The Impressionable Years
American Children and the Public Library

Introduction to Moving Image Archiving & Preservation
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The Impressionable Years

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- NYPL Children’s Books & Film Locations
- Personalities:
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  - Peter Elgar
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The Impressionable Years
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Timeline

Pre-Production

• Summer 1951: Frances Clarke Sayers trains production staff
• Production staff observes children in library
• Sayers searches for lead girl
Timeline

Production

• October 1951: Production at Nathan Straus Branch begins, lasts five weeks
Timeline

Distribution

• April 16, 1952: Premiere at MOMA
• May 9: NY Herald-Tribune reviews MOMA screening
• Fall: Screening for library staff and neighborhood guests
• December: Film made available by NYPL for outside groups
PETER ELGAR
18 EAST 53RD STREET
INVITES YOU TO THE FIRST SHOWING OF

THE IMPRESSIONABLE YEARS

A FILM OF CHILDREN AND THEIR LIBRARIES
PRODUCED FOR THE STATE DEPARTMENT OF
THE UNITED STATES.

THE SHOWING WILL TAKE PLACE
WEDNESDAY, APRIL 16, 1952, AT 8.30 P.M.

IN THE AUDITORIUM OF THE
MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
11 WEST 53RD STREET
NEW YORK CITY

Because of limited seating capacity, a card of admission is required. Please return the enclosed acceptance form in order that a card may be sent you.
Multiple Versions of
The Impressionable Years
Two versions of film

- 40 minutes version
  - “unreleased,” although copies exist

- 30 minute version
  - “official” version released by State Department
    - Missing two scenes
      - Carl Sandburg sings and tells stories to children
      - Christmas party - final scene in film
Why?
No conclusive evidence, but...

- State Department funded film
  - Held final authority over version of film released.
  - Decision to cut scenes was theirs
- cutting occurred on or around April 21, 1952
4/22/32

The president open the meeting to discussion. 3 1/3

26. Four girls - one speaking
505 - 502
You are presented to her point of view, assembles her arguments and defends her own opinion.
9 2/3

27. NS of girl counting
507 - 512
Each is heard in turn, until the president calls for a vote.
4 2/3

28. NS of girl asking question.
515 - 530
The majority decides and "biography" is chosen as the reading of the year.
3 1/3

29. Children entering public library at hind street.
536 - 565
"Perhaps we could ask a writer of "Biography" to come and speak to us. PAUSE And as a letter is written ahead for suggestions... 10

30. Carl Sandburg talking and joking with the children in the audience.
667-691
Because the children ask of a "Biographer" and "poet" came to visit them. A poet in whom the great traditions of America have found a powerful and loving voice. Biographer of Lincoln...poet of the people...singer of folk songs -- Carl Sandburg. 19 1/3

31. Carl Sandburg points to boy.
691 - 696
This is a man who has listened to the heartbeats of a nation; who has listened to the million voices of the people until his own voice speaks with eloquence and fire. 9 1/3

You there, you look like a boy with the wind behind your eyes! I knew, I was born on the prairie, where the wind blows all the time... 8
Our four theories

• Two specifically related to Sandburg
  – Do not account for removal of Christmas scene
• Two are more general
  – Production and use of film
Theory #1

- Sandburg is considered a potential Communist subversive
  - Never testified before HUAC
  - Named in three separate testimonies (1938, 1940, 1947)
  - State Dept. advisor on set (Harry Keith) vetoed *The Two Reds*
Theory #2

• Potential copyright and/or licensing issues for Sandburg’s songs or recordings
Excerpts of three traditional songs are performed:

- “I Ride an Old Paint”
  - Cowboy song
- “Sweet Violets”
  - Multiple versions, some very bawdy
  - Anticipated rhyme scheme
- “Go Down Moses”
  - Spiritual
  - Later made famous by Paul Robeson
Are these live recordings?

- “I Ride an Old Paint” and “Go Down Moses” had previously been recorded by Sandburg, BUT
- “Sweet Violets” was never recorded by Sandburg
- Gerald Hirschfeld (cinematographer) remembers that live sound was recorded at the shooting
- If these are live recordings, they are unreleased Sandburg recordings
Theory #3

• The film was meant to be sent to many different foreign countries
• Perhaps the cut scenes were too culturally specific
"THE IMPRESSIONABLE YEARS"

NOTE TO TRANSLATORS, CHECKERS, AND RECORDING DIRECTORS

Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Marathi, Tamil, Telugu, and Urdu Versions.

For the above versions the following changes are to be made:

The Title has been changed to:
"CHILDREN'S LIBRARY"

REEL I - Insert the following NEW paragraph:

1.

What place is this? Where is "brother" going?
What goes on here? Where are these children
coming and going? All this, little Jane doesn't
know yet. But she will soon.
This is the story of a little girl who has come
with her brother for the first time to the New York
Public Library - this is the children's section -
here seeds are sown for a healthy mental growth -
for friendship with new places - and new peoples.

Change Par. 1 in the script of 10/22/52 to Par. 1-4, and eliminate the
word "FRIMFELSTICK" in line eight of same paragraph.

REEL II - Insert the following NEW paragraph:

13A - Don't worry, Jane! Come again when you can sign
your name - then you can take a book home.

REEL III - Insert the following NEW paragraph:

21A - Books of lands far away——

Substitute the following text for:

Par. 25= Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella, Little Red Riding
Hood—— Tales of Kings and Queens and Fairies
have warmed the hearts of every child all over
the world.

Special Note to HINDI, translator and checker.

The Embassy in Karachi has requested that the correct Hindi of
"Once upon a Time" — "Ek tha Raja" be used since Indian
stories begin this way.
Theory #4

• Scenes contained only sync sound in film
• Sandburg singing songs & kids singing “Deck the Halls” at Christmas
• Would have been impossible to dub
U.S.I.S.
United States Information Service
Presents
United States Information Agency

• Promoted US national interests abroad
• Produced *The Impressionable Years*, among other films
• Known as US Information Service abroad
  – Name changed for domestic purposes to avoid confusion with US Immigration Service
United World Films, Inc.

- Created by Universal Pictures, International Pictures, and J. Arthur Rank after World War II.
- Major producer and distributor (e.g., bought Castle Films in 1947, which was previously the largest distributor of “nontheatrical” films).
- State Department distributed *The Impressionable Years* through United World Films, Inc.
- Original price: $41.60.
NYPL Children’s Book Collection

A Brief History
The Early Years

• 1906: Dept. of Work with Children created
  – Anne Carroll Moore hired as Superintendent

• 1911: Central Children’s Room opens
  – Located in new 42nd St. building
  – Setting for Carl Sandburg scene in *The Impressionable Years*
The Central Children’s Room

• Reading room
• Historical children’s book collection
• Frequently hosted events: storytelling, poetry reading, puppet shows, concerts
• “There was the time when Carl Sandburg… sat on a corner of the desk in the reading room strumming his guitar and singing ballads in his deep rich voice.”

“The Central Children’s Room” by Helen Adams Masten
The Central Children’s Room
Nathan Straus Branch
Nathan Straus Branch

• Main location for *The Impressionable Years*
• Opened in 1941
• First NYPL branch devoted to children & young people
• Located at 348 32nd St. in former pasteurization center
Nathan Straus Branch

First floor: Junior high to age 21
Nathan Straus Branch

Second floor: Children’s Room
Nathan Straus Branch

Third floor: Story hour room
Post-Impressionable Years

• 1955: Nathan Straus Branch closes
• Collection moves to newly-opened Donnell Library
• Collection split into Children’s Collection and Nathan Straus Young Adult Collection (aka Teen Central)
• 1970: Central Children’s Room closes, collection moves to Donnell
Today

• 2008: Donnell Library Center closes
• Children’s Collection to move back to 42nd St.
• Fate of Nathan Straus Young Adult Collection undetermined
• Both collections currently in storage
Nathan Straus Today
Books in the Film

[Image of children reading books]

[Image of "The Kittens' ABC"

[Image of "Wee Gillis"]
Books in the Film

![Image of people at a library]

![Image of a book with the title "you among the stars"]
Frances Clarke Sayers (1897-1989)

Wrote Narration for *The Impressionable Years*
Children’s Librarian (NYPL)

- Librarian in the Central Children’s Room (1918-1923)
- Superintendent of Work with Children (1941-1952)
- Worked closely with mentor/adversary Anne Carroll Moore
Author of children’s books

• *Bluebonnets for Lucinda* (1932)
• *Mr. Tidy Paws* (1934)
• *Oscar Lincoln Busby Stokes* (1970)
Sayers’ Role

- Wrote narration
Sayers’ Role

• Approved project

For some time Miss Ernestine Evans has advocated a film showing work with children and has discussed her ideas with Mrs. Sayers who agrees with most of them but not all. The State Department has bought the idea from Miss Evans but with the understanding that the film will be made by the Peter Elgar Productions with The New York Public Library as background.

Mrs. Sayers will clear with Mr. Elgar the episodes to be used in the script—story hours, puppet shows, playground, bookmobile, housing developments.

NYPL memo, July 24, 1951
Sayers’ Role

• Helped develop concept for film

Mr. Peter Elgar
Peter Elgar Productions
270 Park Avenue
New York 17, New York

Dear Mr. Elgar:

Is this any good? Here is a new book which has come to the library just within the month. In a way it does something no other book we ever had does and that is to explain the solar system for younger children in a way that makes it somehow as personal as the great concept can be made.

Anyhow, could we use this book as the book that comes into the Office? It goes out to one of the Branches where they are arranging an exhibition on the stars and the sky. You remember the charts at George Bruce Branch.

Sayers to Elgar, September 1, 1951
Sayers’ Role

• Solicited Carl Sandburg’s involvement
  – Seems to have had prior relationship

I have been here now ten years this very day and I have never wanted anything so much as I want you for this occasion. I do hope you can crowd it in into your schedule. Long ago you wrote in my copy of the Rootabaga Stories, first edition: "Your Zig Zag, Carl Sandburg". I hope that Zig Zag brings you back to what will certainly be the high point of my professional life if you come.

With much affection,

Frances Clarke Sayers
Superintendent of Work with Children

Sayers to Sandburg, August 28, 1951
Peter Elgar: A Bio-Filmography
Peter Frederick “Fritz” Eckhardt
born in Vienna, Austria-Hungary

1905

1931

Mädchen in Uniform
Director: Leontine Sagan
Producer or Co-Producer:
Peter Elgar
1939

“Elgar... made many educational and artistic films in Europe, including religious films for the Vatican.”

TV Guide, 4/2/54

1930s

Peter and Monica Eckhardt arrive in New York

Eckhardt changes name to Peter Fitzgerald Elgar, joins Army Signal Corps

c.1941
JUDSONS HOSTS
at HOUSEWARMING

LA TIMES, 3/2/41

1941

1945

Reunion (version of Le Retour)

Produced by the United States Information Service in cooperation with the US Army Creative Consultant (Original Version): Henri Cartier-Bresson
Supervisor and Editor (Edited Version): Peter Elgar
Peter and Monica Elgar divorce in Palm Beach, FL

**The Pale Horseman**
Produced by the Army Signal Corps
Director: Irving Jacoby
Editor: **Peter Elgar**

**New York Calling**
Director: **Peter Elgar** (?)

“10/24/46: I worked with Peter Elgar on the state department film with the Eyemo: churches in Harlem, a crowd on Wall Street, and a couple of pigeons making love on Watt’s head in the graveyard at Trinity church.”

**Todd Webb, Looking Back**
1947

*My Father’s House (Beit Avi)*
Director: Herbert Kline
Editor: Peter Elgar

1949

Peter marries Dorothy Wallerstein, they travel to Europe

Son Steven born

1950

“The Parable of the Good Samaritan”
Marionette film for television
Produced by the Protestant Radio Commission

Director: Charles Schwep
Editor: Peter Elgar
1951

Peter Elgar Productions formed

1952

The Impressionable Years
Producer & Director: Peter Elgar

Son Michael born
Elgar family travels to Bermuda

1954

Pall Mall Commercial, March ‘54
First color commercial

“Peach of a Shave” aka “Peach & Brush”
Remington commercial
1954 (cont.)

“Beer Belongs”
20-minute ad for US Brewers’ Foundation

“From the Atlantic to the Pacific”
Pabst commercial

1955

Elgar makes at least three trips to England in spring/summer.

Elgar Making Sterling Ads in $500,000 Film Contract

PRODUCTION was launched last week in London by Peter Elgar Productions, New York, on what was described as “the largest single commercial contract yet awarded a single producer.” It covers 109 filmed commercials for Sterling Drugs Inc. to be produced at a cost of about $500,000.

The filming will be done in England through Elgar’s international affiliates in London. In Film Commercials Ltd. More than 200 sets and exteriors will be used in some 470 scenes according to Peter Elgar, president of Elgar Productions.

The contract was awarded to Elgar by Decker-Fitzgerald-Sample, New York, agency for Sterling. The commercials will be placed on spot basis and on programs in the U. S., starting in the fall, and will promote Sterling products, including Bayer Aspirin, Philip’s Milk of Magnesia, Energizer cleaning fluid and Dr. Lyon’s tooth powder.

Broadcasting, 7/18/55
1956

Peter and Dorothy Elgar divorce in Limestone, AL

Peter embroiled in engagement scandal

"Telephone Store"
AT&T commercial

"Surf"
Proctor & Gamble commercial

1960

"Feel Really Clean"
Zest Soap commercial
1961

*Florida Folk Festival and Creek and Seminole History*
23-minute film

1962

Peter marries Ruth Woods

1963

Elgar closes Peter Elgar Productions due to declining business, joins MPO Videotronics
Invited by Gerald Hirschfeld

1965

Peter travels to Paris to “guide French broadcasting system on appropriate TV commercials for that country.”

*Broadcasting, 3/65*
Peter Elgar dies


EMANUEL—Phyllis K., beloved wife of Max.

New York Times, 2/23/68
Morris Mamorsky (1910-2003)

Composed and Conducted the Score for *The Impressionable Years*
Early Career

• Member of the WPA-funded Composers’ Forum-Laboratory (1935)
• Trained at Yale University School of Music (1937)
• Composer for the Bennington School of Dance (1937-1938)
• Musical Director for the Humphrey-Weidman Dance Group (1937-1938)
Radio

• Hired as a staff composer by NBC in 1940
  – Words at War (1943-1944)
  – Here’s to Youth (January 1944-May 1944)
  – Arthur Hopkins Presents (April 1944-July 1944)
  – The Eternal Light (1945-1948)
  – Miscellaneous programs produced in cooperation with the American Jewish Committee
Television

• *The Philco Television Playhouse* (1948-1949)
  – live dramatic series

• AT&T commercial (1956)
  – Produced by Peter Elgar
Film

• *With These Hands* (1950)
  – propaganda film for the ILGWU.
  – Cinematographer: Gerald Hirschfeld

• *The Parable of the Good Samaritan* (1950)
  – Producer: Peter Elgar
Henry Fonda - Narrator

- Acting on Broadway.
- Very likely rehearsing or performing *Point of No Return* on Broadway when he recorded narration for *The Impressionable Years*.
- Narrated a few other educational films in the early 1950s.
The Cast

Kathleen McDonnell

Beth

Peter
The Cast

Mario

Linda (with Kathy)

Margaret Deegan
  Eileen McNiff
  Rosemary Mele

Miss Schwartz
Film Status

- NYPL seems to be doing acceptable job with prints.
- One unofficial copy on VHS at NYPL.
- Copies in OCLC at NYPL, University of North Texas, California State University-Chico, and Western Cape Provincial Library Service (South Africa). NYPL has both cuts, others have 30-minute cut (on record).
Preservation Recommendations

• Improve cataloguing on file of materials on *The Impressionable Years*.

• Loose papers in a folder, historical files listed on one paper as “in closet.”

• Access