

THE ELEANOR ROOSEVELT PROGRAM

January 26, 1951

Description: In the interview segment, ER discusses the relationship between juvenile delinquency and cinema with Marjorie Granger Dawson, associate editor of Community Relations for the Motion Picture Association of America.

Participants: ER, Marjorie Granger Dawson

[ER:] The question whether motion pictures are responsible for part of the juvenile delinquency problem has been widely argued, so today I've invited an expert on the subject to talk to us about it. She's Marjorie Granger Dawson, associate editor of Community Relations for the Motion Picture Association of America. I'm happy to introduce to you Mrs. Dawson.

[Marjorie Granger Dawson:] I'm very happy to be here Mrs. Roosevelt.

[ER:] First of all Mrs. Dawson we'd like to hear a little about you, yourself. What exactly is your job and how did you get into it?

[Marjorie Granger Dawson:] Well it's a little difficult to define my job in words of ah one syllable or in a short space of time. My primary concern is the Children's Film Library which is a lusty baby of about four years of age. It's a public service, nonprofit ah organization that is designed to ah preserve and to select first of all, and then to preserve, motion picture films for showing in the theaters of America to the children. And in this work we have had the most unparalleled degree of cooperation, ah cooperation between public spirited organizations and community groups and between very great industry so that I think it's a peculiarly American ah kind of ah-ah service that we have organized and its success has been ah quite beyond our wildest hopes when we started out in this work about four years ago. (1:41)

[ER:] Well now how did you come into it? What was your interest?

[Marjorie Granger Dawson:] Well I've always been very much interested in children. Ah I've taught at all grade levels uh up to and including college preparatory English for the past twenty years. In addition I have three children of my own and furthermore I've been terribly interested always in the problem of communication--how to get ideas across so that people will understand each other. And it's seems to me-- it has always seemed to me that motion pictures is one of the most direct forms of communication that we have yet developed, ah we're not so reliant there upon the spoken word which has different meanings for different peoples at different times. We see an action, it's vital we ah participate in it vicariously and there's less possibility of misunderstanding, so that we feel that this is the seed of an international organization that will help eventually to bring the children of the world into better understanding with the children of the other parts of the world.

[ER:] Well that's a very interesting thing and I don't wonder, you who've had the teaching background and also have children of your own have been interested. I know it's one of the things that the Federation of Women's Clubs which uh is made up of so many mothers and wives ah has taken for long while an interest in because they've worried so about the type of films that children would see. So I'd like to ask you, what are the standards for previewing a picture for children?

[Marjorie Granger Dawson:] Uh first of all every picture that is selected for the national Children's Film Library is previewed and discussed very thoroughly by a committee representing eleven national organizations and eleven local community groups. Their standards are educational, social and moral. Ah each of those of course have different subdivisions, with regard to education ah we demand that a film be authentic that it be--have integrity that it be true to the spirit of the times. For example, if you're going to show the pygmies in Africa in a sequence in your picture they've got to be the real pygmies and not just uh rather phony uh reasonable facsimiles of same. Ah socially, we want to encourage the kind of attitudes that will help people get along better with each other. And on the moral level of course, we reflect the culture of America. Ah there are certain dos and don'ts with respect to moral values. We would never for example choose a film wherein virtue didn't triumph [ER Laughs.] The hero's got to win, the bad man's got to bite the dust. We've got to have the triumph of our moral values of our America at this time. (4:41)

[ER:] Well what features lead you to condemn a picture?

[Marjorie Granger Dawson:] Well now those are very interesting and they're rather different I think from the ones you might draw up without studying the subject. Our present criteria are quite different from those which we had when as a committee we first embarked on this work. You see adults tend to forget how they reacted as children. They bring to a picture, as adults, the whole frame of reference that reflects their experience, their personalities, their sympathies. They read into a picture uh nuances, overtones um meanings that are not there at all for the child audience. Now remembering we're speaking about children between the ages of eight and twelve. In the preadolescent stage their sympathies are not as yet fully aroused and developed as they become later on. They are ah highly moral, our children, at that age, they believe that ah bla--good is good and bad is bad and they are--the blacks must ah give way to the good, to the whites, the goods every time. Ah the primary concern—

[ER:] That's a rather poor simile. I wouldn't choose that very often if I were you. [ER Laughs]

[Marjorie Granger Dawson:] Well you see, but that is on the level for our children. Our children need the security of a rather rigid standard when they are little, it's only as [ER: Yes but for instance] [Marjorie Granger Dawson and ER overlap] only as they grow older.

[ER:] But for instance I-I must break in here for instance [Marjorie Granger Dawson: Do]. [ER:] Um you um most children read *Robin Hood* [Marjorie Granger Dawson: Mhm]. [ER:] Now, Robin Hood had certain things that were good and he did things uh that were also bad according to conventional law at the time [Marjorie Granger Dawson: Yes.] [ER:] and yet most children will read *Robin Hood* without any very great harm coming to them. [Marjorie Granger Dawson: No indeed.] [ER:] Because they will remember largely what he did that was good. (6:39)

[Marjorie Granger Dawson:] That's right and they go through to the intention, [ER: Yes.] [Marjorie Granger Dawson:] his desire to do good, to help the poor and the oppressed and of course the children are always very strongly ranged on the side of the oppressed. They want to free them ah. That's ah an example you've chosen there of the rather deeper kind of interpretation which we as a national committee give to motion pictures. Because ah they have far more than a superficial surface effect and they tend to perpetuate certain themes in our American culture. We're a young people still and we alone perhaps or I would say almost alone among the peoples of the world have great faith in our ability as people to go forward to improve the conditions for ourselves and our families, we believe that man is able to ah effect changes for the better, this is shown in all our movies when you have the hero ah getting the girl. The hero starting as a little ah office boy and getting up to be the president of the company. This isn't a fairy tale this actually happens in America here today. Our movies show that and though some of our critics say this is very unrealistic, ah it reflects ah a phase of the American dream and I hope we never lose that confidence in ourselves. (8:05)

[ER:] Well now um are your personal reactions a factor in evaluating a picture?

[Marjorie Granger Dawson:] Of course, you can't uh dissociate entirely your own subjective reaction to a picture. Ah the adult committee tends to observe a picture for children rather objectively on the social and moral and the educational values. Then they fully realize that ah they themselves ah do not look at the picture exactly the same as the children do. And that's where we bring the children in. We test the entertainment value of these preselected pictures on unselected audiences of school children between the ages of eight and twelve. In—

[ER:] Oh you do

[Marjorie Granger Dawson:] Oh yes indeed we wouldn't put a single picture into the library unless we were sure that it would hold the interest and attention of the audience. Because you can show the picture-- children the best picture in the world and if they won't look at it, if they're bored ah it's a very poor entertainment for them.

[ER:] Well that I can--that I can entirely um see, but you have to write the reviews. Now what do you do in writing the review?

[Marjorie Granger Dawson:] Well the--each picture that goes in to the Children's Film Library has a brief appraisal of it that is a composite ah appraisal reflecting the opinion of the adult committee. And then we have ah with that what we call the wiggle test report and that gets right down to cases on how the children reacted scene by scene to the picture which we have shown to them.

[ER:] Well now I of course am deeply interested in the wiggle test [laughter] report, I think it's a marvelous name to have given to a test, and I just see children wiggle as you say it, but I know that for a minute we have to break off this interview and let our sponsors have a chance, so I will come back to this in a minute with that question on the wiggle test. (10:10)

(Pause from 10:10-10:27)

[ER:] Now that we're back on the air, Mrs. Dawson I want at once to ask you what is the wiggle test? [laughter]

[Marjorie Granger Dawson:] Well the wiggle test, is a very practical device ah which we drew up to meet the ah situation that was confronting us. How do we know whether a picture will hold the attention of the children's audience? Will they be interested? We think they will. Unfortunately adults don't always know how children will react and fortunately our adult committee was very much aware of this situation when they first started out on their ah previewing and selection procedures. So we invited first of all the children ah to come uh unselected, coming from different-different schools each time, so that we wouldn't get sophisticated movie goers, ah used to coming. We uh showed them the picture. First of all they came released from school studies, with the blessing of the Board of Education, happily attended by a teacher. Ah Mrs. Roosevelt I don't know whether you are fully aware of the enormous influence exerted by the American teacher. Just the presence of a teacher sitting quietly in the back of the room exerts a very ennobling influence upon the conduct of our children. And uh we started that we weren't getting really untutored spontaneous reactions when the teachers were present. So much to the teachers' regret, we asked them if we couldn't please have the children without any teachers in attendance. Finally we had to take the eh testing procedure out of the weekday and put it on a Saturday morning. The schools issue passes to the children of eight to twelve age range and they come all by themselves from their homes to a theater that seats about eighty. Ah there are no ah rules, law and order is not enforced, the children are allowed to behave perfectly naturally as they would if they were going to their neighborhood theater. Uh

two observers sit very unobtrusively in the sidelines-the side aisles of the theaters and those two observers record without stopping, I can tell you your hand is so cramped at the end of a wiggle test that you-your fingers are numb for weeks. Uh they record each reaction of the children, what they do, what they say, what their posture is, while the different scenes of the picture are being played. And in this way we are able to check up on the entertainment value. Ah our wiggle test shows ah wide extremes of reaction. We range from active participation, when the children are so thoroughly engrossed in the picture so excited so carried away, they're out of their seats and they're cheering and they're whistling ah um emotionally and physically they are actively participating in the picture. That is one extreme of the picture. The other is a dreadful state of affairs known as open revolt. And open revolt is a phenomenon never seen in an adult audience at least not very rarely otherwise the wiggle test applies pretty well to adult audiences. But in open revolt the children are so bored that they are rebellious. They start out by wisecracking back at the lines that they hear from the screen, then they throw things, they throw caps, they throw jackets, then they hurl insults at each other and then in the final and most disastrous stage they will scuffle in the--on the floor between the seats and in the aisles, and there is no semblance of order. At which point the screening is stopped, another picture always held in reserve is flashed on and inside of thirty seconds every child is back in his or her seat with a beatific smile of anticipation wreathing a perfectly angelic face. I've never seen anything so phenomenal as the little miracle that occurs there. I might say we've only had three scenes of open revolt in all the hundreds of pictures that we've tested. And those are very interesting ones because they reveal the ah pet hates-the pet peeves of the children, what was in an earlier picture, uh called *Little Lord Fauntleroy* [ER: Oh.] with Freddie Bartholomew and that touched the maternal hearts of the ah ladies and the paternal hearts of the gentlemen on our Children's Film Library committee. They thought Freddie Bartholomew was quite charming with his lace collar and his curls. I might say that American children didn't [ER: No, American children] [Marjorie Granger Dawson: didn't consider him charming at all.] [ER:] No they would have nothing to do with Freddie Bartholomew.

[Marjorie Granger Dawson:] They revolted very obviously and so *Little Lord Fauntleroy* did not go in to the library it would not fulfill our purpose of entertaining in wholesome, healthy fashion the children of America.

[ER:] What were the other two?

[Marjorie Granger Dawson:] Ah one of the other ones was *I Remember Mama* which was a perfectly beautiful picture and it was very interesting. That film had children in it, so therefore the adults thought that the children-that the presence of children in the picture would automatically ensure its appeal to American children.

[ER:] Was it like the play?

[Marjorie Granger Dawson:] It was exactly like the play Mrs. Roosevelt. It was very faithful transcription of the play and beautifully acted. The only trouble was that there was very little action in it,

[ER:] Yes it would bore children.

[Marjorie Granger Dawson:] It was mostly verbal, in words. And children like to see movies move [ER: Yes I can understand that.][Marjorie Granger Dawson: They don't want that, yes.]

[ER:] I can understand. What was your third?

[Marjorie Granger Dawson:] What was the third? It's a—

[ER:] You can't remember it.

[Marjorie Granger Dawson:] Well I do remember it, Mrs. Roosevelt. It was one that was openly revolted at by the boys of the audience, although the girls enjoyed it very much. It was *Little Women* a very [ER: Oh yes of course.] a very charming presentation. [ER: Oh yes of the book.]

[Marjorie Granger Dawson:] Well now the little girls enjoyed that a great deal but [ER: But the little boys] unfortunately we have to consider the little boy--[ER: Oh yes.] [Marjorie Granger Dawson:] because if they don't enjoy it they won't let the little girls enjoy it--[ER: No.] [Marjorie Granger Dawson:] They're very vociferous.] [ER: Quite.]

[ER:] Quite. Well that I can understand very well because I've always felt that book was a--was usually a little girls' book [Marjorie Granger Dawson: Exactly.] [ER:] Very few boys who enjoyed that—

[Marjorie Granger Dawson:] And little girls and their mothers enjoyed that picture a very great deal.

[ER:] Well now that's very interesting, now does--how closely does the Motion Picture Association work with the picture industry itself?

[Marjorie Granger Dawson:] Well of course the Motion Picture Association ah is in a sense a large part of the--certain phases of the industry because the Motion Picture Association represents the eight major motion picture companies. And uh the whole Children's Film Library idea was sponsored by the president of that association, Mr. Eric Johnston, and it was in the working out of that idea that we turned to the great national organizations for their help in the selection of the kind of fare we wanted for our children in America today. (17:28)

[ER:] Now to revert a minute eh to our original statement on this, do you think that the motion pictures have played any part whatsoever in juvenile delinquency?

[Marjorie Granger Dawson:] Well I'd rather not answer that in my own--from my own personal standpoint, uh I'd rather refer you to certain authorities. I was down at the National Conference of Family Life in Washington two years ago, ah at which juvenile delinquency was of course an area that was largely explored, ah there was no finger pointed at the motion pictures as playing any role in the causation of juvenile delinquency. Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck's most recent book which is an exhaustive study of delinquency also fails to point any finger of blame in that respect at the motion picture industry. Ah, similarly at the attorney generals' conference on juvenile delinquency and at the most recent conference the White House ah Midcentury Conference on Children and Youth, ah none of our experts now point a finger at any one factor in our ah cultural pattern as being the cause. They go back to first causes--the home, the surroundings, and the early personality development of the children. Of course most of our children don't even go to the movies until their personalities are pretty well established.

[ER:] That's true. Now what kind of self-discipline if any does the motion picture industry itself exercise on its productions? (18:57)

[Marjorie Granger Dawson:] Oh now we come to a very interesting area which doesn't apply only to children's films but applies to every motion picture that receives the seal of the motion picture, the seal of approval of the Motion Picture Association. That is the Production Code Administration ah which is the eh responsibility of a committee out on the west coast headed by Mr. Joseph Breen. This is not a censorship body. It is a self-regulatory mechanism whereby the motion picture industry seeks to be sure that its product will not offend against our cultural mores at this time, this time in our eh history. And um it's interesting to note that although this ah project is sponsored and carried on by the association, which represents only eight of the companies, ninety-nine percent of all pictures ah made by independents and ah perhaps any org--motion picture producer seeking wide distribution for his product submits his picture

ah to that code administration for advice lest they infringe upon certain of the ah principles of Americans today.

[ER:] I'd like to ask you one more question in the short time that remains. You have um made a study of English films for children. Do they compare? How do they compare with ours?

[Marjorie Granger Dawson:] I hate to be too general in my ah answer to that question Mrs. Roosevelt, because you see the English program and the English purposes for their children over there is very different from ours. Ah they have a program which is largely educational in intention. Now ours is not. Ours is based on the idea that twelve million children go to the movies on Saturdays throughout this land, we want to see that they are entertained by the finest type of entertainment feature pictures we can get together. Now in England they have the club ah situation. Where ah a theater will have a cinema club, kinema club I believe they call it, and uh the members of course are in competition with other cinema clubs. For our children we don't feel that's desirable because when you belong to a club you want to make your club the biggest and best and we feel that entertainment via motion pictures should be completely free here in America, nobody should put pressure on the children. (21:31)

[ER:] So we have-we have entertainment rather than education first--[Marjorie Granger Dawson: Ah we have education] [ER: But we do give education too.]

[Marjorie Granger Dawson:] it's very strong but indirect – [ER: But indirectly.]

[ER:] Well I thank you so much for coming to be with me today and I know that our audience has had a great deal of interest out of your visit.

[Marjorie Granger Dawson:] Thank you Mrs. Roosevelt

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