

1937 Lewisburg: The Movie

by

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History happens every day, all the time. All it takes is a look back, and we find change. The question “What was it like then?” can often be answered with surprising clarity. Such is the case for 1937 in Lewisburg.¹

Back in the midst of Union County’s Bicentennial celebration, a remarkable artifact surfaced in the archives of the Union County Historical Society. It was a 12” reel of film, similar in the format to that found in the film *1937 in Mifflinburg and Western Union County*, which the Historical Society made available to the public in 2013.² The format was so similar that one can safely deduce that the company responsible for the Mifflinburg production was also clearly at work in Lewisburg. The 1937 Lewisburg film



A member of the William Cameron Engine Company sports the purple and white parade uniform. The parade unit marched in Lewisburg and county celebrations. In 1874, William Cameron, a wealthy Lewisburg banker and businessman, presented to the Borough of Lewisburg a new Silsby steam engine, the most advanced fire-fighting equipment of its time. This gift, worth \$10,000, was given at a time when the panic of 1873 was still fresh in everyone’s mind. The fire company was named in Cameron’s honor.

¹ All photos in this article are out-takes from the CD.

² The Mifflinburg film, *1937 in Mifflinburg and Western Union County*, is available as a DVD for purchase from the Society at its office in the Union County Courthouse, room 123; \$16, plus \$3 shipping and handling.

was in much better physical condition than the Mifflinburg reels, and the leader piece of the film was still intact, which identified the production company: Amateur Services Production.

An Internet search referenced the work of Caroline Frick, Assistant Professor at the University of Texas at Austin, and she is also identified as the founder and director of the Texas Archive of the Moving Image. An excerpt of her earlier work, *Itinerant Filmography in North America* [*The Moving Image*, Spring, 2010] listed Amateur Services Production and its series, “See Yourself and Your Town in the Movies.” The company, with offices in Lancaster, PA, and probably in other cities as well, was active from about 1930 to 1950. For Pennsylvania, this directory of films lists the following towns as having films in its series: Aliquippa (1937), Bellefonte (1941), California [PA] (1935), Hamburg (no date), Hatboro (1939-1940), Lansford (1939), and New Holland (1939). Gettysburg (1940) is listed with the note, “The local Lions Club chapter canceled the contract with Amateur Services Production before the film’s completion.” Professor Frick was excited to learn that the Lewisburg and Mifflinburg films also exist.



H.B. Heimbach Lumber Company was located at Sixth and St. Louis streets. Here the truck driver, having a load of several wooden planks, receives instructions regarding delivery.

Professor Frick referred me to Martin L. Johnson, assistant professor in the Department of Media Studies at the Catholic University of America. In a subsequent email to me, Johnson wrote, “[M]y sense is that Amateur Services Production was a

company that provided the resources and training necessary for aspiring itinerant filmmakers to produce local films in small towns. An advance person would go from town to town seeking to establish contracts with local civic groups to produce a ‘See Yourself and Your Town in the Movies’ film in their town. Once the contract was signed, they would send a camera operator to film the town, and the film would then be exhibited in a local theater, likely using a 16mm projector brought into the theater for that night’s screening.”

The lid of the canister housing the Lewisburg film has an address label naming Commercial and Home Movies Services with an address in Allentown, PA. According to Johnson, that company probably processed the film but had no role in its production. Johnson also mentioned the filmmakers associated with Amateur Services Production “did not promote themselves in local newspapers, making it difficult to determine who was involved in actually making the films.”

One find leads to another. I located another copy of the Lewisburg film in the Bucknell University archives. Bucknell’s copy was sharper than the Historical Society copy, perhaps due to the climate controls used at Bucknell’s archival storage. These days a DVD is much more usable than a 16 mm film. So, with help and permission from Isabella O’Neill, I used the Bucknell copy for the final digitizing, done for me by Scott McVicar Productions of Lewisburg.



The Roxy movie theater was located on North Third Street. It was a place where younger town teens often met up with Bucknell students. The meeting was not always friendly, and stories abound of movie-goers on the main floor being spit on by those sitting in the balcony. The Roxy closed in 1960.

I was told of another copy once owned by William Heim. Several older residents of Lewisburg told me that they had seen the film many years ago. No one identified where it was shown. Lewisburg's Lions Club has no record of contacting Amateur Services Production. At this time, it is unknown who in Lewisburg contracted with Amateur Services Production to produce the film.

Both the *1937 in Lewisburg* and *1937 in Mifflinburg and Western Union County* films use the same format and protocol. Both emphasize filming people and getting as many people as possible on film. The photographer films students as they exit their schools, workers in front of factories, and owners and their employees in front of their shops and stores. Both films show a fire drill in the town and include a "victim" being driven off in an ambulance. Both film a soccer game. In Mifflinburg, the photographer did substantial footage of Chestnut Street. In Lewisburg it was of Market Street.



Market Street is Lewisburg's main shopping and business area, with grocery, hardware, and dry goods stores as well as shops and restaurants. Lewisburg's signature three-globed street lights were installed in 1918, originally from the Susquehanna River to Eighth Street and later extended to side streets as they developed. Local casting of the iron standards was initially done by the Laurelton Foundry and later by foundries in Watsontown, Bloomsburg, and Danville.

The Lewisburg film's emphasis on people is perhaps even more apparent than that of the Mifflinburg film. The photographer, while photographing a building, will turn suddenly to film passers-by, a mailman, or people working near the building, and then continue filming the building. There is no scene of the Susquehanna River, no bridges, and no railroad stations, a remarkable omission given Lewisburg's history. All

scenes were filmed outside; there are no interior shots. Individuals were filmed whether they liked it or not in a series of candid, unstaged street scenes. Some hurry away, some grin and pose.

Schools figure prominently: North Ward, South Ward, Linntown, and Lewisburg High School. Each student attending school on the day of the filming is shown leaving the school building. Bucknell's Old Main, Literature Building, Memorial Stadium, and



The Federal Building, at the southwest corner of Market and Third streets, was erected in 1932 and dedicated in 1934. It housed the federal district court and the Lewisburg post office. The court moved to Williamsport in 1987. Bucknell University now owns the building, which houses its development offices. The post office remains on the ground floor.

Christy Mathewson Gateway make their appearance as do the First Baptist Church, Beaver Memorial United Methodist Church, the First Presbyterian Church, and, glimpsed in the background, Sacred Heart Catholic Church. The campus of what is now RiverWoods is shown along with its orphanage, its school and students, and the no longer existing hospital building.

Lewisburg industries, businesses, and utilities are shown, frequently with owners, employees, and customers. Included are H.B. Heimbach Lumber Company, Dietrich and Gambrill Feed Mill, Lewisburg Chair Factory, William Cameron Engine Company and Ladies Auxiliary, Lewisburg Woolen Mills, Bechtel's Dairy and milk trucks, Hotel Lewisburger, Herman and Leiser Dry Goods (seen with Herman and Leiser), Charles A. Heiser Seafood Market, Buffalo Valley Telephone with its Board of Directors, Busser

Plumbing Supply, Good and Mauer Food Market, Keeler's Office Supplies, Reedy Furniture, three banks in Lewisburg, Diehl Chevrolet, Union Motors (Oldsmobile



Firemen practice fire-fighting, using a pumper vehicle, which also carried other needed equipment. While the fire may have been real in this drill, the emergency was not. Crowds gathered to watch the exercise.



Mr. Reedy, owner of Reddy furniture store, prepares delivery of a chest of drawers. The store was located on the north side of Market Street near Sixth St.

dealership), the Ford dealership, Lewisburg Inn, the Saturday News Building and staff, the offices of Citizens' Electric and the Lewisburg Gas Company, Lewisburg Hardware, Dreisbach Wholesale Hardware, Atlantic White Flash gas station, Texaco gas station, and Esso gas station. Subtitles added to the digitized film identify each of these

businesses, indicating for some their founding dates and locations. Individuals have generally not been identified, but older residents of Lewisburg will recognize many of them. The film is 40 minutes long in, of course, black and white.

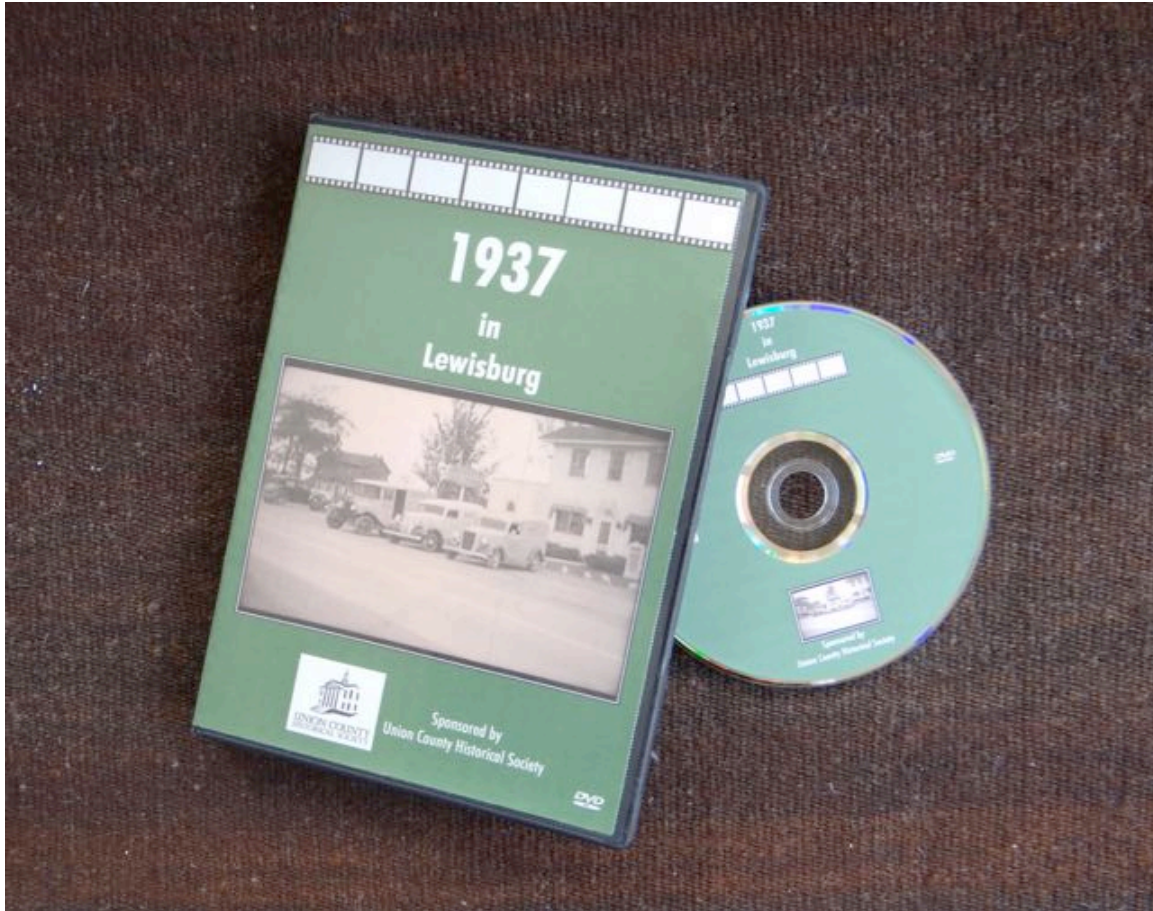
As the film moves along and schools, businesses and people quickly pass by, one senses a community of individuals caring and helping each other, of camaraderie and of



Teen friends enjoy time on Market Street. Bechtel's Dairy Restaurant, on the south side of Market Street near Third Street was a favorite hangout. Bechtel's Restaurant later moved to Route 15.

serious concern for the welfare of neighbors and the community as a whole. True, the town was smaller and perhaps more cohesive, but a look back reminds us that one's Lewisburg ancestors worked hard to build a meaningful life and to solve problems in anticipation of a better future. The film shows history, everyday history. It shows how it was back then, and in doing so, shows how Lewisburg came to be what it is today.

The DVD of 1937 in Lewisburg will be available for \$16 from the Union County Historical Society. It makes a great gift for those who have lived in Lewisburg, and families can enjoy the scenes together as older folks explain the "olden days" to younger folks and perhaps even point out some ancestors!



Editor's Note: We think the *1937 in Lewisburg* and the *1937 in Mifflinburg/Western Union County* DVDs would make fine holiday gifts. You can watch the DVDs on the Society's computers at our Courthouse office and purchase them there if you decide to buy. Alternately you can place an order by phone (570-524-8666) or e-mail (info@unioncountyhistoricalsociety.org) and, for a \$3 postage/handling fee, have them mailed to you.

The *Mifflinburg/Western Union County* film was the subject of an article by Lois Huffines in Vol. 3, #2, which you can read by going to the Society's website and clicking on that issue of ACCOUNTS. TG

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