

Silent Voices:
Amateur Photos and Movies as
Historical Documentation
by
Lois Huffines

Images from the past may be silent, but they are not mute. Photographs and early homemade movies have no sound, but from them we can derive important historical information that otherwise would have been lost to us. Amateur and candid shots typically tell us more of the daily routine and evoke a sense of individual personalities in ways that formal and staged photographs with their standardized stares and forced rigidity suppress. This lesson is amply demonstrated by four reels of 16 mm film from 1937.

The four reels, now digitized and presented on DVD, were rescued from a trash heap in 1976 by James Schwartz, now a retired funeral director in Mifflinburg. The



The original film reels, nestled in tins and packaged in cardboard boxes
DVD offers viewers a slice of history from their own backyard, as it was in 1937. And just in time! Appropriately, the new DVD arrived during the Bicentennial of Union

County, a celebration of times past. The DVD offers a local answer to questions of how life once was and brings some of those memories forward just before they might have lost.

In 2012, Schwartz donated the original reels to the Union County Historical Society just at the time Marion Lois Huffines was researching the history of Mifflinburg for her book, *Mifflinburg and the West End*, published by Arcadia in 2012. She borrowed a 16mm projector from Bucknell University and was astonished to find that the reels contained 36 minutes raw footage of Mifflinburg and surrounding towns, taken in 1937. Sponsored by the Union County Historical Society and underwritten by several of its members, Huffines contracted with McVicar Video Productions of Lewisburg to have the film digitized and produced on DVD for sale to the public. Originally the film segments as they appeared were basically random, taken wherever the photographer



300 Block of Chestnut Street, Mifflinburg, facing east

happened to be at the time. Huffines edited the film, reordered the segments by location, and provided subtitles identifying places and locations. Bruce Teeple, a member of the Union County Historical Society, introduces the DVD, providing some context for viewing it. He notes that in 1937 the United States was still suffering effects

from the Great Depression, Franklin D. Roosevelt had just been elected to a second term, and that World War II had not yet threatened on the horizon.

The 1937 footage provides a view of daily life in Mifflinburg and the surrounding towns. As the photographer traveled around the county, he filmed individuals active in their routine activities. Although his black and white moving images are without sound or technical effects, they tell the story of how people lived, worked, and enjoyed their leisure. In the film, for example, gas station attendants pump gas while washing windshields, checking oil and water levels, and showing the dip stick to the driver. At the Atlantic station, the attendant works in white company overalls and sports a cap, looking quite professional. At the Kocher Texaco station, the attendant wears a cap adorned by the Texaco star symbol. Still other gas station attendants don work clothes from home and wipe their hands of oil and water on the



Mifflinburg's Atlantic Gas Station, no self-service here yet!

front of their clothing when no rag is handy. One sees the interactions with the customer, the cars of the era, and the careful attention given to the work task. In Mifflinburg, vehicles line the streets, and 1938 Studebakers are already being advertised.

The photographer filmed the workers at several industries. At the Kooltex Knitting Mills and at the Kurtz Overall Factory, which stood across the tracks from the Mifflinburg railroad station, we see the workers as they leave for home. Though tired at the end of their workday, they seem glad to help out the photographer by walking by him as he films their departure. He filmed workers at mill docks as they load and stack sacks of flour at Snook's mills in Mifflinburg, Swengel, and Vicksburg into trucks beds and even a horse-drawn wagon. At one mill, the truck departs by driving backwards up the street—now what was that all about?



Workers from the Mifflinburg Flour and Grain Mill

On Chestnut Street in Mifflinburg, the photographer shows shop workers and displays in shop windows. At Gast & Sons Dry Goods, Mr. and Mrs. Harry Gast stand by the doorway, and Edmund Shively's Appliances has its own delivery truck which also advertises the store's telephone number. A jaunty young man waves as he walks past the Corner Lunch shop and the Mifflinburg Book Store. At the Crossroads in Laurelton, we see Pete Pursley's General Store and Post Office, and even Pete's brother-in-law. Other workers are busy too: Ken Erdley delivers milk for Wehr's Dairy, probably at Cowan, and sticks around for conversation with the photographer and friends. Preston Knepp's Grocery Bus sells peaches at 14 cents per pound and egg noodles for 8 cents.

Outside the Mazeppa Mill, hunters stand with rifles and their hunting dog ready to take off for the woods.

The photographer traveled to every school in central and western Union County. He seemed intent on photographing every school child. He filmed students and some of the teachers at Mifflinburg High School, Hartley Township High School, and Lewis Township High School. He visited every elementary school, and as a result, we see these lively, energetic students at recess and watch while their teachers, ever mindful of the



Students playing London Bridge at the Buffalo Crossroads School



Millmont Elementary School, Paul Reamer, teacher

time, try to gather them briefly for a picture and then back into the school room. The photographer visited the schools in Swengel, Millmont, Laurelton, Green Grove, White Springs, Pontius, Rand, Creek School, Red Bank School, Forest Hill, Mazeppa, Buffalo Cross Roads, Cowan (both Grammar and Primary schools), and Vicksburg. As the students are being photographed, the younger ones push and shove each other; the boys show off, and the girls try to behave. The older students, especially some of the young ladies, turn their heads in shyness. They play London Bridge and Farmer in the Dell, strategies to give the photographer a way to film each individual student. Anyone who attended school in this area of Union County in 1937 is probably on the DVD.



Mary Ellen (Ringler) Nolan taught fourth grade at Pontius School

Other pieces of history show up then too. The photographer filmed the veterans serving at the Civilian Conservation Corps camp in Weikert, as the men prepare to carry out their assigned projects involving timbering, trail building, and reforestation. Raymond B. Winter appears in this segment of the film although his name is enshrined at the state park at Halfway, further to the north. At the Weikert camp, the cooks for the camp order a couple of men, as part of their KP duties, to peel potatoes in preparation for dinner. As often happens in filming, the men stare at the camera motionless until someone, perhaps the photographer, reminds them that it is a movie camera. It is then that one sees their personalities emerge in good-hearted teasing. The film also has images of the CCC at Halfway where the young men at this camp perform a flag-lowering exercise at the end of the day, marching in step until they believe themselves to

be out of camera range. At that point they break into a run, perhaps hurrying to dinner. The camp itself shows off its fine stone work, quite an accomplishment still seen, in part, as Halfway Dam. The photographer even filmed the camp from the lookout.

Still other institutions appear in the film, ones that remind us that the daily logistics of living, working, and passing on continue a cycle from one generation to the next: Mifflinburg Bank and Trust, Laurelton State Bank, Strunk Funeral Home, and B.T. Lance Monument Works. The four-story Brown's Buggy Factory (later Sterling Bros. Throwing Mill), a building no longer standing, appears in the background, near what became the Mifflinburg Community Park, which in 1937 was a ballpark with a stand of bleachers. Herbster's mills at Laurelton and at Laurel Park are still in operation.

The photographer also filmed the residents at Laurelton State Village for Feeble-minded Women of Childbearing Age as they did their work, going to the barn with milk buckets and a pitch fork. Some of them were so shy at having their picture taken that they walked backwards toward the camera. Back in Mifflinburg, we see a 1937 fire drill



Mifflinburg Firehouse, razed in 1976 to make room for a new larger firehouse

as the Mifflinburg fire trucks race to Gardner Gottschall's shop behind the Lewisburg Hotel to hook up hoses, douse a "fire," and remove a "victim" in an ambulance provided by Strunk Funeral Home. Residents gather to watch the commotion. A fireman shows the inner workings of the emergency alarm located between the firehouse and the borough building.

The past differs from what we see now in myriad ways, and vibrant memories are often triggered by the sight of seemingly insignificant details. Young boys wear knickers or bib-overalls to school, and they had not yet discovered the baseball cap. The girls are in dresses, and the older boys don coats and ties, sometimes even a vest. The cars look clunky to modern eyes, but they sure beat horse-drawn wagons, and there is already a traffic light on Chestnut Street in Mifflinburg. One catches a glimpse of a horse and wagon at work, but by now horses in towns were out of work, and ponies were brought to town to offer families a chance to have their children photographed taking a ride. Wringer washers sold for \$69.95. Lux soap was for sale, and gas stations advertised



Edmund Shively's Appliance Store sold wringer washers for \$69.95

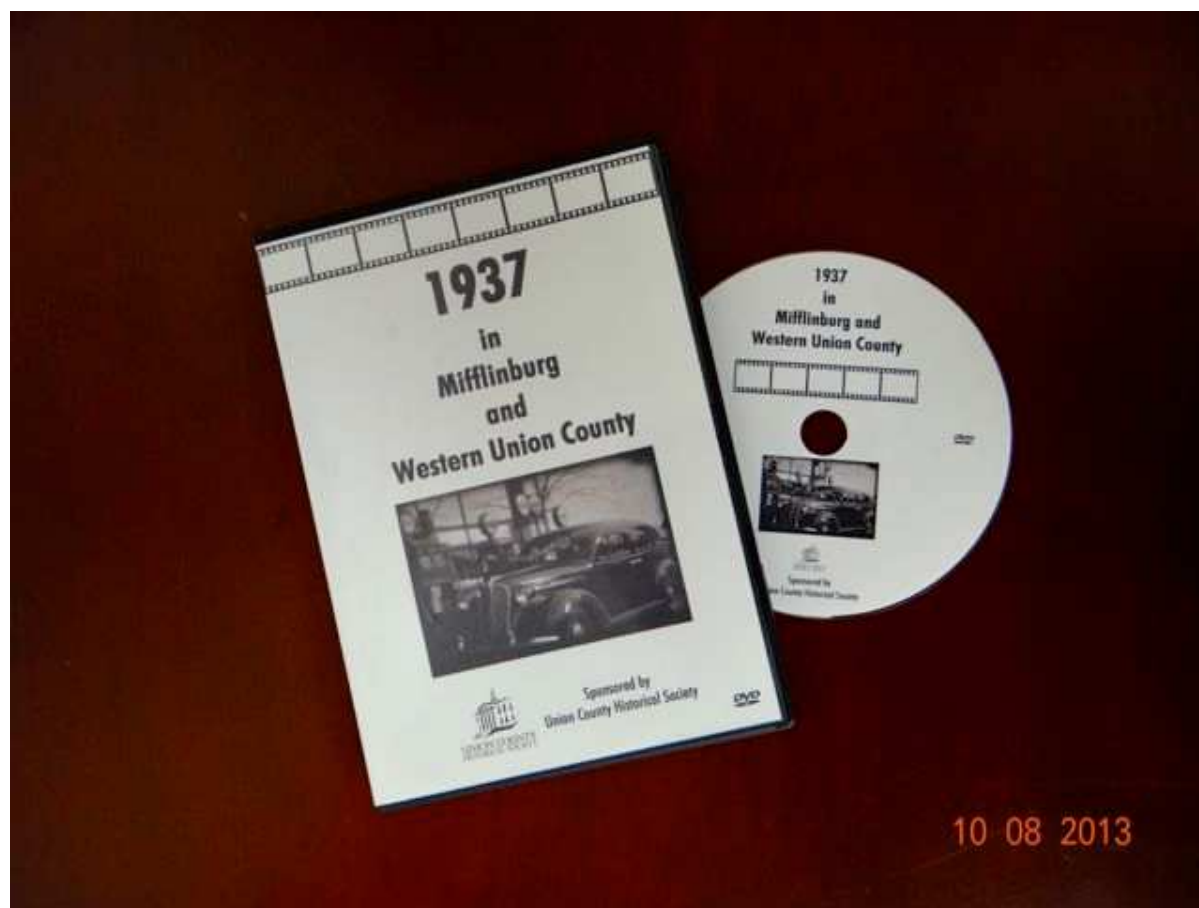
sanitary rest rooms. Milk trucks made deliveries to private homes. Mills and small industries provided a way to make a living, and many more men smoked.

Much has changed since 1937, but the film captures a slice of time as it was. Viewers get a feel for the community, how people worked together, and see how one-room schoolhouses might have brought students and teachers together, helping them to know and respect each other in ways that are sometimes lost today. Modern viewers will recognize places and some of the people, and they may be surprised by how many memories are evoked by these images of long ago.

The photographer has not been identified although many people suggest that it was Edmund Shively, who owned an appliance store but was also a teacher and photographer. The photographer himself is reflected in a store window in one of the film segments. Is he really Shively, who also appears later in the film at Swengel School? What about some of the other people who appear in the film? Who were they and what happened to them? The camera used by the photographer was one of the hand-held models on the market. These models were easily carried from place to place. The film was made by Agfa, and one suspects that the camera probably was too. One notes that all the footage taken by this photographer was taken outside.

Local history is where “big history” actually begins and where it is lived. While change seems to be accelerating in modern society, a look back, even 76 years back, offers a context for how today communities came to be what they are. A look back offers perspective—a lot of people preceded us and have lived and worked, and celebrated in the small local communities that we call home today. Each of them had a personality that made them unique, and that personality even emerges as we watch how they react to the camera’s eye. Whereas some people welcome a camera, others are shy, still others “perform” for it to make themselves noticeable, and one person even thumbs his nose at the photographer! Each generation leaves its mark for those who follow. We may not know who preceded us, but we realize that they made a life for themselves in the best way they could, each taking a step toward the future. None will ever know how far their influence reached, but for a brief 36 minutes, we can look back to 1937 and see their world. It is an amazing opportunity to see the past, and because of films such as this one, we may appreciate its people, our predecessors, all the more.

The DVD *1937 Mifflinburg and Western Union County* is on sale at the Union County Historical Society for \$15 plus tax. The Historical Society may be reached at (570) 524-8666 or by email at info@unioncountyhistoricalsociety.org. The DVD may also be purchased at Laurel Market and from Tony Shively in Millmont at (570) 922-4297. The DVD tells a visually significant story of local history. It makes a great gift for those who want to know or to remember how it really was in 1937.



The newly issued digitized DVD of the four film reels

The original four reels of 16mm film were given by James K. and Carol G. Schwartz to the Union County Historical Society in memory of Katherine R. Roush and Mary E. Koons, who were noted historians in Mifflinburg and the West End.

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