

## **EAAS POSTGRADUATE TRAVEL GRANT: RESEARCH VISIT REPORT**

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With the invaluable assistance of a European Association for American Studies Postgraduate Travel Grant, I spent three weeks in Washington D.C., accessing archival resources at the Library of Congress and National Archives, College Park. My thesis concerns the photographic and newsfilm coverage of flood and drought events in America during the 1930s, taking a comparative approach to the analysis of commercial photojournalism, social documentary, and more routine photographic sources. I suggest that visual reportage, and the specific historical circumstances that shape its production, can provide an important body of evidence with which to consider how different constituencies in American society navigated emergency conditions; contextualising collaborations and conflicts that accompany temporary breakdowns and transformations in social life. The material I was able to gather will provide the basis for an important Chapter in my project that assesses the working practices of newsreel cameramen – and figures working on publicity films for relief organisations – during the 1936 Northeastern United States flood and the Ohio-Mississippi floods of 1937.

### **Moving Image and Sound Research Room, National Archives, College Park, MD.**

I spent the first week of my research trip in the Moving Image and Sound Research Room of National Archives, College Park, where I focused on a series of flood specials produced for the Works Progress Administration and the Motion Picture Releases of the Universal Newsreel Library. By initially consulting subject card catalogues I compiled a list of the individual stories that covered flooding across the decade, proceeding to locate the stories on the archive's reference DVDs and make notes. I was able to make my own digital copies of the moving image material, and this sizeable quantity of newsfilm will now support my interpretation of how commercial media outlets reported domestic disasters and their humanitarian consequences during the Great Depression.

By reading the descriptions that were included in newsreel release sheets or programmes, in addition to concentrated analysis of how shots were sequenced in the films themselves, I will be able to speculate on the intended framing of manifest stories (sections that were edited together and released to audiences). However, the footage also reveals details about how camera crews operated having been sent into the flood zones. To include one example of this, images from the story

'Pestilence Menaces Louisville as Flood Batters South'/'Refugees Flock into Memphis with Mississippi Crest Mounting Hourly: Louisville, KY' (Vol. 9, Release 533: February 1, 1937) confirm that Universal News staff operated their own company-marked boats, raising important questions about the attitudes that crews took towards performing rescues on top of their reporting duties.

Following the days I spent working at the video viewing stations, archivists in the reading room made me aware that the MCA/Universal Pictures Collection also contained production files and I was really pleased to have the opportunity to consult the cameramen's dope sheets (explanatory notes and shot records that were submitted to editors along with the reels), as well as some draft scripts for the relevant releases. The abundant evidence that I found in these files was very much unexpected, having been brought to my attention by staff. Through sifting through these boxes, I was able to find out a considerable amount about the novel techniques that news photographers employed to obtain exclusives during floods, often under the protest of minor authority figures such as firemen and railroad 'bulls'.

### **Moving Image Research Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.**

During my second week, I visited the Moving Image Research Center of the Library of Congress, in the James Madison Memorial Building, where I consulted production records in the Fox Movietone News Papers. Following a similar approach, I was able to determine the specific movements and activities of individual camera crews during the floods, using an existing authority file to confirm the full names of individual camera operators. By surveying files from two competing newsreel companies (Universal and Fox), this archival research allowed me to gain a secure picture of the frantic pace of news gathering in the thirties. It also provided information about the challenges that reporters could face in inundated areas. Several accounts detail, for example, how mist and rain hindered the filming process and delayed shipments of reels.

In addition to my main research with newsfilm and production records, I spent a considerable amount of time during my second and third weeks working with other textual collections. Using digitized newspaper database resources in the Main Reading Room of the Library of Congress, I was able to gather information on the visual reporting of the Black press during the 1936 and 1937 floods (looking particularly at Dan Burley's photographic work for the *Chicago Defender*). Collating this information greatly strengthened my understanding of the conflicting voices in the reporting of these two complex emergencies. I continued to follow this track by looking for different assessments in the correspondence in the Roy Emerson Stryker papers (held in the LOC's Prints & Photographs Division) and articles from contemporary publications like the *Illinois Guardsman*. During my final week, I returned to the National Archives, where, alongside pursuing other avenues, I viewed the collection of press clippings that the Information Division of the Works Progress Administration

retained as a record of the floods. This material provided further insights into how employees of the federal government framed their own relief operations and the slow recovery efforts.

This research trip greatly extended my access to original primary sources and has improved the overall range and depth of my dissertation project. I would like to thank the European Association for American Studies for their award: this assistance has made it possible for me to make use of multiple rich and under-researched collections while developing my own approach to newsreel scholarship. I am also immensely grateful to staff members at the Library of Congress and National Archives for accommodating my research over the three weeks. I'd particularly like to recognise the assistance of Zoran Sinobad, Reference Librarian at the Moving Image Research Center and Ellen Mulligan at the National Archive's Moving Image and Sound Branch. Finally, I would like to acknowledge my colleagues at the University of Hull for their dependable guidance and help along the way as I formed the objectives and confirmed the logistics of this period of study.



Figure 1.: Video Viewing Station, Moving Image and Sound Research Room, National Archives at College Park.



Figure 2.: Synopsis sheet for newsreel release, MCA/Universal Pictures Collection, production files (National Archives).



Figure 3.: 'Several Homes Untouched by Flood are Hit by Windstorm', *Evansville Press*, February 14, 1937, p. 6, from Newspaper Clippings, 1935-1954, [Floods – Pictures], Records of the Works Progress Administration (National Archives).