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A VERMONT ROMANCE **URNS ONE HUNDRED**

MARTIN L. JOHNSON AND
FREDERICK C. POND

Vermont's Earliest

Surviving Photoplay

In 2016, a hundred-year-old film spent the year touring the northern half of Vermont, drawing audiences to refurbished opera houses and picture palaces. But the picture being celebrated for its centenary year was not D. W. Griffith's *Intolerance* or Lois Weber's *Shoes*, two of the best-known films made in 1916. Instead, Vermonters were watching what they believed to be the first feature film made in their state, the fetchingly titled photoplay *A Vermont Romance*.

But *A Vermont Romance* is not a conventional feature picture. None of the people who appeared in the film had previous movie acting experience, and to our knowledge, none of them appeared in another film. The picture was not made by an upstart local production company hoping to enter the lucrative business of moviemaking. Instead, it was sponsored by a newspaper, the *Vermont Advance*, which in turn was established to promote a political organization, the Vermont Progressive Party. To complicate matters further, the film was not made by a Vermonter. Instead, it was shot by an English cameraman living in New York and a salesman and self-proclaimed "movie director" from Cleveland. While the film was seen widely in Vermont, which was the intent of its sponsor, it was not distributed out of state. Instead, it was celebrated at the time as one of the first statewide "contest films" and, after *Photoplay* magazine's "The Beauty and Brains" contest, held the same year, the biggest contest of its type. Participants competed to win parts in the production, with forty regional winners plus two "stars," who received the most votes statewide. One entered the contest by buying newspapers and newspaper subscriptions, or by convincing others to do the same.

Although the paper claimed the contest a success, it was not successful enough to save the *Vermont Advance*, which folded within a year of the film's debut. The Vermont Progressive Party did not last much longer either. Not surprisingly, none of the picture's stars was able to parlay their screen debuts into an acting career. But the film itself survived, even though hundreds of nationally released movies made that year are lost, most likely destroyed by motion picture companies uninterested in keeping copies of their product.¹

In this article, we discuss *A Vermont Romance* as two motion pictures. The first motion picture, made in 1916 as a "contest film," is a significant example of how the cinema came to reflect and project ideas about social status, celebrity, and identity in the 1910s, when classical Hollywood cinema itself was being formed. The second motion picture, discovered by local historians in 1964, is an example of how popular ideas about what cinema *was* informs how old movies are received and reproduced in contemporary culture.² For us, the story of *A Vermont Romance* is not a singular history of the film's production, exhibition, and discovery but rather a dual history, one in

which the rediscovery of a film can be a transformative act, bringing a new significance to a work that was previously unknown to scholars, archivists, and popular audiences alike. For this reason, the story of the two *Vermont Romance* films provides a productive vantage point from which to think about the use and reuse of archival moving images in public history. With the recent success of Bill Morrison's *Dawson City: Frozen Time* (2016) and Peter Jackson's *They Shall Not Grow Old* (2018), both of which make use of film footage from the 1910s, we anticipate that public historians, curators, archivists, and programmers in museums, libraries, and archives will increasingly turn to film as a way to fill the gap between past and present. The generations of local historians and archivists who worked to make *A Vermont Romance* better known in their state present a unique case study of how the process of discovery, preservation, and representation can alter the perception of an archival film.

While *A Vermont Romance*'s status as the state's "first" feature film made it of considerable interest, its paradigmatic, if convoluted, plot also drew in audiences and researchers.³ The film tells the story of a love pentagon in which three men and two women from different class and geographic backgrounds seek romantic partnerships. The film pits a bucolic rural Vermont farm against factories in Burlington, the state's largest city, suggesting that the former is cursed by economic stagnation, while the latter is rife with danger. Although the film ends with two happy marriages, and one suitor left behind, it does not resolve tensions between Vermont's rural and urban communities. Instead, the film sought to unify Vermont by showing in theaters throughout the state, depicting the best, and worst, of both country and city.

Although the story behind *A Vermont Romance* is unique, dozens of regional film archives, as well as state, university, and local historical societies and archives, possess similar "local" films in their collections, and many more are likely in private hands.⁴ Because local films, particularly those shot on 35mm film, were rarely artisanal productions, but instead made by regional or national firms, they cannot be studied as culturally and spatially circumscribed documents. Instead, a researcher, whether a film scholar, archivist, or local historian, must invest in both the particularities of a film's production—members of the cast, filming locations, and financing—and those aspects that place the film within a mode of national moving picture production to make the film legible as a historical artifact. By bridging the gaps between local history and cultural history, archivists and historians can make these films accessible to an audience far larger than the one the filmmakers originally intended to attract.

DISCOVERING A VERMONT ROMANCE

The story of the discovery of *A Vermont Romance* is prosaic, yet also typical of how films from the early twentieth century survived. In 1955, Ida Horton, who, with her husband, Guy, published the *Vermont Advance* in the 1910s, died, outliving her husband by five years. Almost a decade after her death, the 35mm print of *A Vermont Romance* was discovered in her estate. Bernard “Bun” Bosworth, the husband of one of the three executrixes of the estate, gave the reels to WCAX, a newly established local television station, which arranged for the film’s transfer to 16mm format. According to WCAX records, the transfer of the film was not easy, and the 35mm film had to be sent to two different labs before a satisfactory print was made. Furthermore, an unsigned note written on WCAX-TV letterhead explained that “certain scenes are out of frame due to printing difficulties unable to be corrected.”⁵ It also appears that the film was transferred at the wrong speed and may have been reassembled in the wrong order. After the transfer was made, the 35mm nitrate print was destroyed, a common practice at the time.

In the mid-1960s, WCAX began lending its 16mm copy of *A Vermont Romance* for community viewings, and screenings were publicized in local newspapers. One in early 1964 announces the showing of the film at a school Parent–Teacher Association meeting, noting, “Of interest, will be the movie ‘*A Vermont Romance*’ filmed in Burlington and Rutland about 1915.”⁶ Later that year, the *Burlington Free Press* noted another showing of the film, remarking only that it was “about Vermont towns in 1916.”⁷

In the early 1970s, the Vermont Historical Society, which was founded more than a century earlier, acquired a copy of the transferred 16mm film, as well as another 8mm print.⁸ Although the film was not made available for wider distribution, the existence of several prints meant that it could be shown in classrooms, churches, historical societies, and other settings in the 1970s and 1980s. At the same time, the paucity of surviving films like it meant that *A Vermont Romance* was a local oddity, unknown outside of the state.

In 1989, Enzo Di Maio, an executive producer with Vermont Educational Television, the local PBS affiliate, screened the film as part of the tenth season of Vermont ETV’s *Crossroad* series, which spotlighted Vermont’s people, business, and history. Di Maio secured the rights to show the film from WCAX and commissioned the prominent composer and silent film accompanist Lee Erwin to write and record a new score for the film. In the voice-over narration that introduces the film, the announcer calls Vermont ETV’s presentation of the film the “modern debut” of a “long-forgotten silent film.” Di Maio’s introduction to the film claims that the film was a fundraiser for the Vermont

Progressive Party and shot by a New York camera operator. He then reads the plot from a newspaper, presumably the *Vermont Advance*.

Two days before *A Vermont Romance* appeared on television, the *Boston Globe* ran a feature on the film.⁹ In the article, Bun Bosworth, who gave the film to WCAX, provides a narrative of its production that places the Hortons, active in the Progressive Party, at the center of the story. In Bosworth's telling, the film was made to raise funds for the party, and the Hortons' embrace of cinema is described as typical of their "forward-looking" attitudes. At the same time, the article misinterprets the film's plot and dismisses *Romance* as "a little jumpy, a little quirky, a little hard to follow." Vermont ETV publicized the film as "Vermont's Own Silent Film," emphasizing in advertising that it would give Vermonters the opportunity to see well-known landmarks as they appeared "nearly 75 years ago."¹⁰

Despite this fanfare, the film soon disappeared from the public eye, with Vermont ETV broadcasting the film just a few times over the course of the next decade. In 1999, Northeast Historic Film, a regional film archive that was founded in 1986 and focused on preserving amateur motion pictures made in New England, applied for a grant from the newly formed National Film Preservation Board to do another transfer of the 16mm film.¹¹ When writing Peter Martin, general manager of WCAX, to request the existing film elements, Karan Sheldon noted that the "newly-formed National Film Preservation Foundation has organized a consortium of archives to work with a federal funder to make film copies of material judged culturally and artistically significant."¹² After receiving the film, David Weiss, also of Northeast Historic Film, noted some problems with WCAX's print, including a "framing problem when the print was made as well as a couple of scenes where splices appear to have been cut wrong."¹³ Although Northeast Historic Film was aware of these technical issues with the film, they were not addressed at the time. In one description of the film, *A Vermont Romance* was described as "the Vermont Progressive Party's moral tale about an orphaned country girl forced to take factory work in town."¹⁴ While one might assume that federally funded preservation work, and the transfer of the original film materials to an archive, would be a definitive end to *A Vermont Romance*'s long journey, the fact that the film was stored out of state and, due to assumptions that it was a professionally made project, not central to Northeast Historic Film's mission of preserving amateur film meant that it was once again neglected.

The most recent rediscovery of *A Vermont Romance* commenced in 2007, when the film was broadcast again on public television. For this broadcast, Marjorie Allard, a board member of Preservation Burlington, a nonprofit focused on historic preservation, prepared an introduction of the film, incorporating research from the *Vermont Advance*

newspapers and drawing connections between the film's production and the Progressive Party. A rebroadcast of the 2007 airing attracted interest from yet another Vermonter, the filmmaker David Giancola, who, in 2014, donated another previously unknown copy of the film to the Vermont Historical Society. After receiving Giancola's print, archivists at the Vermont Historical Society looked for related materials to the film and discovered an 8mm transfer that was previously unknown.

That same year, a group of Vermont filmmakers launched the Vermont Archive Movie Project (VAMP), with support from the Vermont International Film Festival, to help preserve films made in Vermont and show them to audiences statewide.¹⁵ They quickly completed two small projects, the digitization of the logging documentary *Chester Grimes* (1971) and the short experimental film *Transformations* (1972), made by a women's collective led by Barbara Hirschfeld and Julia Haines. For their third project, the group collaborated with the Vermont Historical Society to digitize the newly discovered 8mm film and incorporate it into a new preservation of *A Vermont Romance*. The 8mm transfer contained intertitles that were not present in the 16mm transfer held by Northeast Historic Film, which aided in the effort to restore the film's narrative to the order in which it was likely first presented. At this time, one of the co-authors of this article became interested in researching the film and, after discussing the film with the other co-author at Northeast Historic Film's annual conference, began collaborating on this article. Through this research, the authors realized that *A Vermont Romance* was not a novel melodrama, as it was presented in Vermont Educational Television's 1989 broadcast, nor was it merely a historical artifact, as it was described when it was rediscovered in the 1960s. Instead, the film was a sponsored local "contest" film, an example of a mode of local film production that was commonplace in the 1910s and 1920s but, until recently, unknown to film historians and archivists.¹⁶

THE VERMONT ADVANCE AND THE CONTEST FILM

Although *A Vermont Romance* was a fundraising film of sorts, its purpose was to support, not the Vermont Progressive Party, as earlier researchers had surmised, but the party's newspaper, the *Vermont Advance*, which was established in 1914. By the mid-1910s, newspaper subscription contests, designed to increase a publication's readership, were a cottage industry in the United States, and many were designed to select the most "popular" individuals in the paper's geographic area. Firms such as the Publisher's Music Company of Chicago and the United Contest Company of Cleveland organized newspaper-based popularity contests nationwide, targeting papers in big cities and

small towns alike. In these popularity contests, one entered by purchasing a newspaper and nominating oneself. After the nomination period, people could vote for the favorites by purchasing a newspaper, which contained a ballot worth a small number of votes, or subscribing to the paper, which gave them significantly more votes. Votes were tallied and the results were widely publicized in the newspaper, giving others the opportunity to cast their ballots for the candidates they favored most. Such contests were designed to run for several months, eventually winnowing down to a handful of winners, who were prominently featured in the newspaper as the contest drew to a close. The prizes for the winners became increasingly extravagant over time, giving entrants incentive to subscribe to the newspaper and encourage their friends and family to do the same. For example, in 1912, the *San Francisco Chronicle* awarded automobiles, piano players, and jewelry to the most popular conductors, policemen, schoolteachers, “telephone girls,” and “girl wage earners.”¹⁷

Although popularity and its attenuated form, stardom, were part and parcel of the movie industry by the early teens, it took a few years for movie culture and the newspaper popularity contest to collide.¹⁸ In 1911, a Montana movie theater chain sponsored a popularity contest but retained cash prizes. In 1914, the Rex Theater of Defiance, Ohio, contracted with the Ohio Pony Contest Company to give away “Rex,” the pony who was also apparently editing a weekly contest newspaper, the *Pony Press*, for the contest’s duration.¹⁹ The first screen contests, in which films of the winners were shown in local theaters, appeared in late 1914, with the *Chicago Herald’s* “Who Will Be Sue?” contest spurring a host of imitators.²⁰ For example, in Pittsburgh, one paper ran a scenario writing contest, which was judged by representatives of the prominent Essanay film studio in Chicago. The contest was such a success that the paper followed it with a star contest, with the winners appearing in a local film directed by Katherine Russell Bleecker, one of the first women camera operators.²¹

In the mid-teens, itinerant filmmakers, some of whom had previously made nonfiction, nonnarrative “local views” and city booster films, entered the movie contest field. For example, directors affiliated with the Hudris Film Company shot their Romance and Belle series in dozens, possibly hundreds, of cities nationwide.²² Several films from this era made in New England are extant. A New Hampshire-made Hudris film, *The Belle of Nashua* (1917), was recently rediscovered by archivists at the Library of Congress. In Massachusetts, a picture made by a similar company, *A Romance of Quincy* (1916), was screened for the first time in more than a century in 2017.²³ The Ohio-based McHenry Film Company made its Manhaters series in the Midwest, two of which are extant. Paragon Feature Film Company produced municipal booster pictures throughout the

United States. Three of their productions, made in Wausau, Wisconsin, Grand Rapids, Michigan, and Montgomery, Alabama, survive. The Interstate Film Producers, who became one of the more prolific producers of local Hollywood films in the 1920s, also got its start around 1915.²⁴

Although most of these itinerants did not make movies with the explicit intent of selling newspapers, they borrowed publicity strategies from these earlier schemes, particularly the use of entry forms to excite interest in participating in movie magic.²⁵ More importantly, many of these films were sponsored by newspaper owners, who assumed that the publicity from covering the production of such films would reward them, in terms of subscriptions, sales, and reader goodwill.²⁶ By turning its local residents into movie stars for a day, or even a few weeks, both newspapers and movie theaters profited. Although *A Vermont Romance* is among the earliest surviving examples of a narrative local film, it was far from the only one.²⁷

MAKING A VERMONT ROMANCE

Although placing *A Vermont Romance* in the contexts of newspaper subscription contests and itinerant film practices in the mid-1910s makes the film appear to be ordinary for its time, there are still particular details about its production that set it apart from other local films. First, and most importantly, the company that made the film is never identified, and the two individuals associated with its production, director Ralph Newman and camera operator Ernest Powell, did not make similar pictures elsewhere.²⁸ Second, the film's plot appears to be original, unlike the movies made by other itinerant filmmakers of the period, who reused plot lines, intertitles, and even some footage to keep production costs down. Third, the actors in *A Vermont Romance* were paid, however modestly, for their work. Because of these factors, making the film was a particularly risky endeavor. The *Vermont Advance*, published weekly, had fewer than five thousand subscribers in 1916. While the newspaper did not boast of the film's production budget, companies routinely charged hundreds of dollars to make movies of similar length, which meant that the paper, which charged one dollar for a year's subscription, would have had to grow its subscriber rate substantially just to break even.²⁹

When the paper announced the contest, on April Fool's Day of 1916, it repeatedly emphasized that it had taken on "great expense" to bring on a team of filmmakers from New York to give Vermonters their chance for movie stardom. Such an initiative appears to have been taken on behalf of the paper's ambitious new editor, Arthur Platt Howard. Howard was a native New Yorker, son of a famous jeweler, and husband of an

heir. Soon after marrying, he proceeded to lose much of his wife's money on Wall Street and turned to writing—including a book on the pitfalls of investing—and politics as a second career. In Massachusetts, he served briefly as mayor of Salem and ran, unsuccessfully, for lieutenant governor on the Prohibition Party line in 1914. He moved to Vermont shortly after his political career in Massachusetts faltered and, in June 1915, became editor of the *Advance*. In less than a year's time, he introduced movies to the newspaper's pages, running Universal's serial story *Graft*, and more than tripled the amount of advertising in the paper.

As a result, it is not too surprising to see the *Advance* pitch *A Vermont Romance* as a screen test rather than a publicity campaign or political propaganda. The film does not openly advocate for Progressive Party candidates or its platform, though it is possible to detect some of its politics in the subjects presented in the film, including its depictions of the ills that befell urban and rural Vermont and, one assumes, could be ameliorated by the Progressive Party. In his 1941 history of the Progressive movement in Vermont, Winston Allen Flint notes that one of the key political issues of the 1910s was the establishment of party primaries, which were put in place to eliminate some of the party machinations that had long privileged rural candidates over urban ones.³⁰ The film also could have been made to boost the party's flagging population. The year prior, reform-minded Republicans in the Vermont legislature approved a number of Progressive initiatives, including primaries, a workman's compensation law, and an agricultural bureau, which effectively robbed the Progressive Party of its most compelling issues.³¹ Guy Horton, the paper's publisher, might have assumed that he needed a publicity stunt just to keep the party's newspaper going. Once the *Advance* launched the contest, it put its full editorial weight behind motion pictures as an enticing new industry for Vermonters. As the *Advance* warned in an April editorial,

Beware Mary Pickford, Marguerite Clark, Francis X. Bushman and Charlie Chaplin. Look to your laurels, or you may lose them. The young people of Vermont are going to enter your field of industry and there is no telling what the result might be.³²

In keeping with the subscription contest format, the *Vermont Advance's* movie contest was designed to create as many winners as feasible. In the contest, the state was divided into ten sections, with the four vote-getters in each section—two men and two women—receiving a part in the play. In addition, two starring roles would be awarded to the “lady and gentleman getting the biggest number of votes in the entire state,” for a total of

APRIL 1, 1916

THE VERMONT ADVANCE

PAGE TWENTY-NINE

Here Is Your Chance to Act in the Movies

The Vermont Advance offers you a wonderful opportunity to appear in a moving picture of which the entire cast of players will be made up of the people of Vermont. The picture, entitled "A Vermont Romance," will be taken in different parts of the state.

\$25.00 a week and expenses will be Paid
to Persons Having Star Parts : : :

We want to find out, who, among the enterprising and ambitious men, women, young ladies and children, residing in Vermont are best fitted to act the leading roles in the motion picture play to be produced right here in Vermont, to be acted by all Vermont people, and to be shown in all Vermont theatres. In order to do this quickly the Advance has contracted, at a big expense, with a large New York company to come here and take the picture. Everything has been arranged. It is now up to you to get in the game and win.

See Yourself on the Screen

You do not need experience. We pay you while you work.

There will be the Hero, the Heroine, the Villain, the Bad Boy, the Good Girl and many others.

Any man, woman, or child living in Vermont can enter this contest. All that is necessary is to clip the nomination blank on another page of this paper, fill in your name and mail or deliver to the Motion Picture director of the Advance. If you do not want to enter yourself nominate one of your friends. Nomination Blank is good for 5,000 votes.

DON'T MISS THIS OPPORTUNITY, SEE YOURSELF ACT IN

A Vermont Romance

For further particulars See or Write at Once Motion Picture Director

The Advance

Strong Building

Burlington

Figure 1. The Vermont Advance, April 1, 1916.

APRIL 15, 1916

THE VERMONT ADVANCE

PAGE NINE

To
Movie Stardom
 from the
Typewriter

A big step that was made by an ambitious girl. Her opportunity came through a moving picture contest. She did not wait to think it over. She grasped it. She won.

The Advance Movie Contest Offers You The Same Opportunity

**WHY
 DON'T
 YOU
 ADVANCE**

not enter this contest?

not become our star?

not achieve your ambition?

don't you try?

miss this opportunity.

waste time wishing.

let others beat you.

forget we pay you.

are very ambitious?

are anxious to act?

can realize your ambition.

can succeed if you try.

while you have a chance.

to a good position.

yourself and your income.

to movie stardom.

Win A Part In "A VERMONT ROMANCE"

For further particulars see or write at once
 MOTION PICTURE DIRECTOR, THE ADVANCE, BURLINGTON, VT.

Figure 2. The *Vermont Advance*, April 15, 1916.

Ladies Lead in Movie Contest

Dorothy Whipple of Waterbury in the Lead

At last the movie contest fight is on in earnest, and all the contestants will try to outrun each other. Look for your name, if it is not near the top of the list it is up to you to get busy.

Miss Dorothy Whipple who leads all the contestants, has proved that living in a small town is not a great disadvantage, so far as obtaining votes is concerned.

Miss Lillian Leavitt, Newport, Vt., is a close second, and is putting up a good fight; third in the race is Miss Ruby Kendall, who is also out for the stellar role. There is still time for you; ambition and perseverance are the qualities that count.

Following is the complete standing of the contestants up to Wednesday night, May 10th:

SECTION NO. 1 ADDISON COUNTY

Claire Clarissy19,540

SECTION NO. 2 BENNINGTON COUNTY

Alice Sumner	5,040	Channing Weir Hare	5,230
Nora Kearns	5,000	L. F. Hewitt	5,140
Bessie Arcus	5,000	Ralph Mathers	5,090
		Henry MacLaren	5,170
		William McGurn	5,000
		Arthur Debarge	5,000

Figure 3. The *Vermont Advance*, May 13, 1916.

forty-two parts. Stars were to be paid twenty-five dollars

a week and expenses, while section winners received ten

dollars and runners-up received five dollars. Also, participants were informed that they would "have the pleasure of working in a real movie, directed by a first-class producer from New York, and photographed by an expert camera man also from the 'great white way.'"

The contest opened on Saturday, April 8, and "any man, child, or woman living in Vermont" was encouraged to enter the contest.³³ Readers could use an entry form printed in the newspaper to nominate candidates, who would receive five thousand votes at the start of the contest. In subsequent issues, readers could cast "votes" for their favored contestants by purchasing copies of the *Advance*, which printed coupons, each worth ten votes, in its pages, or by signing up for a subscription, which gave one up to five thousand votes.³⁴

The itinerant entrepreneurs who ran contests and made local films were not always straightforward with their clients, and by 1916, there were already reports circulating of unsuspecting towns taken advantage of by unscrupulous salespeople. Even though the filmmakers behind *A Vermont Romance* fulfilled their promises, they misrepresented their backgrounds, perhaps to reassure participants and investors of

their credentials. The film's cinematographer, Ernest Powell, was a professional camera operator from England. While directors could afford to puff up their résumés, a skilled camera operator was required to make a film a success, as unsteady cranking, uneven exposure, and a thousand other mistakes could make a motion picture unwatchable, even by the forgiving standards of local boosters. Ralph Newman, on the other hand, was a more duplicitous character. Even after he admitted to the paper that he was from Cleveland, not New York, he refused to disclose his employer, preferring to sign items published in the newspaper under the name "Movie Director." Most likely, Newman was a stage actor and salesman, not a director, and, after a brief stint in pictures, spent his career pushing consumer goods, from newspapers to musical instruments.³⁵

While many itinerant filmmakers were self-employed, the sophisticated materials affiliated with Vermont's motion picture suggests that Newman was acting as an agent of an outfit that had made these sorts of films before. For example, the entry coupons used in the Vermont contest were similar to those used in other screen contests, and some of the fine-print rules of his contest were likely copied from other contests. Even if this film was Newman's first and only "contest film," contests like it were common in the early twentieth century. As the newspaper asked of the contest,

Would it attract the right type of people to take the parts? Would the picture be well made? And nine and ninety questions. This being the first state-wide motion picture contest ever carried out no little attention has been given it throughout the East and it is not all presumptuous to say that the screen result is anxiously awaited.³⁶

While these concerns may have been on the minds of the participants in the contest, they were clearly among the newspaper's chief worries, particularly because of the risks it underwrote on behalf of everyone else who was interested in making a movie in Vermont. Because the *Advance* was a statewide newspaper, without a built-in local audience, it had to build demand for its sponsored motion picture, convince theaters in the state to support their campaign, and hand out coupons to attract interest in all corners of the state.

In addition to supporting contest operations, the *Advance* printed interviews with some of the aspiring contestants, perhaps to advantage favored individuals. Unlike other contests, there were no age restrictions—a nine-year-old was an early entrant, and fifteen-year-old Dorothy Whipple took an early lead in the competition. The casting process caused Newman some consternation. Rather than casting for predetermined

Figure 4. The *Vermont Advance*, May 6, 1916.

roles, as itinerants tended to do, Newman told the newspaper that he would write his screenplay around the personalities and characteristics of his actors. For example, in the film, the character played by Dorothy Whipple, who had a starring role, experiences the death of her father, an event that resonated with her own life, as Whipple’s father had died in 1903.³⁷ As Newman, the film’s director, told the paper, “when I write for a New York firm, I know that actors can be engaged to play and look like the characters in my story; but in this case I have to write my story so that the characters will fit the actors that I am to use.”³⁸ By approaching *A Vermont Romance* as a film that would be reflective of the life experiences of its cast members, Newman ensured that his story would be more local than other films like it.

After two months of voting, the *Advance*’s contest ended in early June, with Whipple and J. A. Hunt coming out on top. The voting was lopsided, with women receiving more votes than men, and some sections were much less competitive than others. Newman’s decision to wait until the cast was selected delayed the production of the

Figure 5. The *Vermont Advance*, September 23, 1916.

film because he took longer than anticipated to write the scenario. As he told the readers of the *Advance*, “I want this picture to equal any feature photo play ever shown in Vermont, and with this thought in mind, it is necessary that I proceed slowly.”³⁹ Given that itinerant filmmakers in this period cast, filmed, developed, edited, and exhibited their local motion pictures within a two- or three-week window, the two months it took just to assemble a cast was a sign of how committed Newman, with support from the *Advance*, was to telling Vermont’s story.

Even so, once the filming commenced in early June, the crew stayed on schedule, completing the shoot in three weeks, despite the usual setbacks of bad weather and technical issues, such as running out of film. After the shooting was complete, Newman and Powell returned to New York, while editorial writers at the *Advance* continued to pester them about the film, publishing one article (“We Want to See the Motion Picture”) just a week after the end of filming.⁴⁰ It was not unheard of for fly-by-night operations to pretend to make pictures, collect money, and then disappear, so the paper’s suspicion was warranted. To his credit, Newman kept Vermonters up to date on his activities, calling the film “the best contest picture ever made” at the end of July, even as he cut the interview short, citing the heat.⁴¹

In fact, the film was not completed until mid-September, more than two months

after the shooting was completed. Although it appears that just one print of the film was made, it quickly made its way through the state, screening to an audience of five thousand people in Burlington and breaking box-office records in Morrisville, Derby Line, St. Johnsbury, and, likely, many other Vermont towns. For most towns, the film played for just a single night, so the *Advance* could put it before most of the state within a few weeks' time, ending its first run on October 10. For those who missed seeing the film or just found it hard to follow, the *Advance* serialized its plot in the newspaper, publishing it in three segments—September 23, before most Vermonters had seen the film; September 30; and October 7. While the serialization of motion picture stories was common in the mid-1910s, granting this treatment to a local film was highly unusual. In most cases, local films were just one or two reels, and their story could easily fit on a single page. But, for the three-reel *A Vermont Romance*, “novelization,” as the *Advance* called it, proved to be a better fit, particularly given the intricacies of the plot.

Although Newman claimed that the story was written to fit the particular profiles of the contest winners, the story of *A Vermont Romance* is an inventive variation of a love triangle, one of the most popular plots of 1910s movie melodramas. When the film opens, five characters are in search of a mate—two women and three men. Both women are orphans, the wealthy urbanite Madeline Randolph, who is cut off from social gatherings by her strict aunt, and the poor farmer Dorothy Whipple, whose father dies in the second act. The film opens with Madeline escaping the reaches of her aunt by venturing on an unchaperoned automobile trip to the country with two suitors, Ted Crosby and Jerry Hunter. After their car breaks down, and Madeline sprains her ankle while walking down the road, the trio meets Dorothy, and they become fast friends. Jerry becomes romantically interested in Dorothy but quickly realizes that he has competition for Dorothy's affections in Don Gates, her childhood sweetheart. In effect, this love pentagon serves to pit the country against the city, a common theme of early twentieth-century narratives in the United States.

At the same time, the film manages to cast both country and city in a negative light. Despite the bucolic setting of the countryside, where Dorothy lives, the film depicts farming as an economically unviable activity. In the second act, creditors arrive at Dorothy's home demanding that her father repay the mortgage. Unable to pay, Dorothy's father dies in shock. Don offers everything he has to repay the family's debts, but it is insufficient to save the farm, and Dorothy, now destitute, must go to the city to work. Meanwhile, Dorothy's new friends set off on new adventures, including a road trip west.

In this turn of events, the conflict in the film moves from one based on the contrast between urban and rural life to one based on class. When Dorothy arrives in the

city, she follows a path familiar to viewers of screen melodrama. Living in a boardinghouse, she searches everywhere for work but is unable to find a job. No longer able to pay the weekly rent for the boardinghouse, Dorothy contemplates suicide and ventures out to a scenic site overlooking Lake Champlain. Just before she jumps, she is saved by Marjorie Lavoy, a working-class woman who helps her navigate life as a single woman. With Marjorie's help, Dorothy obtains a job in a factory but also faces sexual harassment by Harvey Sinnott, a pimp and the son of the woman who owns the boardinghouse.

Meanwhile, both of Dorothy's suitors continue to look for her and convince Madeline and Ted to join them in their search. In true melodramatic fashion, the four witness a woman being kidnapped by a pimp and decide to intervene, even though they are unaware that they are in fact seeing Dorothy and Harvey. A harrowing high-speed chase commences, and Dorothy is rescued by her friends. Although this portrayal of urban life is far from an advertisement for the specific advantages of Burlington, Vermont, it is in keeping with the filmmaker's desire to reproduce the tropes of popular melodrama in a motion picture featuring local people and places.

At the end of this adventure, Madeline convinces Dorothy to stay with her and begins the process of acquainting Dorothy with her upper-class life in the city. A few weeks later, Jerry takes Dorothy on a tour of a bread factory, owned by his friend, where Dorothy encounters Don, who's working in the shipping department. Despite this reunion with her old friend, Dorothy keeps company with her city friends. A few days later, Jerry proposes to Dorothy, and Ted proposes to Madeline, resolving their differences. The four of them plan for a double wedding, and the story ends.

LOSING AND FINDING *A VERMONT ROMANCE*

Although *A Vermont Romance* was unusual in that it was produced and exhibited throughout the state, its fairly short run was typical for the period. The local municipal booster films made with similar budgets had even shorter runs, as they were just seen in the town where they were made. While the film's production was publicized as a historical event of sorts, the film itself was assumed to be ephemeral, something made and forgotten, rather than a perennial object that would be shown as often as possible.

Even though *A Vermont Romance* won widespread attention in the state, the movie was not enough to keep the paper in business. In January 1917, just a few months after the picture's premiere, the paper closed, and its editor was jailed the following month for forgery.⁴² In 1919, an editor of a Missouri newspaper criticized such circulation campaigns, arguing, "When a man won't subscribe for your paper on its own merits, it is either of two

things—the paper is of no value to the man, or the man would be of no value to the paper as a subscriber.”⁴³ In the case of the *Advance*, both seemed to be true, as the Progressive Party lost the 1916 election and its members returned to the Republican fold shortly after.

Although the film had lost its utility for the newspaper or the Progressive Party, it was screened a few times more in the 1910s. On January 10, 1917, *A Vermont Romance* was exhibited at the Olympia Theater in West Lebanon, New Hampshire, which was just over the Connecticut River from White River Junction, Vermont, where key scenes from the film were shot. A poster produced to advertise the film’s exhibition notes that “there are 10 people from West Lebanon and White River Junction in this picture” and that “the picture is an excellent amateur production . . . said by experienced theatrical people to be the finest contest picture ever produced.”⁴⁴ Already, *A Vermont Romance* was being redefined as an amateur production, with few links to the movie industry. Even though the Vermont Progressive Party, and the newspaper that sponsored the film, were no longer, *A Vermont Romance* continued to be shown in-state and was exhibited in Chelsea and Northfield. In April, *A Vermont Romance* was exhibited in Montpelier, Vermont. This time, however, the film was not the feature but rather ran at the end of the program.⁴⁵

After its spring 1917 screenings, the film went into hiding, likely in the care of Ida and Guy Horton, who published the *Vermont Advance* and, later in life, were locally known for their interest in archives and collecting. The film was not seen again until the early 1960s, when it gained a second life through the care of the historical societies, television stations, and film archivists who made it available to the public once more, even though the film remained underdescribed. It was not until 2014, when the VAMP formed, that researchers began consulting local newspapers, diaries, and film elements to reconstruct *A Vermont Romance* as a film that was more than just an odd, and somewhat misunderstood, artifact of early moviemaking.

While earlier rediscoveries of *A Vermont Romance* tended to discuss the film as a historical artifact, the group behind the 2016 tour instead positioned the film as an example of the creativity and talent of Vermont’s people and the state’s potential as a home for film production. In this way, the starry-eyed movie romance sold to the film’s participants in 1916 was revived for 2016, with the earlier picture screened as an example of what the state can accomplish when it sets its mind to making movies. The group consulted surviving film elements, including the rediscovered 8mm print, and consulted the *Vermont Advance* to add new information, such as a complete list of the film’s cast members, to the film. They also commissioned Bob Merrill, a composer and performer of music for silent films, to produce a new sound track for the film.

After an exhibition-standard 2K digital scan was made of the film, the group

Figure 6. Frame grab from *A Vermont Romance* (1916).

launched a screening tour of *A Vermont Romance* across northern Vermont. For each screening, a panel introduced the film while soliciting support for identification and preservation of similar Vermont films, particularly calling attention to works of Vermont filmmakers. Led by filmmakers, the panels also featured archivists and librarians from the state.⁴⁶ Once again, local media played a significant role in the film's exhibition, with the *Burlington Free Press*, Vermont's largest newspaper, featuring the film and its history in a Sunday foldout section, "History Space," in May 2016.⁴⁷

In response to the publicity regarding the screening of the redigitized film, a diary kept by Guy Horton, publisher of the *Vermont Advance*, was donated to the historical

Figure 7. Frame grab from *A Vermont Romance* (1916).

society by friends of the producer's family. This primary source provides a look at the lives of Guy and Ida Horton, giving details about the development of the *Vermont Advance*, the promotion of the plans for *A Vermont Romance*, and the later filming and screening of the film. Because this most recent exhibition of *A Vermont Romance* was conceived as an opportunity to reflect on the multiple meanings of the film, and its interest to historians, filmmakers, and archivists alike, the film was able to attract greater engagement from the public than it had in previous discoveries. At the same time, the members of VAMP had even higher hopes for the film, expecting it to serve as the first of many projects that would connect Vermont's past with its present. Since 2014, VAMP has created a database of films made in Vermont and continues to seek grant funding to preserve, digitize, and make available other films made in Vermont. Rather than isolating *A Vermont Romance* as a singular example of what Vermont filmmaking was, VAMP instead made the film's preservation a demonstration of what it might look like if one were to see Vermont through the medium of archival moving images.

As a result, *A Vermont Romance*'s most recent exhibition was a success because filmmakers, local historians, and archivists understood the film as an object of archaeological interest. Rather than accepting the object at face value, or as merely an example of proto-Hollywood amateur filmmaking, the people who researched *A Vermont Romance*

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Figure 8. *A Vermont Romance*, Centenary Tour 1916–2016, Vermont Archive Movie Project, 2016.

April 1, 1916

The *Vermont Advance*, published by Guy Horton, announces a contest to select actors and actresses.

April–June

Advertisements ran in the newspaper: “To Movie Stardom from the Typewriter” and “He Who Hesitates Is Lost” and “See Yourself on the Screen.”

June 10

Results announced: Dorothy Whipple of Waterbury wins with 236,870 votes; J. A. Hunt of Derby Line wins male lead with 142,750 votes.

June 20

Cameraman Ernest Powell of New York arrives in Burlington to start filming.

July 1

Shooting complete.

September 14

4,000 people see the film at the Majestic Theater in Burlington.

Fall 1916

A Vermont Romance tours the state.

1965 or 1966

35mm copy of *A Vermont Romance* uncovered by B. B. Bosworth in estate of his wife’s mother’s friend, Ida B. Horton; he gives film to WCAX-TV station to transfer to 16mm.

1966

A Vermont Romance shown for the first time in fifty years by the Chittenden County Historical Society.

1972

Vermont Historical Society receives letter from Bosworth describing the films and its discovery, later acquiring 16mm and 8mm copies of the film.

1989

A Vermont Romance broadcast on Vermont PBS history program.

1999

Northeast Historic Film borrows print from WCAX-TV, making copy as part of National Endowment for the Arts Millennial Grant.

2007

Vermont PBS broadcasts film transfer update as historian Marjorie Allard researches the *Vermont Advance*.

2016

Vermont Historical Society and Vermont Archive Movie Project create digital resolution copy, presenting statewide.

Figure 9. *A Vermont Romance* timeline.

realized its multifaceted and complicated history. By turning to local newspapers published at the time of the film's production and first release, they found a 1916 "contest film" that was seen by audiences who saw themselves and places they recognized in the film. By looking at records from the film's initial rediscovery in the 1960s, they found historical society members who were excited to learn that Vermont had a film history to be preserved, researched, and written. By revisiting the film's television premiere in 1989, they saw the importance of celebrating the state's sole surviving silent movie. Finally, by sharing the film with 2016 audiences, they had an opportunity to reflect on how the state is perceived, and perceives itself, in moving images. In effect, by presenting *A Vermont Romance* once more, this time with much more contextual detail, they created a work that was much more than the sum of its three reels.

Although *A Vermont Romance* is a unique motion picture, many local and state archives have films in their collections—travelogues, industrials, home movies, and amateur films—that would benefit from similar efforts. The familiar tools of local historical research—searching small-town newspapers, consulting archival collections held by historical societies and libraries, and producing oral histories—can turn unidentified and underdescribed films into culturally and socially rich motion pictures that can encourage people to make new connections to the past. Furthermore, by consulting new histories of local film, amateur film, industrial film, home movies, and similar genres, archivists and historians can place motion pictures within more specific contexts than Hollywood. By considering, and recreating, the community-building power of local and regional film, archivists and historians can produce new perspectives on people and places that were captured, however briefly, on film.

Martin L. Johnson is an associate professor of English and comparative literature at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. His first book, *Main Street Movies: The History of Local Film in the United States*, was published in 2018. He is currently working on two book projects: a history of advertising film in the United States (1896–1928) and a history of early educational film in the United States.

Frederick C. Pond contributes to the discovery, preservation, and appreciation of Vermont's moving image heritage with the Vermont Historical Society. Search <http://scholarworks.uvm.edu/> for a complete collection of Pond's publications involving Vermont film and scholarship. The author recognizes the financial support of the 2017 New England Archivists Audio/Visual Professional Award and, furthermore, is grateful to the Vermont Historical Society and the University of Vermont for their support.

NOTES

1. In a 2013 study, David Pierce estimated that just 25 percent of the feature films made in 1916 are extant. See David Pierce, "The Survival of American Silent Feature Films: 1912–1929," Library of Congress, September 2013, 2, https://www.loc.gov/static/programs/national-film-preservation-board/documents/pub158.final_version_sept_2013.pdf. Although *A Vermont Romance*, a three-reel film, would not qualify as a feature using the criteria employed by Pierce, which focus on films four reels or longer, the survival rate for short films made in 1916 is likely even lower than that for features. In the silent period, a reel of film took ten to twelve minutes to run through the projector.
2. "Ira Allen PTA Plans Fun Night," *Burlington Free Press*, March 17, 1964, 16.
3. While it would be difficult to definitively prove when the first film in Vermont was made, one candidate would be W. K. L. Dickson's films made at Fort Ethan Allen in April 1897 on behalf of the American Biograph Company. See "Cavalry Maneuvers," *Burlington Free Press*, April 15, 1897, 5. The Fort Ethan Allen films were exhibited elsewhere by the American Biograph. See "The Biograph Pictures," *Fall River [Mass.] Evening News*, February 1, 1899, 8.
4. In addition to regional film archives, such as Northeast Historic Film, Chicago Film Archive, the Texas Archive of the Moving Image, the Tennessee Archive of Moving Image and Sound, and the Mid-Atlantic Regional Moving Image Archive, there are significant collections of local films at the state- and university-based archives in South Carolina, Oregon, Wisconsin, Georgia, Alabama, and Nebraska. Historical societies, public libraries, and other institutions also hold local films in their collections.
5. "A Vermont Romance" WCAX-TV accompanying notes to transferred film, circa 1960s.
6. "Ira Allen PTA Plans Fun Night," 16.
7. "Athena Club Plans Gifts for State Hospital Patients," *Burlington Free Press*, December 12, 1964, 4.
8. The 8mm print was later found to contain titling lost on the 16mm print, which suggests it was made at the same time as the 16mm print.
9. "Your Chance to Relive 'A Vermont Romance,'" *Boston Sunday Globe*, December 3, 1989, 84.
10. Advertisement, *Rutland [Vermont] Daily Herald*, December 5, 1989, 19.
11. Northeast Historic Film applied for funding from the Treasures of American Film Archives millennium project, which was established by the National Film Preservation Foundation with funding from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Pew Charitable Trusts. This particular grant was designated for "orphan" films, or motion pictures that were not under copyright. See Brian Taves, "Archival News," *Cinema Journal* 39, no. 2 (2000): 121.
12. Karan Sheldon to Peter Martin, July 22, 1998, Northeast Historic Film.
13. David Weiss to Nancy Hamilton, January 19, 1999, Northeast Historic Film.
14. Taves, "Archival News," 126.
15. "VAMP (Vermont Archive Movie Project)," <https://vtiff.org/vtiff-now/vamp/>.

16. For more, see Martin L. Johnson, *Main Street Movies: The History of Local Film in the United States* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018).
17. Advertisement, *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 10, 1912, 66.
18. Although accounts of the rise of film stardom differ, many scholars attribute Carl Laemmle's publicity stunt with Florence Lawrence in March 1910 as the origin point of film stardom in the United States. See Richard deCordova, *Picture Personalities: The Emergence of the Star System in America* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1990).
19. "The Exhibitor's End of It," *Reel Life*, October 24, 1914, 23.
20. For more on the "Who Will Be Sue?" contest and similar contests, see Richard Abel, *Menus for Movieland: Newspapers and the Emergence of American Film Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016), 130–39.
21. See "Press Affords Opportunity to Any Pittsburger to Become Moving Picture Star," *Pittsburgh Press*, August 8, 1915, 1, Editorial Section 5, and "Film for Press Movie Contest Is Completed," *Pittsburgh Press*, August 20, 1916, 2.
22. See "Filmography," in Johnson, *Main Street Movies*, 265, for a list of the Hudris Company's film productions.
23. See Jeremy C. Fox, "100-Year-Old Silent Film Shot in Quincy Discovered," *Boston Globe*, April 19, 2016, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2016/04/19/family-search-unearths-year-old-silent-film-shot-quincy/MDxKMGsPGLA2hTUSG8m76I/story.html>.
24. See "Filmography" for more information on Paragon and McHenry.
25. See Johnson, *Main Street Movies*, particularly Chapters 1 and 2. For more on the newspaper sponsorship of itinerant filmmakers, see Caitlin Cieslik-Miskimen, "Hollywood in the Hinterland: Newspapers, Itinerant Films and Community Identity in the 1920s," *Communication, Culture, and Critique* 12, no. 3 (2019): 378–96.
26. For movie theaters, on the other hand, sponsoring local films was a more uncertain proposition, in part because audience expectations of new programs two or three times a week meant that they had just a few days to make a profit on their investment.
27. For example, three films by Paragon Feature Film Company, which Johnson discusses extensively in Chapter 1 of *Main Street Movies*, are extant: *Present and Past in the Cradle of Dixie* (1914), *The Lumberjack* (1914), and *Blissveldt Romance* (1915). Like *A Vermont Romance*, all three of these films are melodramas in which the leading characters, all played by local people, are torn between a desire to maintain traditional occupations, such as farming, and to adapt to modernity.
28. For example, online searches in newspaper databases and film publications do not indicate that they made films elsewhere. However, one possible clue of their connection to itinerant work appears in the June 24, 1916, issue of the *Vermont Advance*, 1, where Powell is identified as a representative of the Universal Camera Company. A Universal Camera Company was also active in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, in the same period and, according to Jessica Whitehead, made a version of *The Manhatters* in July 1915. See Whitehead, "The Historical Process of Fandom as a Participatory Pastime: Film Discourse in Newspapers from 1911 to 1918," research paper, August 29, 2012.

29. One of the most prominent producers of municipal booster films, the Paragon Feature Film Company, charged \$750 for the production of two-reel motion pictures in 1912. See Johnson, *Main Street Movies*, 35.
30. Winston Allen Flint, *The Progressive Movement in Vermont* (Washington, D.C.: American Council on Public Affairs, 1941), 68.
31. Flint, 67.
32. "The People of Vermont to Act in Moving Picture," *Vermont Advance*, April 1, 1916, 20.
33. "The People of Vermont to Act in Moving Picture," 20.
34. Each nominated individual received five thousand votes to start. Once the contest started, each copy of the newspaper (three cents a copy) contained a coupon for ten votes, which one could use to support one of the people in the running. A purchaser of a three-month subscription (twenty-five cents) received a coupon good for one hundred votes, while a six-month subscription netted three hundred votes. A one-year subscription (one dollar) was accompanied with a coupon for one thousand votes, while three-year subscribers received five thousand votes. See *Vermont Advance*, May 27, 1916, 8.
35. This information is ascertained from a World War I draft card signed by Newman, in which he identifies himself as an actor for the New Amsterdam Theater, and city directories in Cleveland, which lists the occupation of a Ralph Newman living at the same address. See U.S., World War I Draft Registration Cards, 1917–1918, Ancestry.com Operations Inc., 2005. For census records, see Ralph Newman, St. Louis, St. Louis (Independent City), Missouri, page 4B; Enumeration District 0168, FHL microfilm 2340976, 1930 *United States Federal Census*, Ancestry.com Operations Inc., 2002, and Ralph Newman, Chicago, Cook, Illinois, Roll m-t0627-01019, page 11A, Enumeration District 103-3105, 1940 *United States Federal Census*, Ancestry.com Operations Inc., 2012.
36. *Vermont Advance*, June 24, 1916, 1.
37. "Harley E. Whipple," *St. Johnsbury Republican*, January 28, 1903, 8.
38. *Vermont Advance*, June 17, 1916, 5.
39. "Advance Movie Story—A Vermont Romance. Most Difficult I Have Ever Had to Write Says Movie Director," *Vermont Advance*, June 17, 1916, 5.
40. "We Want to See the Motion Picture," *Vermont Advance*, July 8, 1916, 5.
41. "The Movie Man Back from New York," *Vermont Advance*, July 29, 1916, 6.
42. "Burlington, VT," *Typographical Journal*, January 1917, 26.
43. Frank W. Rucker, "Circulating the Newspaper among the Farmer. Special Issue: 'The Small-Town Newspaper as a Business,'" *University of Missouri Bulletin* 20, no. 26 (1919): 9.
44. "Big Show!" poster, Wilbur Broadside Collection, Special Collections and Archives, University of Vermont, 1917.
45. Advertisement, *Montpelier Evening Argus*, April 16, 1917, 4.
46. Panelists included Bob Merrill and Nat Winthrop, co-producers of *Freedom and Unity: The Vermont Movie* (2013); author and former movie theater owner Rick Winston; and Gregory Sanford, former Vermont state archivist.
47. "First Vermont-Made Movie Was in 1916," *Burlington Free Press*, May 29, 2016, <http://www.burlingtonfreepress.com/story/news/2016/05/27/history-space-vermont-romance/85001688/>.