

Brian Cruz

Introduction to Moving Image Archiving and Preservation

Prof. Howard Besser

### **J.R. Bray & Tommy José: One Man's Mission to Preserve the Films of the Bray Studio**

“Who created the first animated films?” If you were to pose that question to a cinema studies student or someone with an interest in film history, you’re likely to hear names like J. Stuart Blackton, Émile Cohl, and Winsor McCay, and a convincing argument can be made for any one of those men. One name you’re not as likely to hear, however, is John Randolph Bray. His name is virtually unknown today, despite having created the world’s first animation studio<sup>1</sup> and pioneering the mass production of animated short films. The Bray Studio was the leading producer of animated films in the latter half of the 1910s, but its fame was supplanted the by studios founded in the 1920s by the likes of Walt Disney, Pat Sullivan (Felix the Cat), and former Bray employees Paul Terry, Max Fleischer, and Walter Lantz. No serious attempts were made to compile the extant work of the Bray Studio until a young film collector and archivist named Tommy José Stathes began to acquire 16mm prints in the 1990s. Stathes later began curating public screenings of the films from Bray and other early animation studios throughout the New York metropolitan area, reintroducing audiences to these forgotten cartoons. Now Stathes is collaborating with an independent distributor to issue these films on DVD and Blu-ray, bringing them into homes worldwide. What follows is the story of a film pioneer and the archivist dedicated to preserving his legacy. This is the story of J.R. Bray and Tommy José Stathes.

---

<sup>1</sup> The Barré Studio, founded by Raoul Barré and William Nolan in 1914, has also been called the first animation studio.

John Randolph Bray (1879-1978) has been called the Henry Ford of animation.<sup>2</sup> He was a cartoonist whose strip *Little Johnny and the Teddy Bears* was featured in *Judge* magazine beginning in 1907.<sup>3</sup> He began experimenting with animation after seeing Winsor McCay's first two films *Little Nemo* (1911) and *How a Mosquito Operates* (1912), and after several months he completed his first film *The Artist's Dream*<sup>4</sup> in 1913. The film intercut live-action footage of Bray at his drawing board with animation of a dachshund eating a plate of sausages. It ends in a similar manner to McCay's second film, with the dachshund exploding from over-consumption just as McCay's mosquito did a year earlier. Bray took the film to Charles Pathé, who was impressed with the work and signed Bray to a contract calling for six cartoons to be delivered in six months.<sup>5</sup> Realizing the need to streamline the labor-intensive production of animation, Bray refined the techniques he utilized in *The Artist's Dream* and filed for a patent on January 9, 1914, which was granted eight months later.<sup>6</sup> Bray's technique separated the static background drawings from the moving characters by "printing multiple copies of the background for each scene, drawing the characters on those printed sheets, and scraping away [erasing] those parts of the background that the character disturbed."<sup>7</sup>

Bray and a few hired assistants convened at his farm in upstate New York, where they completed the first film for Pathé. Released on January 14, 1914, *Colonel Heeza Liar in Africa* is

---

<sup>2</sup> Crafton, page 137

<sup>3</sup> Crafton, page 140

<sup>4</sup> Also known as *The Dachshund and The Sausage*.

<sup>5</sup> Crafton, page 144

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.google.com/patents/US1107193>

<sup>7</sup> Barrier, page 12

considered the first commercially-released animated film to be part of a series, rather than a vaudeville act or a one-time endeavor.<sup>8</sup> Six more films starring Heeza Liar were released in 1914. Bray applied for a second patent on July 26, 1914, describing a technique for applying gray tones to his films by painting onto the back side of translucent sheets.<sup>9</sup> It's notable that neither of Bray's patents utilized transparent celluloid; that groundbreaking method was patented by another cartoonist, Earl Hurd, who filed it on December 19, 1914.<sup>10</sup> The use of a static background overlaid with characters inked and painted onto layers of celluloid became the standard process for animation until computers entered the scene in the 1990s.

Bray Studios Incorporated was formed in December 1914, with its offices located at 23 East 26<sup>th</sup> Street in Manhattan.<sup>11</sup> One of the first artists Bray hired for his studio was Earl Hurd, who brought his "cel" animation process with him. Together they formed the Bray-Hurd Process Company, consolidating the major patents on animation and essentially creating a monopoly that required competitors to license the process from them, similar to what the Motion Picture Patents Company had done with live-action film.<sup>12</sup> Bray continued to receive licensing fees until these patents expired in 1933.

Earl Hurd also brought his character Bobby Bumps, who had appeared in a few animated shorts for Universal, to the Bray Studio. Leonard Maltin would later write that the Bobby Bumps

---

<sup>8</sup> Maltin, page 7

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.google.com/patents/US1159740>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.google.com/patents/US1143542>

<sup>11</sup> Crafton, page 148

<sup>12</sup> Crafton, pages 153-154

cartoons were “among the most mature, most well-conceived cartoons of the silent era— certainly the best work done in the mid- to late teens.”<sup>13</sup> Other series produced at the Bray Studio included C. T. Anderson’s *Police Dog*, fashion artist C. Allan Gilbert’s *Silhouette Fantasies*, Alexander Leggett’s *The Trick Kids*, F. M. Follett’s *Quacky Doodles*, and Wallace Carlson’s trio of *Otto Luck*, *Goodrich Dirt*, and *Us Fellers*.<sup>14</sup> J.R. Bray himself stopped animating in 1916, turning the *Colonel Heeza Liar* series over to sports cartoonist Leslie Elton.<sup>15</sup> But it would be animators Paul Terry and Max Fleischer who would go on to the greatest success, both forming their own prominent studios after leaving Bray.

Paul Terry joined the Bray Studio in 1915, albeit under duress. He had applied for his own animation patent, and then was threatened by Bray with a lawsuit unless Terry agreed to join his studio.<sup>16</sup> Terry created Farmer Al Falfa and directed 11 cartoons with the character in 1916 before entering war service in 1917. In 1921 Terry founded his own studio, Fables Pictures, Inc, which produced an astounding 430 *Aesop’s Fables* cartoons from 1921 to 1929, several of which featured Farmer Al Falfa.<sup>17</sup> Terry continued using the cel process, prompting a lawsuit from Bray which wouldn’t be settled until 1926, when Terry finally agreed to purchase a license.<sup>18</sup> Terry left Fables Pictures in 1929 and formed another studio, Terrytoons, which would

---

<sup>13</sup> Maltin page 19

<sup>14</sup> Maltin, page 20

<sup>15</sup> Crafton page 149

<sup>16</sup> <http://bryanimation.weebly.com/farmer-al-falfa.html>

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Crafton, page 157

become one of the major studios of animation's golden age, responsible for creating characters such as Heckle and Jeckle and Mighty Mouse.

Max Fleischer, art editor at *Popular Science* magazine, patented a device called the rotoscope in 1917.<sup>19</sup> It created realistic movement in animation by allowing an artist to trace live-action footage. His first experiments, featuring rotoscoped drawings of a clown (actually his brother, Dave Fleischer, in a clown suit), attracted Bray's attention, and he hired Fleischer to produce one cartoon a month. But before any films could be produced, Bray tasked Fleischer to work on training films for the U.S. armed forces, which had just entered World War I.<sup>20</sup> After the Armistice, Fleischer returned to work on his rotoscoped series, now called *Out of the Inkwell*, releasing the first film in 1918. The series, which featured the clown (later named Koko) interacting with a live-action cartoonist (played by Max Fleischer himself) proved immensely popular with both audiences and critics. Fleischer left Bray in 1921 and formed his own studio, continuing the *Out of the Inkwell* series throughout the 1920s. In the 1930s the Fleischer studio began producing cartoons featuring Betty Boop and Popeye, who remain among the most enduring characters in animation history.

The training films commissioned by the armed forces proved successful, and the Bray Studio began receiving orders from the government, private industry, and educational institutions for more films.<sup>21</sup> Some of these, such as *The Submarine Mine Layer* (1917), were released

---

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.google.com/patents/US1242674>

<sup>20</sup> Maltin, page 85

<sup>21</sup> Crafton, page 158

theatrically. The studio expanded by creating technical and education branches, which handled the production of those films separately from the theatrical cartoons.<sup>22</sup>

Savvy distribution deals ensured that the Bray Studio's theatrical product was seen by large audiences throughout the country. In 1915 he left Pathé and signed a contract with Paramount that called for a new cartoon to be delivered every week starting in January 1916.<sup>23</sup> By February 1917 Bray had enough capital to purchase a controlling interest the weekly *Paramount Pictograph*, renaming it the *Paramount-Bray Pictograph*. In June 1919 Bray broke with Paramount and formed the Bray Pictures Corporation with \$1.5 million in capitalization, then in August signed a distribution agreement with Samuel Goldwyn for what was now called the *Goldwyn-Bray Pictograph*.<sup>24</sup> Earl Hurd decided to leave Bray and continued releasing his Bobby Bumps cartoons through Paramount.<sup>25</sup> In October, Bray entered into an agreement with William Randolph Hearst's International Film Service (IFS) which brought their animation studio and three Hearst properties—Krazy Kat, The Shenanigan Kids (aka The Katzenjammer Kids) and Jerry on the Job—under the oversight the Bray Studio, allowing them to increase their output to two cartoons a week.<sup>26</sup> In 1920 alone, the Bray Studio released over 120 cartoons.<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> <http://brayanimation.weebly.com/educational-animation.html>

<sup>23</sup> Crafton page 157

<sup>24</sup> Crafton page 160

<sup>25</sup> Barrier page 21

<sup>26</sup> Gerstein, David. Bray and International Film Service. <http://brayanimation.weebly.com/international-film-service-introduction.html>

<sup>27</sup> <http://brayanimation.weebly.com/complete-filmography.html>

This increase in production would prove to be short lived, however. In 1921 Max Fleischer left Bray to form his own studio, taking *Out of the Inkwell* with him. The IFS-Bray deal fell apart when Bray became delinquent in reimbursing IFS for their costs. An arrangement was made where, rather than reimburse IFS directly, the Bray Studio agreed to produce two series that were based on the Hearst properties Judge Rummy and Happy Hooligan, with production on Jerry on the Job eventually resuming as well.<sup>28</sup> This arrangement lasted until 1922, when the Colonel Heeza Liar series, which had ended in 1917, was brought out of retirement under director Vernon Stallings for a new series that combined live-action with animation, as *Out of the Inkwell* had done. When interest in this new incarnation of Heeza Liar faded, Stallings was replaced by young animator Walter Lantz, who introduced several new series to the studio: Dinky Doodles in 1924, Unnatural History in 1925, and Pete the Pup in 1926. While Lantz would later achieve great success at his own studio with characters such as Woody Woodpecker, he wasn't able to return the Bray Studio to its former glory. After its incredible peak in 1920, fewer than two dozen Bray cartoons were released each year from 1921-1927. The distribution deal with Goldwyn had ended in 1921, forcing Bray to release his films on a state's rights basis for several months before eventually signing a distribution deal with the W. W. Hodkinson Company, then moving to the Standard Cinema Corporation, and finally to Joseph P. Kennedy's Film Booking Offices of America.<sup>29</sup> Bray's interest in theatrical cartoons had faded away completely by 1927, and he directed his studio's attention exclusively towards the profitable educational and instructional films, producing them until his retirement in the late 1960s.

---

<sup>28</sup> Gerstein, David. Bray and International Film Service. <http://brayanimation.weebly.com/international-film-service-introduction.html>

<sup>29</sup> <http://brayanimation.weebly.com/distribution-history.html>

The Bray Studio's cartoons did not disappear from the public consciousness immediately. In 1932, the nitrate negatives for many Bray cartoons were sold to the Keystone Manufacturing Company of Boston, who offered 16mm prints for home use up to the mid-1940s.<sup>30</sup> In 1948 Bray bought the negatives back from Keystone—except for a few which had already deteriorated—and produced new prints for television distribution, adding soundtracks and replacing the original main and end titles.<sup>31</sup> Being among the few animated films available for television in its early days, the Bray cartoons were played frequently for several years. But by the late 1950s sound cartoons from other studios became available, and the Bray cartoons were no longer desirable. In many cases these 16mm prints for home and television use are the only remaining elements that survive.<sup>32</sup> The cartoons faded from memory, occasionally being referenced in books on animation history, but remaining inaccessible to the public... until a young film collector came along and decided to change that.

Tommy José Stathes was born in 1989 in Flushing, Queens, New York. He was fascinated with both animation and history from an early age, and began collecting VHS tapes that featured prints of public domain cartoons, eventually amassing nearly 800 of them. Of Mice and Magic, Leonard Maltin's book on the history of animation, exposed him to animation of the silent era and the Bray Studio in particular. At one point Tommy's father gave him a few 16mm Castle Films prints of various cartoons, and though he had no way of projecting them, he was fascinated by aesthetic of physical film and the small pictures that could be seen within it. Later,

---

<sup>30</sup> <http://bryanimation.weebly.com/distribution-history.html>

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.



Tommy brought the films to his godparent's house, where his godfather remembered that he still had an old 16mm projector. They went down to the basement, and Tommy saw his films projected for the first time. It was a moment that would change his life forever. "I had to focus on that from now on, because I loved the way these things looked and the technology involved", he said when I spoke to him in November 2014.<sup>33</sup>

Tommy began visiting antique shops and flea markets, purchasing any prints of early animation he could find and taking them to his godfather's to view them. By the time he was thirteen, Tommy had purchased a Kodak Pageant projector from eBay and was able to project film on his own, and he later acquired a Tobin telecine in order to make video transfers. eBay soon became his primary source for acquiring prints, with Tommy using the money he received as birthday and Christmas gifts to make purchases. He met other film collectors through internet message boards and started trading and selling some of his prints in order to obtain rarer, more expensive cartoons. He even began acquiring film prints in other gauges, simply because the film was rare and unavailable in 16mm. How to actually play a film in say, 28mm, was a problem for another day.

It wasn't long before Tommy realized that film prints were overtaking his bedroom. He began storing in them in a walk-in closet, which today holds more than 1200 reels of film, organized by studio and year of production. He maintains an Excel spreadsheet that records the title, year, studio, condition and price paid for each film, though he hopes to create a more detailed database in the near future.

---

<sup>33</sup> Conversation with Tommy José Stathes, November 30, 2014. All other information about Tommy is derived from this conversation.

The relationships Tommy formed online proved to be extremely valuable. He became friends with animation historian David Gerstein, who brought Tommy along with him to do research at the Library of Congress. It was there that Tommy met nitrate vault manager Geo. Willeman, who Tommy considers a father figure. A mutually beneficial relationship was formed in which Tommy would donate rare or deteriorating nitrate elements to the Library for preservation, who would then provide him with a new print. Bray cartoons Tommy has donated to LoC include *Sufficiency* (1919) featuring Jerry on the Job, *The Bootblack* (1920) featuring Happy Hooligan, and *Col. Heeza Liar, Detective* (1923). Tommy has obtained copies of other rare cartoons from the Library to add to his collection, and has worked with them to identify some of the films on their possession and prioritize films in need of preservation. He considers LoC to be best and easiest archive to work with.

Dino Everett of USC's Hugh Hefner Archive purchased some 8mm films that Tommy had put up for sale, leading to another important relationship. Tommy describes Everett as a big brother. Everett visited Tommy at his home and brought along a 28mm projector, enabling Tommy to finally view the rare 28mm prints he had collected.

Animation historian Jerry Beck has also encouraged Tommy's efforts, and visited his home to see the collection first hand. When Beck programmed an animation block for Turner Classic Movies in 2012, he utilized several films from Tommy's collection. This was the first opportunity for Tommy to do restoration work on some of the films, collaborating with historian David Gerstein to recreate original title cards and commission new musical scores, and with independent DVD distributor Steve Stanchfield to create new HD scans with image stabilization and dirt & dust cleanup.

In June 2009, Tommy held his first public screening of films from his collection, which he billed as the Tom Stathes Cartoon Carnival. At first they were modest gatherings in small venues, with around 25 people in attendance. Later events had well over 100 people attending. Tommy has held over 50 public screenings so far, including two at BAMcinématek as part of their annual Animation Block Party event.

Copyright has not been an issue for Tommy so far. Most of his prints are of cartoons in the public domain, and he takes care not to use trademarked characters like Mickey Mouse in the promotional material for his screenings. He doesn't worry about the few cartoons he screens which are still under copyright, as the rights holders to those films are either unaware of their ownership or completely indifferent to those properties. Somebody might still own the trademark for Farmer Al Falfa, but they haven't complained so far.

Tommy considers his collection a repository or safe house for rare animated films. While in no means an archival facility, thus far Tommy has had few problems with films deteriorating under his care. Bulk purchases do occasionally include a deteriorating film, which he donates to the Library of Congress or has an HD transfer made with the hope of producing a film print of it in the future. One of the biggest drawbacks to maintaining a private archive is a lack of funding. If he had the resources, Tommy would like to store his collection under archival conditions, be able to perform digital restoration on more films, and create new negatives and prints from those restorations. He is actively looking for ways to monetize his collection and make some of those goals possible.

Tommy began selling homemade DVDs of films from his collection in 2005. While not a major source of income, the DVDs do enable interested parties throughout the world to view his

rare cartoons. Tommy's relationship with distributor Steve Stanchfield has led to the production of Blu-ray entitled "Cartoon Roots", released in December 2014. It is Tommy's hope that this and future releases will provide the income required to further his activities. He is also considering making his films available to stock footage libraries as an additional source of income.

In October 2014 Tommy appeared with Robert Osbourne on Turner Classic Movies to present an hour of Bray cartoons from his collection. While he had already had several articles written about him and had appeared on television previously, this was by far the biggest exposure Tommy and his collection had ever received. Soon after his appearance he was deluged with requests for cartoons and received several offers to acquire films that he might be missing.

Major archives are not actively looking to acquire early animated films, and often aren't even aware of what they have. This is where a private archivist such as Tommy proves his value. When a collection is overseen by a single individual, many things become easier to do, particularly when it comes to providing access. There's no bureaucracy, red tape or mystery involved in viewing his films, as one might find at an archive or university. If you want to see one of Tommy's films, he finds a way to make it available to you.

Tommy hasn't formally decided what would become of his collection should he meet an untimely demise. He would like to have his family benefit from what he has compiled. Ultimately, he would like his collection to reside at the Library of Congress or another interested archive or educational institution, one that would make the films accessible to the public.

Tommy's mission statement is to physically reunite as much early animation as possible in one location, use that collection to entertain and educate others about animation history, and ensure that audiences worldwide are able to see these films. In 2011, Tommy and several contributors founded The Bray Animation Project, a website featuring a comprehensive history and filmography of the studio and its characters. He has now acquired around 225 of the approximately 540 cartoons produced by Bray, and identified about 50 more in the hands of archives and private collectors, indicating a survival rate of over 50 percent,<sup>34</sup> an impressive number for films of that era. Tommy hopes his legacy will be preserving the cartoons of Bray and other studios for future generations. It's hard to argue that he hasn't done that already, we all will benefit from his efforts.

### **Bibliography**

Barrier, Michael. Hollywood Cartoons. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Crafton, Donald. Before Mickey. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1982.

Gerstein, David. *Bray and International Film Service*. The Bray Animation Project, 2011.

Maltin, Leonard. Of Mice and Magic. New York: Penguin Books, 1980.

---

<sup>34</sup> <http://brayanimation.weebly.com/the-project.html>