly some solutions.
2) Water pollution.
3) Pesticides.
4) Air pollution.
5) "Catch all" to include pollution by rubbish, noise, and nuclear-power thermal units.

Mike Ferring spent six weeks researching the documentaries and was also responsible for writing the scripts.[75]

The WOOD-TV news department has been following news-making stories on pollution. Occasionally, in the documentary unit's filming, when the crew discovered an area of pollution that was "news," Ferring would make the report and turn it over to the news department for the evening's newscast.[76]

---

[73]Thurman interview, August 13, 1969.

[74]Ibid.

[75]Ferring interview, August 13, 1969.

[76]Thurman interview, August 26, 1969.

Proposed Documentaries

Two documentaries are in the planning stages to follow the pollution series--one on taxation and one on a Grand Rapids native who spends his summers canoeing the outer islands of Alaska.[77]

"The Tax Crunch" (working title) is scheduled for spring, 1970. Thurman hopes to show how the middle class family is making ends meet, how voters are rejecting school millage increases. The questions he poses include: Is there a limit to taxation? How do we get around it? Do people want so much involvement of services from government? Thurman says the taxation subject first interested him when an economist mentioned his theory that society begins to decay when it reaches the point of 50 percent taxation.

For the Alaskan show, Thurman gave some 2,000 feet of film to Tony Dauksza, proprietor of a west-side Grand Rapids Polish bar. Dauksza has spent the last six summers canoeing Alaska in an 18-foot craft powered by a one-and-a-half horse power motor. The film includes shots of caribou and grizzly bear hunting.

A third documentary is also being considered. After presenting "Student Revolt and Jim Dukarm," Thurman would like to take the conservative view and "listen to the other side for a change." He says the middle class is fed up with

---

[77]Thurman interview, September 18, 1969.

the student and black revolts, and viewers are ready to hear this side of the story.[78]

[78] Ibid.

CHAPTER IV

SPONSORSHIP AND PROMOTION

Sponsorship

One documentary expert claims that the two factors most responsible for the steadily maturing art of the television documentary are sufficient money to make them and sponsors willing to buy them.[1] Certainly sponsorship of WOOD documentaries has made a difference in the development of the department. Without a doubt, available money alone spelled a good deal of the difference between knowing how and actually being able to do the job.

Recent history of WOOD-TV's documentary sponsorship is a manager's dream. Thurman, who had set commercial sponsorship as one of his main goals, says "it got to be a delightful problem." His first program, "Tell it Like it is," was sold to Old Kent Bank (number one in assets in Grand Rapids) and from then on, competition to sponsor documentaries on WOOD has been fierce.[2]

---

[1]Lou Hazam, "This Fair Conjunction," Television: The Creative Experience, a Survey of Anglo-American Progress (New York: Hastings House, Publishers, 1967), p. 181.

[2]Thurman interview, August 13, 1969.

A month after "Tell it Like it is," when "House Upon a Rock" was ready for broadcast, Thurman suggested that the WOOD sales department approach Union Bank and Trust Company since its president, Edward Fry, had been interviewed and would appear in a segment of the film. Thurman thought it would be difficult for Union's public relation man to reject sponsorship, but in case Union Bank proved disinterested, he suggested they contact the Kalamazoo bank which was also represented in the film. Without hesitation Union Bank took up sponsorship of "House Upon a Rock."[3]

In December Union Bank heard about the proposed documentary on Governor Milliken and immediately said they wanted to sponsor it, so the WOOD staff hurried to get the governor's approval to do the film. When Old Kent Bank heard that they had missed out on this opportunity, "they were a bit ticked," Thurman said. At this point, the rivalry between the two sponsors became more earnest.[4]

Thurman described it as a "cloak and dagger" situation. He said the problem progressed to the point where you could not talk openly in the salesroom for fear others might hear and leak the news.[5] Schroeder called the situation untenable: "The first salesman that got out and back got the

---

[3]Ibid.

[4]Ibid.

[5]Thurman interview, August 17, 1969.

sponsor."[6] After pressure from both banks, WOOD finally agreed to contact the respective advertising agencies for each bank simultaneously. The agencies in turn could talk to the banks and phone WOOD if interested. The first month this arrangement was tried, the appropriate person to approve sponsorship of the show was not available, at Old Kent agency, so Union won again.[7]

WOOD tried once more, this time setting up a procedure for mailing out simultaneous letters to each bank announcing when a documentary was available and describing it. The method seemed foolproof. The letters were sent out announcing "Student Revolt and Jim Dukarm," and next day, the WOOD sales people waited for the phone to ring. When WOOD had heard nothing by noon, the sales department decided perhaps a student revolt documentary was just not the banks' cup of tea and thought, since neither bank had been interested, maybe they had better start contacting other possible sponsors. First they called the banks just to make sure. The man at Old Kent was not in the office. WOOD got through to the right person at Union, found out that the mail had been delayed and they had not received word of the new documentary. The salesman described the show over the phone, the sale was made to Union, and Old Kent lost out again.[8]

---

[6]Schroeder interview, August 26, 1969.

[7]Thurman interview, August 13, 1969.

[8]Ibid.

Union bank also asked to sponsor the next five documentaries that WOOD would produce. The plan seemed to parallel the standing arrangement Gulf Oil has with NBC to sponsor news specials as they arise. "On the surface it sounded like something you should immediately jump at," Thurman says. But WOOD was reluctant to give all the documentaries to Union versus Old Kent. The other advertising each bank was doing (or might do if kept on friendly terms) had to be considered. Thus, WOOD suggested that if Union would contract for a series of documentaries to be produced over and above the regular schedule, then WOOD would expand its one-man documentary department to a three-man permanent unit. That way, Union and Old Kent could still compete for the regular documentaries. The plan was agreed upon, and the documentary unit was established in May, 1969.[9]

The problem still remained of selecting a sponsor each month. Thurman finally (with reluctance) agreed to show some raw footage of the narcotics documentary to both banks. If both wanted to sponsor the show, then they could flip a coin to decide.[10]

Thurman objects to showing unedited footage, but says he will bend and go along with the sales department. "I've learned in a big outfit to make concessions," he says.[11]

---

[9]Ibid.

[10]Thurman interview, August 17, 1969.

[11]Ibid.

He totally objects to showing a completed show to any client. He admits he did do this for his first two documentaries but says he and the station were starting from ground zero at that time. He says that even if there were no competition for sponsorship of his shows at this point, he feels the unit has proved itself now, and to allow clients to review a show before buying it would be retrogression.[12]

The documentary unit is not that much interested in the profit factor, according to Thurman. "We are happy if we can meet our production costs and air time. We're not like Time-Life 8 [film producing subsidiary of Time-Life Broadcast] that wants to make money," he says.[13]

Judging from the documentary department's first bill, Thurman has no need for concern; the bill covered seven months and amounted to a certainly inadequate $169. While documentary unit salaries are budgeted through the news department, Thurman admits the $169 for other expenses was totally unrealistic. With documentary production becoming self-supporting, a budgetary meeting to discuss finances with the news department was finally arranged.[14]

Thurman gave some very rough estimates for sponsorship costs. A documentary appearing from 7:30 to 8:00 p.m. would run $650 to $850 for airtime, he says. Production costs

---

[12]Ibid.

[13]Thurman interview, August 26, 1969.

[14]Ibid.

would vary, but a $700 to $800 figure was mentioned, bringing total costs to around $1,600 for a sponsor.[15]

What does a WOOD TV documentary provide that makes sponsorship attractive? Documentaries reach an audience of movers and leaders, according to Union Bank Public Relations Director Bill Gill who happens to be a former WOOD news reporter. "Bank management considers it their responsibility to call attention to matters that need doing. If the banks do not do it, who would?" he asks. Gill says that, as a member of the Chamber of Commerce, he saw things that really needed doing in town. "The bank at first did not relate this responsibility to television, but TV, being very dramatic, can do the job. If you want to get the message across, choose the medium of greatest impact," he says. He had joined Union Bank and was just beginning to feel at home and flexible enough to make innovations when WOOD started producing "some pretty good documentaries." All elements meshed at the same time, he says.[16]

Gill admits that 50-year-old Union Bank feels the pressure of two facts: Old Kent is 100 years old and has twice Union's resources. He describes Old Kent as "cozy" and Union as "flexible."[17]

---

[15]Ibid.

[16]Interview with Bill Gill, public relations director, Union Bank and Trust Company, Grand Rapids, August 26, 1969.

[17]Ibid.

He agrees that one way to measure success of sponsoring documentaries is increased business for the bank. "Our sponsoring such a program doesn't bring people in to open new accounts, but accounts do result from building a better community," Gill says.[18]

Gill feels that the impact of the pollution series which they are sponsoring should really sink home after all the articles people have been reading on the subject. Prints of each documentary will be made available to the bank for showing to 1) any and all service clubs, 2) schools and colleges, and 3) hopefully, state legislative committees.[19]

A problem in buying documentaries is that the bank is not merchandising and promoting them enough, according to Gill. To promote documentaries in the past, Union bank and WOOD-TV have purchased co-op ads in the Grand Rapids Press with each paying half the cost. WOOD also has supplied Union Bank's advertising agency with photos for posters distributed to the 25 bank branch offices. In addition, for the pollution series, the bank will be mailing out, with cancelled check statements, inserts describing the shows.[20]

As a result of past experiences Union Bank wants no red tape between their advertising agency and WOOD and they have

---

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid.

authorized their agency to go ahead should it hear of a documentary WOOD is producing.[21]

Union does not advertise exclusively on television with WOOD. In addition to being a strong advertiser in other area media, Union has sponsored shows on WOOD's rival, WZZM-TV. "We want to do the bulk of our business with WOOD," Gill says, "because they have a better documentary team, a better staff, and a better audience." Gill says that, if channel 13 comes up with a program and Union Bank is not tied up, they will sponsor it. He notes that the documentaries on WZZM are "a lot cheaper, but they don't have the audience WOOD does either."[22]

Union bank had asked WOOD news to do a documentary on Alexander Calder and his new stabile in Vandenburg Center. Thurman and the news staff were not interested, so Union turned to WZZM who did produce such a program for them. Meanwhile, the WOOD programming department decided that, in addition to live coverage of the Calder stabile dedication, they would do a Calder show. Old Kent was the sponsor.[23]

Commercials in a one-hour show total six minutes. In Thurman's first film, "Tell it Like it is," Old Kent gave up two minutes of commercial time so that the documentary

---

[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid.

might run uninterrupted. Thurman says that thereafter he planned the shows around commercial interruptions. Documentaries are public service shows," he says, "but I don't feel that advertisers should have to give up their commercials."[24]

Although WOOD has completely free reign on the pollution series, there has been some interaction between the station and Union on the subject. Gill hoped the documentary series would cover the algae situation in Lake Michigan. He said, swimmers had to wade out 40 to 50 feet before they got to water clean enough to swim in.[25]

Thurman at the same time described to Gill, with some pride, two shots his crew filmed for the pollution documentaries. One show will close with a full zoom out from a belching smokestack to a wide angle of a cemetery and tombstones this side of the river; a second scene will show a billboard on Highway 131 which reads "Welcome to Grand Rapids, Cultural Center of Western Michigan." The camera then tilts down to show the junk yard where the billboard is standing.[26]

Another example of WOOD-Union interaction took place after the "Student Revolt and Jim Dukarm" documentary when all calls and letters were coming in negative. Thurman phoned

---

[24]Thurman interview, August 26, 1969.

[25]Gill interview, August 26, 1969.

[26]Thurman-Gill joint interview, August 26, 1969.

the Union public relations department and suggested how they might best respond to the calls coming in there.[27]

Since there is interaction between Union and WOOD, what is the censorship involved? Both Thurman and Gill say, "There is none."[28] Gill says that if his background had been different, he might try to tell WOOD what to do, but he believes that people should be informed, and the TV station should be uncensored in developing its documentaries.[29]

"I didn't like the Dukarm documentary myself," Gill says. "I felt you couldn't sustain interest that long. But I wouldn't interfere to change it. The dullness and length weren't what people objected to anyway."[30]

What if viewer response to a documentary becomes exceptionally heavy and negative?

"If the bank looks bad, we're going to have to flinch," Gill admits. "You have to remember the financial facts of life." He points out the experience of Bell and Howell a few years back. The company was being boycotted because they sponsored certain programs which they now no longer sponsor.[31]

Artists at all times have been dependent, in one way or another, upon patronage.

---

[27]Thurman interview, August 13, 1969.

[28]Thurman-Gill joint interview, August 26, 1969.

[29]Gill interview, August 26, 1969.

[30]Ibid.

[31]Ibid.

> Today this factor of dependence unduly restricts the scope of self-expression, partly because of the now generally prevalent fear of ideas, partly, too because of the concern of sponsors to get their own particular ideas across.[32]

C. A. Siepmann says that because sponsors try to control documentary films in the field of social comment, the films end up dealing in life situations at an expository rather than at an interpretative level and documentaries become simply instructional films.

Thurman hardly expects "instructional" films to result from the footage the unit has shot on pollution. "Right now we're wondering which of the industries we're accusing of pollution have accounts with Union Bank."[33] They are wondering, but are concerned only with presenting the pollution story as they find it.

Promotion

WOOD-TV documentaries receive the same promotion as any other local WOOD program with perhaps a little added emphasis because they are image builders for the station and client.[34] Promotion practices include: 1) Notice of the program through a one-sentence synopsis is sent to TV Guide. 2) Program listings are made in the Grand Rapids Press (although "the paper

---

[32]C. A. Siepmann, "Documentary Redefined," Ideas on Film, ed. Cecile Starr (New York: Funk and Wagnalls Co., 1951), p. 7.

[33]Thurman interview, August 13, 1969.

[34]Interview with John Cooper, WOOD promotion department, August 26, 1969.

tries not to acknowledge we exist," says John Cooper who handles the documentary promotion). 3) Notice of the program is also sent to 300 papers including local weeklies and national trade journals (the weekly papers generally give the best promotion, according to the WOOD promotion department). 4) Glossy prints of each show are provided by the promotion department for inserts in posters in Union Bank branch offices.[35]

Thurman and Cooper have a close working relationship and feel that internal promotion (advertising on WOOD's own radio-TV facilities) has the best effect. For example, the following promotionals were aired for "An Atlantic Adventure"; three 10-second, nine 30-second, twenty 2-second, and on radio, fifteen 20-second. The sponsor is not guaranteed any spots and there is no tie-in with the sponsor.[36] Union did buy radio spots for "New Style in the Statehouse" since the program was also broadcast on radio. WOOD radio disk jockeys interviewed Mike Ferring concerning a few of the documentaries.[37]

Newspaper ads which WOOD has placed in cooperation with Union Bank run about $250 for a quarter page.[38]

---

[35]Ibid.

[36]Ibid.

[37]Thurman interview, August 13, 1969.

[38]Cooper interview, August 26, 1969.

Old Kent Bank and Union Bank have felt it wise to promote documentaries on their own in addition to what the station guarantees. Union Bank uses posters in each branch office and, for the pollution series, will place inserts in statements to clients.[39]

Old Kent, sponsor of "Tell it Like it is," sent letters over the signature of its president to ministers in the Grand Rapids area. In the letter they called attention to their previous sponsorship of "One Nation Indivisible," the documentary WOOD had purchased from Westinghouse.

> . . . Response to this program was most enthusiastic. It became apparent after analyzing the letters and phone calls, many from clergymen representing a number of faiths, that our citizens are genuinely concerned and desire more information, more facts to better equip themselves to cope with the crisis between Black and White.
>
> Thus was born, "Tell it Like it is: Black America Speaks" . . . a localized follow-up to "One Nation Indivisible". . . .
>
> We strongly recommend that you and the members of your congregation watch this program. . . .[40]

No effort has been made in selling the documentaries to other stations in Michigan or other parts of the country. A station like WJIM-TV, Lansing, might pay $75 to $100 for a film such as "Dukarm," but at that price it would not be worth the sales effort.[41] WJBK-TV, Detroit, did buy the

---

[39]Gill interview, August 26, 1969.

[40]Mimeographed letter from Richard M. Gillett, president, Old Kent Bank and Trust Company, July 16, 1968.

[41]Thurman interview, August 26, 1969.

Milliken film for $500, however, and after WOOD-TV installs their printer this fall, they plan a release of "An Atlantic Adventure" to other Time-Life stations.[42]

Apparently all is fair in station programming competition. Through advertising sources at the daily paper, Thurman learned that channel 13 scheduled a New York-produced, one-hour panel show, plus a half-hour local panel, on the subject of narcotics on September 9th, four days before WOOD's half-hour narcotics show. Thurman felt WZZM's promotion was an asset rather than a deterent, and with his advance warning, all he had to do was restructure the promotion of his own narcotics film to contrast with that of WZZM's.[43]

Why has there been the switch in the last 18 months to a demand by sponsors for documentaries? Cooper believes the sophistication of the viewer now makes documentaries easier to sell.[44] Cheverton says that in the past many stations felt documentaries did not provide a large enough audience and were therefore programmed Sunday afternoons. "Shows were not well done and didn't deserve better."[45] After the networks took the lead in documentary production, programming them in prime time, local stations, including WOOD, then began to accept their responsibility for local-level documentaries, and to produce increasingly better programs.

---

[42] Ibid.

[43] Ibid.

[44] Cooper interview, August 26, 1969.

[45] Cheverton interview, August 13, 1969.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

WOOD-TV is now successfully producing documentaries on a frequent basis in a medium-sized market. But the road toward developing documentary production has not been a straight one. The main stumbling blocks appear to have been twofold.

First of all, management held one conception of what a documentary film should be, and those actually producing the films had other ideas. Even though the decision had been made in the mid 1960s to produce documentaries fairly regularly, significant progress was not apparent. Those in charge of production apparently had ideas that were (a) too involved for the initial steps of creating a documentary department and (b) too grandiose for the size of market. Had the film ideas been more local in nature, more news oriented, and less slanted toward attempts at being artistic creations, the successful production of documentaries might have been achieved two years earlier.

Secondly, rivalry between departments (or perhaps disorganization in the departmental structure) apparently hindered film production. Once a more-or-less autonomous

documentary director was appointed, apart from departmental factions, production became regular and documentaries began to evince elements of success.

Elements for Success

These elements of WOOD's success, which stations seeking to present effective documentaries would do well to consider, include:

Sponsorship.--Of primary consideration is that a station must be willing to produce documentaries without sponsorship for a reasonable length of time in order to develop a reputation and background that attracts sponsors. If the production is discontinued after two or three attempts with unsponsored films, documentaries are defeated before work really gets started. Thus, the station must be willing to operate completely at a deficit as far as documentaries are concerned until the community and sponsors become aware of their efforts.

Regular production.--Of secondary importance is the production of documentaries on a fairly regular basis. A station cannot hope to show sincere interest in documentaries if they produce only two or three films a year. WOOD's management has set a goal of 12 a year, hopefully one every month. While actual production has fallen considerly behind that schedule, the goal is kept before the staff and there is a certain amount of pressure to produce.

Autonomy.--Documentary producers must have the confidence of management and the autonomy of their work. They must be free of interference in their production either by management or sponsor.

Limitations.--Local stations must learn to set limits on their documentary production. The amount of money available is certainly the most limiting factor. However, given an adequate amount in funds, manpower, and equipment, the documentary unit must know its own limits and produce films within those boundaries. To seek constantly for travel to exotic corners of the world in pursuit of subjects beyond the practicality of production in the medium-sized market only wastes time and money. The unit must explore subjects that are attainable, in areas that are accessible, with people who are willing to express their point of view.

The local angle.--Cheverton claims that the further the documentary unit goes from Grand Rapids, the less viewer interest there will be. Documentaries on the local level need to explore local issues of importance to viewers in the immediate area. This does not preclude developing films on issues of national interest such as pollution, narcotics, and revolutionary ideologies, but a local slant in each film is necessary if the station in the medium-sized market is to compete with network productions.

Conviction.--The documentary unit must be made up of men who are enthusiastic about their productions, who have convictions about the importance of the issues, and who are

willing to express those opinions. Equally important is the establishment of a unit of men whose members think favorably of one another's work and who can work well together.

Take a stand. Finally, documentary production depends on a station being willing to say something about issues to viewers. The station that constantly programs on an informational basis without presenting conclusions to the viewer on vital issues, fails in his responsibility to produce documentaries that meet the needs of today's society.

Future Trend in Documentary Production at WOOD-TV

Television in the future will schedule a decreasing amount of pure entertainment and an increasing amount of news programming. At least 50 percent of local programming will be related to news, according to Schroeder.[1] As the community becomes more educated and complex, more people are tiring of sitting in front of westerns and situation comedies for three hours per night. Actuality programs will be anticipated and welcomed by viewers.

In the initial stages, the audience was unsophisticated, Schroeder says. "With all the light entertainment shows, there was a case of too much chocolate ice cream. With documentaries, the variety is built in and the subject matter is

---

[1]Schroeder interview, August 26, 1969.

as wide as the world."[2]

Documentaries are an important ingredient in programming simply because the complicated issues and problems that face urban areas today cannot be developed in the news time allotment, Cheverton says.[3] He writes:

> If I had to make a prediction, I'd guess that the documentary will take all kinds of forms in the future, and as it breaks out of set time limits, its form and techniques will be different. Experimentation will increase. We'll risk more.[4]

Cheverton says stations will accept an "informational unit" concept of programming with news, documentary, program, and production personnel working together to develop a station's informational capability.

Nevertheless, there is a limit to the amount of documentary production in the middle-sized market. WOOD-TV has almost reached its saturation point, according to Thurman. "You find a limit to how much this sized market can pay," he says.[5] Thus a station's choice of subject matter becomes doubly important in light of the maximum amount the market will bear. The WOOD documentary trend has been toward subjects that involve viewers in community problems. Their productions in the past year involved city government revision, narcotics, youth revolts, and racial unrest. While the lack

---

[2]Ibid.

[3]Letter from Cheverton, September 17, 1969.

[4]Ibid.

[5]Thurman interview, September 18, 1969.

of viewer response in most cases was actually far from that desired by the documentary staff, the trend to the news-oriented subject seems established for the future.

Evaluation and Implications

Cheverton's initial definition of documentary as being a lengthened news story is indicative of documentaries recently produced at WOOD. The programs on improving ghetto housing, on Governor Milliken, on student revolutionary Dukarm, and on narcotics were basically news stories, and while each had some element of persuasion and implied a point of view, none came boldly out to say "We at WOOD-TV think thus and so." The only documentary (on City Comptroller Harper) that set out to persuade the people was formulated so that 9/10 of the program consisted of information while the last two-and-a-half minutes were editorial under the label of "news special." One has the feeling that WOOD uses editorials to state station opinions and then produces documentaries simply to present information with general conclusions. No doubt this combination is effective when the station presents editorials as frequently as WOOD does, but the fact that a station does present editorials does not mean it is exempt from forthrightly advocating a point of view in a documentary.

This desire of WOOD-TV to achieve balance in each documentary is of prime importance to the station, judging from the number of times personnel mentioned the subject during

interviews for this study. Their policy of "balanced" documentaries seems diametrically opposed to their policy of frequent, strong editorials. The reason for this emphasis on balanced films is, no doubt, the Federal Communications Commission fairness regulation which would require WOOD-TV to give an equal portion of time to persons against whom a documentary would editorialize. Unless, or until, the FCC exempts documentaries from this regulation, WOOD will certainly continue to take that element into careful consideration when planning each documentary. The station, however, should not feel that "balance" constantly fulfills the "fairness" requirement. In striving for balanced documentaries, the station may be avoiding what is actually fair in the situation the documentary attempts to portray. Simply to present unbiased, balanced material edited in a half-hour film, is not enough in today's television documentary.

WOOD has found in Thurman the right combination of talent needed for documentary production: a cinematographer with a background of news reporting. Viewers' opinion that "dull and documentary" must necessarily be paired may soon be obsolete when producers such as Thurman apply cinematic technique to important news subjects in an attempt to capture viewers interest in, and sympathy for, a community concern. Too often, documentary production over the years was handed over to persons having no idea how to employ cinematography to enhance a basic news subject. Thurman puts his cinematography training to good use and, while WOOD documentaries are certainly

not technically perfect, the improvements in overall production in the last six months (particularly in filming) are clearly obvious.

WOOD-TV is helping fill a substatial need in today's society for television on the local level to bring viewers in touch with the problems in their communities. While the print media fill pages with limitless articles on the concerns of society, these problems become alive and real only through the visual presentation of television. Network owned-and-operated television stations in metropolises can and do turn out dozens of documentaries, but unless stations like WOOD-TV in medium-sized cities like Grand Rapids recognize the need for local documentaries and accept this responsibility, a vast area of communication potential will be wasted. Since viewers are barraged with so much whimsy and frill, those local stations that use their time and efforts in producing documentaries on subjects of real substance and social concern are the stations that are making the best contribution to television documentary. Although the larger percentage of WOOD-TV documentaries does fall in this area of social concern, the documentary unit has been quick to produce programs on topics of slight significance when the opportunity presented itself. Considering Thurman's statement that WOOD-TV has about reached the numerical limit of what the market will bear, the station would do well to concentrate on serious subjects and not be tempted to increase the number

of "fun" documentaries produced in any year. WOOD-TV's main documentary responsibility should be to produce films on topics that draw the Grand Rapids viewer's attention to areas of community concern so that he will re-examine his attitudes and opinions and respond to community needs.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books

Atkins, Jim, Jr., and Willette, Leo. Filming TV News and Documentaries. Philadelphia: Chilton Books, 1965.

Baddeley, W. Hugh. The Technique of Documentary Film Production. New York: Hastings House, Publishers, 1963.

Berlo, David K. The Process of Communication, An Introduction to Theory and Practice. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960.

Bluem, A. William. Documentary in American Television. New York: Hastings House, Publishers, 1965.

Bluem, A. William; Cox, John F.; McPherson, Gene. Television in the Public Interest. New York: Hastings House, Publishers, 1961.

Bluem, A. William, and Manvell, Roger (eds.). Television: The Creative Experience, a Survey of Anglo-American Progress. New York: Hastings House, Publishers, 1967.

Calder-Marshall, Arthur. The Innocent Eye: the Life of Robert J. Flaherty. London: W. H. Allen, 1963.

Fischer, Edward. The Screen Arts, a Guide to Film and Television Appreciation. New York: Sheed and Ward, 1960.

Friendly, Fred W. Due to Circumstances Beyond Our Control. . . . New York: Random House, 1967.

Froke, Marlowe. The News Director's Role in Information Programing. University Park: Pennsylvania State University, 1959.

Fulton, A. R. Motion Pictures. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1960.

Grierson, John. Grierson on Documentary. Revised ed. London, Faber and Faber, Ltd., 1966.

Interaction. Television Public Affairs Programming . . . at the Community Level. Television Information Office, 1960.

Leyda, Jay. Films Beget Films. London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1964.

MacNeil, Robert. The People Machine. New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1968.

Minow, Newton N. Equal Time, The Private Broadcaster and the Public Interest. New York: Atheneum, 1964.

Murrow, Edward R., and Friendly, Fred W. See It Now. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1955.

Rotha, Paul. Documentary Film. London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1952.

Starr, Cecile (ed.). Ideas on Film. New York: Funk and Wagnalls Co., 1951.

Swallow, Norman. Factual Television. New York: Hastings House, Publishers, 1966.

Twenty-Two Television Talks, Transcribed from BMI Clinics. New York: Broadcast Music, Inc., 1953.

Waldron, Gloria. The Information Film. New York: Columbia University Press, 1949.

Willis, Edgar E. Writing Television and Radio Programs. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1967.

Articles and Periodicals

Barron, Arthur. "Toward New Goals in Documentary," Film Library Quarterly, II, No. 1 (Winter, 1968-1969), 19-23.

Belson, William A. "Selective Perception in Viewing a TV Broadcast," Audio-visual Communication Review, VI (Spring, 1958), 23-32.

Bennett, Cyril, and Morley, Peter. "Actuality: a Discussion," Journal of the Society of Film and Television Arts, No. 15 (Spring, 1964), 8-10.

Brodey, Sherm. "Local TV Puts its Best Foot Forward," Broadcasting, LXXVI, No. 25 (June 23, 1969), 71-100.

Bryson, Lyman, and Murrow, Edward R. "You and Television," Hollywood Quarterly, IV (Fall, Summer, 1949-1950), 178-81.

Burton, Benjamin. "The Documentary Heritage," Television Quarterly, I, No. 1 (February, 1963), 29-34.

Elkan, Allan. "Scripting Actuality Television," Sight and Sound, XXVII (Winter, 1957-58), 120-21.

Gunselman, John. "Filming 'Appalachian Heritage,'" American Cinematographer, L, No. 7 (July, 1969), 661-3, 708-12.

Hazam, Lou. "Dollars and Documentaries--'This Fair Conjunction,'" Television Quarterly, II, No. 1 (Winter, 1963), 33-39.

Hepler, Hal W., and Campbell, James H. "On Writing," Dimensions in Communication, edited by Hal W. Hepler and James H. Campbell. Belmont, Calif: Wadsworth Publishing Co., Inc., 1965.

"How to Get Involved," Newsweek, LVII, No. 19 (May 8, 1961), 64.

Hyatt, Gordon. "A Form for Television," Television Quarterly, I, No. 1 (February, 1962), 24-28.

Hyatt, Gordon. "Words and Pictures," Television Quarterly, II, No. 2 (Spring, 1963), 46-50.

Jay, Antony. "Actuality," Journal of the Society of Film and Television Arts Ltd., No. 15 (Spring, 1964), 5-7.

Knight, Arthur. "The Decline of Documentary," Saturday Review, XLVI, No. 13 (March 30, 1963), 35.

Lassally, Walter. "Communication and the Creative Process," Film, No. 37 (Autumn, 1963), 18-24.

Lipscomb, James. "PBL: Get Off Issues and on People," Life, LXV, No. 25 (December 20, 1968), 8.

Luft, Herbert G. "Rotha and the World," Quarterly of Film, Radio and Television, X (1955-1956), 89-99.

Robinson, David. "Looking for Documentary: The Background to Production," Sight and Sound, XXVII (Summer, 1957), 6-11.

Robinson, David. "Looking for Documentary: The Ones that Got Away," Sight and Sound, XXVII (Autumn, 1957), 70-75.

Rotha, Paul. "Television and the Future of Documentary," Quarterly of Film, Radio and Television, IX (1954-1955), 366-73.

Shayon, Robert Lewis. "A Message About Messages," Saturday Review, LII, No. 29 (July 19, 1969), 26.

Shayon, Robert Lewis. "Biography's Backyard," Saturday Review, XLVI, No. 26 (June 29, 1963), 22.

Shayon, Robert Lewis. "The Fuse in the Documentary," Saturday Review, XLIII, No. 51 (December 17, 1960), 29.

Schreiber, Flora Rheta. "Television's New Idiom in Public Affairs," Hollywood Quarterly, V (1950-1951), 144-52.

"The Story of Documentary Film," Fortnightly Review, CXLVI, (August 1939), 121-30.

Wilder, Robert G. "An Appeal for Efforts Adequate to the Problems," Broadcasting, LXXVII, No. 4 (July 28, 1969), 16.

Unpublished Material

Alspaugh, Lilyan M. Report to Dr. Thomas Baldwin, Michigan State University (November 2, 1968).

Graziano, Joseph D. "Local News Operations of WOOD-TV." Unpublished Master's Thesis, School of Journalism, Michigan State University, 1961.

Other Sources

Cheverton, Dick. "For Those Who Care." Printed pamphlet of WOOD-TV editorial presented July 31, 1968.

"Greater Grand Rapids. For Business and Pleasure." Pamphlet published by Greater Grand Rapids Chamber of Commerce, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1969.

MacLean, Malcolm S., Jr.; Danbury, Thomas; Prather, Jack G. "Varieties of Public Images of WOOD-TV in Grand Rapids," Part1, Television Program Preferences--Typologies, mimeographed study, Communications Research Center, Michigan State University, October, 1962.

Union Bank and Trust Company. Personal interview with Bill Gill, public relations director. August 26, 1969.

WOOD-TV, Grand Rapids. Personal interviews with Richard E. Cheverton, WOOD-AM-FM-TV news director. August 13, 1969; August 26, 1969. Letter, September 17, 1969.

_____. Personal interview with John Cooper, promotion department, August 26, 1969.

_____. Personal interviews with Mike Ferring, documentary unit news reporter. August 13, 1969; August 26, 1969.

_____. Personal interviews with Herbert A. Thurman, documentary production chief. August 13, 1969; August 17, 1969; August 26, 1969; September 18, 1969.

_____. Personal interview with Willard Schroeder, vice-president, Time-Life Broadcast and general manager WOOD-AM-FM-TV. August 26, 1969.