

MOVIE SHOW
(A Story for Lincoln's Birthday)
By Arthur Porges

THERE- THAT'S THE END. Looks like some very bad abstract art, or maybe Mark Twain's cat throwing its famous fit in a platter of tomatoes! If only I'd had the good sense to make a copy immediately, before the cheap film deteriorated, but who could have suspected the old man would do his own amateurish processing instead of sending the movie out? Obviously, he was a very paranoid sort, certain that "They" would steal it, or even come after him with a net on glimpsing his work.

Well, I've kicked myself enough; it won't help, so I'll just give you the facts. Who knows? Maybe someday they'll dig up new data about what really happened in that courtroom, and confirm what I have to believe is true, however wild that is. But, frankly, I doubt it; Elmer Grain was a unique genius, the kind we're lucky to get once a century. Anyhow, here's what happened.

I had some business in Springfield, Illinois, the state capital. Some relations of mine, people I hadn't seen for years, live there, so naturally I looked them up. The only one who matters in this story is my nephew, Joel, a kid of twelve. One of his hobbies is photography, and after a magnificent dinner he set up a projector to show us some of his home movies. The boy's a fine technician for his age, that was clear, but not very imaginative. All he'd taken were shots of the Mississippi, Tom Sawyer's cave, and other familiar scenes of the Mark Twain country.

But then, after about twenty minutes, there came a bit of film that must have been spliced in, and that caught my eye, which had been glazing over. It was some shots of a courtroom, with sunlight streaming in, yet the focusing was pretty bad, the film jerky, the color badly off. So it definitely wasn't Joel's careful work. Besides, it had a soundtrack, and my nephew's movie was silent, being just a scenic take. Come to think of it, I don't really know how they get sound on a movie or camcorder.

But getting back to the strange addition, the place was really packed, and everybody just dripping with perspiration. A Southern Illinois summer can be worse than one in India or on the Equator. I guessed from a magnificent old elm visible w barely w through the dirty windows that the film might have been made in June or July.

There were three people on trial, it seemed, and a judge, a prosecutor, and, of course a defense attorney— or a pair of them; I couldn't decide. Most of this wasn't clear to me at the time, but only much later, as you'll see.

When the chief prosecutor stood up— unfolded himself, almost— to well over six lean feet, obviously the tallest person there by far, my nephew snorted derisively, and said, "That's supposed to be Lincoln: You heard the judge call him

Mr. Lincoln. I wonder where Elmer dug him up!” I wasn’t so negative; there was a kind of resemblance. It occurred to me at the time that there were still enough tall, lanky, loose-jointed young men in Illinois to fit the part.

The sound was awful, and Joel explained that he’d had to improvise by cleverly hooking up to a not-very-good radio. And the actors were no better. We’re used to the slick stuff, modern movies with high-tech, surround-sound equipment, which has subtly replaced the slow, stumbling, inarticulate conversations of real life. These people swallowed many of their words, so we couldn’t really tell much about the trial. I should add that the man who played Lincoln had a high-pitched voice nothing at all like the organ-tones we’re used to in classic movies. And the cast, as a whole, had no sense of theater; they moved about aimlessly, blocking each other from the camera, and with none of that controlled grace of professional actors. Lincoln seemed particularly awkward, a clumsy bumpkin. You’d think he was going to pitch forward on his nose any minute. I felt relieved when he sat down next to his partner, whispering something that made the fellow roar with laughter. Yet, in spite of all this, or maybe because of it, the events had a remarkable effect of realism. Looking at the crowded courtroom, I couldn’t help wondering what had motivated the old recluse to round up so many extras, and, presumably, pay them, to make this film.

The three accused men were evidently supposed to be terrified of lynching, to judge from the hostility of the spectators who jammed the sweltering room. Certainly, they acted like frightened criminals, huddling together, white-faced, with wide eyes that repeatedly scanned the jury.

The prosecutor was quite ferocious, and hammed up his part, describing in terms no judge would permit today their callous murder of a man named Fisher. He was deliberately inciting the mob, I felt, and it was touch-and-go whether the accused trio would live to get an official sentence.

While the prosecutor’s diatribe was going on, Lincoln just sat there, placid, almost smug, a faint smile on his craggy face, which was ugly, yet somehow endearing, so that I suddenly decided Mr. Grain hadn’t done such poor casting after all. No beard then, of course; this was the young country lawyer, nothing at all, though, like Henry Fonda. He didn’t seem at all concerned about mounting a defense.

Unfortunately, the film broke off long before the trial ended, almost before it was even well under way. There came the slapping of the tag-end against the reel, and Joel turned on the lights.

I immediately cornered the boy and questioned him about the odd bit of movie. It seems the film had been made by an old recluse, one Elmer Grain, who, as I noted earlier, must have been some kind of a genius, who turned out in his garage a host of crazy inventions that probably worked well enough, but had no important

applications or economic value, except for one, a very versatile plastic. That he had sold for a big enough sum to let him devote his last years to whatever interested him, which apparently was almost everything nobody else cared about.

Anyhow, when the old guy died in a fire, Joel found the blistered, blackened tin of film in the Dumpster, and took it home, where he figured out, quite ingeniously, I felt, how to run it and even get words out of the sound-track, a feat that still baffles me, since marks on the edge, near the sprocket-holes, were all he had to work with. That, and a radio. But when it comes to such things, I'm as the brutes that perish, as the Bible—I think —puts it.

At first Joel got no sense from the movie. He guessed it was meant to be a "story" of some kind, but with only a fragment left unburnt, was unable to reconstruct the plot. By a lucky chance, one of his uncles, a history professor at the University of Illinois, came to town, was shown the film, and was cautiously approving of it. He took a dim view of the casting, Lincoln's dialect was overdone, and his suit neither clean nor well-fitted. He was also put off by all the sweating as uncalled-for realism. In short, said the professor, a strictly amateur job of movie-making.

All this increased my own curiosity; I was strangely fascinated by the short film. I couldn't see Grain producing it just for fun; it was inconsistent with what Joel had told me about him; so directly on my return to Chicago I made a point of researching the trial that the old man had appropriated for his film.

The case was an odd one, well-known to Lincoln scholars. It involved the alleged murder of Fisher by the three Traylor brothers. The prosecutor was an ambitious politico named Lamborn. The defense was handled by the firm of Lincoln and Logan.

Well, there was a good reason for Lincoln's smugness while Lamborn waved his arms and flung reckless accusations. Fisher wasn't dead, but just suffering from amnesia, safe in a doctor's care, as Lincoln knew well before the trial. So he just let the prosecutor noose himself, then coolly dropped the gallows' trapdoor, breaking the man's legal neck, so to speak.

But the Traylor case was not the crux of the matter to me; the film itself was, so I went back to Springfield and had Joel run it Off again, several times, in fact. I wondered again how Grain had found so many extras, fitted them out in clothes the professor admitted were reasonably vintage, and even found an old courthouse—there are still plenty dating from the 1840s—to film in.

It wasn't until about the fifth showing that I spotted something highly significant as a clue to the whole mystery. So far, for obvious reasons, I'd hardly noticed the few objects visible through the dirty windows, but now, running out of clues, I carefully examined them. There was that huge elm I've mentioned, a puzzle

in itself; disease has almost eliminated those trees. And, toward the middle of the movie, some birds fluttered down to alight on its branches. It was very atypical of me to overlook them all this time, since I'm a longtime birder, a member of the Audubon Society in good standing. No doubt it was because so much was going on in the courthouse.

Now there are mighty few birds east of the Rockies I can't identify at a glance, but one peek at these shattered my ego. I did a quick, incredulous double-take. There were about forty of them huddled together on the lower branches. They resembled ordinary doves, but just didn't have the right markings. True, they were not in good focus, and the windows far from clean, as noted, but any ornithologist worthy of the name, thanks to Roger Peterson's splendid guidebooks, can tell a bird from its outline, color-scheme, wing-patterns, and similar attributes; only a glimpse is needed. Yet these had me stumped, and I made poor Joel run the film yet again.

Then, as I watched with new intensity, my heart began to pound wildly. Those dovelike forms wheeling and finally alighting in the huge elm suggested something so exciting—and incredible—that I refused to believe my eyes. Joel was gaping at me, but I didn't even try to explain—how could I, when I doubted my own senses?

Almost in a daze, I ran out of the house and rushed to the main library. There I rounded up five of the best, most comprehensive reference books available, even one with Audubon prints. It wasn't an easy puzzle to resolve, because I forced myself to be skeptical, to seek irrefutable evidence. The diagrams, sketches, and careful descriptions of expert naturalists should have been enough, but if not, a faded photo showing a lone bird on its perch in a zoo clinched the matter. It established the truth beyond further question. Fantastic as it must seem, the birds that clustered in that old elm were passenger pigeons! Once they had swarmed in uncounted millions throughout the Mississippi Valley, flocks so large they actually blotted out the sun for hours. But they were massacred for food and sport; the magnificent forests that fed and sheltered them were destroyed, and the last of the species died alone, a pathetic little figure in the Cincinnati Zoological Garden, on September 1, 1914, at the age of twenty-two years.

How Grain caught the trial on film—some kind of Time Machine, apparently; what a loss!—we'll never know; and the film itself, incomplete, badly processed, scorched, and mishandled, is now only the colored blurs you saw. The setting, the extras, Lincoln himself, those could have been faked, of course, but not the pigeons—no way!

And looking back on all of it now, I'm not sure which was the more moving, bringing me closer to tears than I've been since I was a child: Lincoln, as he truly was, or that flock of doomed passenger pigeons circling gracefully to alight on the branches of an elm tree in Springfield, Illinois, in the summer of 1841.

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By Arthur Porges

Arthur Porges was born in 1915 and sold his first story in 1951. He gave up his career as a college math teacher in 1957 and has gone on to publish approximately three hundred SF and detective stories. (By his count, his 1953 F&SF story "The Ruum," has been reprinted thirty times.) He notes also that he contributed a few minor discoveries to the field of mathematics, including a novel method of encryption. Mr. Porges underwent quadruple bypass heart surgery last year, but seems to be recovering just fine—he published a story recently in Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine and has another one due out soon in Cricket magazine. This new story pays tribute to our sixteenth President, and to things we've lost.