



Saving Brinton

A Film By

Tommy Haines, John Richard and Andrew Sherburne

87 mins - USA - Documentary

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ABOUT THE FILM

LOGLINE

When an eccentric collector discovers the showreels of the man who brought moving pictures to the Heartland, he begins a journey to restore the legacy of America's greatest barnstorming movieman and save these irreplaceable cinematic treasures from turning to dust.

SYNOPSIS

In a farmhouse basement on the Iowa countryside, eccentric collector Mike Zahs makes a remarkable discovery: the showreels of the man who brought moving pictures to America's Heartland.

Among the treasures: rare footage of President Teddy Roosevelt, the first moving images from Burma, a lost relic from magical effects godfather Georges Méliés. These are the films that introduced movies to the world. And they didn't end up in Iowa by accident.

The old nitrate reels are just some of the artifacts that belonged to William Franklin Brinton. From thousands of trinkets, handwritten journals, receipts, posters and catalogs emerges the story of an inventive farmboy who became America's greatest barnstorming movieman.

As Mike uncovers this hidden legacy, he begins a journey to restore the Brinton name that takes us to The Library of Congress, Paris and back for a big screen extravaganza in the same small-town movie theater where Frank first turned on a projector over a century ago.

By uniting community through a pride in their living history, Mike embodies a welcome antidote to the breakneck pace of our disposable society. "Saving Brinton" is a portrait of this unlikely Midwestern folk hero, at once a meditation on living simply and a celebration of dreaming big.

*I'm not
sure if we
can wow
people
anymore,
but I'd sure
like to try.*

MICHAEL ZAHS

Saving
Brinton 2



Flyover country. That simple phrase which so casually dismisses the people and culture of middle America. Sure, there are pigs, and corn—lots of it!—but our Midwestern modesty belies a rich history and a vibrant present.

And it may then come as a surprise that the world's oldest operating movie theater, and the showreels that first lit that silver screen, reside in Washington, Iowa. This amazing history, and Mike Zahs, the man who will not let it be forgotten, are the story of "Saving Brinton."

This is a film about film, yes. But it's also a story about people. So what is true about the citizens of the rural Midwest? They are humble, earnest, steeped in community. Mike Zahs is their model citizen. With wit, charm and unassuming generosity he commands the screen, but not with the bluster and braggadocio we've come to expect from our leading men—a welcome contrast to the era of YouTube celebrity and Donald Trump.

So too is "Saving Brinton" proudly different—a patient portrait of a man, a community and a history seldom celebrated on the big screen.

The film still delivers its share of surprises. Among them, the revelatory discovery of a lost film by a cinema legend—a priceless relic that could easily have been mistaken for worthless in our throw-away culture. Without the Mikes of the world it might have been lost. It might all have been lost.

As Midwestern filmmakers, we're excited to show what's buried beneath that blanket of corn seen from a passing plane. The Heartland is alive and Mike Zahs is its champion.



ABOUT FILM SUBJECT

MICHAEL ZAHS

A retired junior high history teacher, Mike is known as the “Sage of Washington County” for his expansive knowledge of the rural Iowa county.

A gentle giant, always accompanied by his trusty canine sidekick **TUESDAY**, he’s also known as the man in town who will take your old junk—in case it has historical value.

Mike has twice been named Iowa’s “Teacher of the Year” for his one-of-a-kind hands-on history lessons. In retirement, his classroom has only gotten larger as he takes his expansive collections on the road to schools, community opera houses, steampunk conventions and anyone who wants to learn.



“Years ago, a man said to me ‘you’re not a historian, you’re a storyteller.’ He did not mean it as a compliment, but I took it as one. After all the biggest part of the word history is story.”

When he found the complete estate of Frank and Indiana Brinton in a farmhouse basement, Mike’s life changed forever. *“It was a good thing it was three days AFTER our wedding.”*

His wife **JULIE** would prefer a house without so much clutter, but that doesn’t stop her from being a part of an increasingly interesting journey spurred on by the Brinton discovery.

Once the boxes, “marked Brinton C-R-A-P” have been unpacked, Mike discovers 5 hours of film from the dawn of cinema. Not content to let them sit in darkness for another 100 years, he endeavors to show them again and “wow” a modern audience.

“I never thought I was specific enough in my focus to be called a collector. I always saved.”

As Mike works to preserve the Brinton’s story—and his own legacy—he also must tend to his aging mother **ELAINE**, the one person in his life who always supported his eccentric hobbies.

Calling on a cast of friends old and new, Mike puts together an extravagant revival of the Brinton show. As this once-lost film collection gains new fans and international notoriety, this humble man of Amish roots becomes a reluctant big screen hero, well beyond the county line.



At the turn of the 19th century, William Franklin Brinton was Iowa's highest-paid entertainer known for a wide variety of lectures, slideshows and the newly invented "moving pictures."

The son of a wealthy landowner, Frank was taken by intellectual pursuits from an early age. From an early age he dreamed of flight, tinkering with airships decades before the Wright Brothers. His world travels, following his father, brought back relics and observations which fascinated the local residents of Washington County.

His pursuits of new ideas and technologies led him to the nascent art form of the "moving picture." In 1897, at Washington's Graham Opera house Brinton wowed a sellout crowd of over 800 with the first movie shown in the theater, and from there his path was forever altered.

At the height of his fame and fortune, 1904-1907, Brinton travelled relentlessly, with over 800 shows from Minnesota down to Texas—hundreds of thousands of rural Americans would see their first motion picture at a Brinton show.

In the midst of his touring he married Indiana Putnam. Though their shows were beloved, the two were often considered eccentric and odd by the locals—perhaps it was the nudism or the mummy in their living room.

The two would leave the road in 1908, but Frank would continue to manage the Graham Opera House, which would become a full-time movie theater until his death in 1919. When Indiana passed in 1955, without an heir, their estate was packed into the basement of a neighbor, where it sat until Michael Zahs would find the dusty boxes marked Brinton C-R-A-P three decades later.





ABOUT

THE BRINTON COLLECTION

Frank and Indiana Brinton's estate, estimated at over 8,000 individual items, paints the most complete portrait of early traveling movie exhibitors in America.

Among the collection are receipts, posters, catalogs, newspaper clippings, a daily log, magic lantern slides, and over 5 hours of cellulose nitrate films.

The films—over 130 in all—include early works produced by the Lumière Brothers, Thomas Edison, Siegmund Lubin, Pathé Films, and Georges Méliés.

These moving pictures include comedies; early westerns; “actualities” of Niagara Falls, Theodore Roosevelt, Burma and more; and fantasy films from Segundo de Chomón and Méliés. Only a few minutes each, the films would be assembled with other entertainment and live musical accompaniment to create a two-hour show.

Among the films were two “lost films” from George Méliés, unseen publicly for over a century and thought to no longer exist. One of these films, “The Triple-Headed Lady” was debuted before an audience of thousands at the 2016 Il Cinema Ritrovato in Bologna, Italy. The second will be premiered following the world premiere of *Saving Brinton*.

In 2014, Michael Zahs gifted the entirety of the Brinton Collection to the University of Iowa Libraries, Special Collections where it will be catalogued, preserved and available for scholarly research.

*It's marvelous,
just marvelous.
Gives me
goosebumps.*

PROF. RICK ALTMAN





ABOUT

WASHINGTON COUNTY, IOWA

Amid the rolling farmland and Amish communities of Washington County, Iowa are the unlikely roots of America's love affair with the movies. Frank Brinton began showing movies here in 1897, shortly after their invention and it was the home base from which he built a barnstorming movie exhibition network that stretched north to Minnesota and south to Texas.

With a population that is essentially the same in 2017 as in 1897, Washington remains a vibrant community where history and tradition are alive and well. Perhaps nothing illustrates this better than the State Theatre, the very building where Frank turned on the projector lights so long ago still serves as the local movie palace, earning it the Guinness World Record title of "The World's Oldest Continuously Operating Movie Theater."



*It's much better to be
in Washington, Iowa
than Washington, DC.*

REP. DAVE LOEBSACK





TIMELINE IN BRIEF

- 1856 William Franklin Brinton is born.
- 1880 Brinton begins travelling with illustrated lectures in Iowa and the Midwest.
- 1894 Thomas Edison patents the kinetoscope.
- 1895 Lumière Brothers premiere their cinématographe in Paris, France.
- 1897 Brinton shows moving pictures at Washington, Iowa's Graham Opera House.
- 1903 George Méliés films "The Triple Headed Lady."
- 1904-1907 Brinton's heyday sees his roadshow expand beyond Iowa as far north as Minnesota and south to Texas. He will present over 800 shows during these years to hundreds of thousands of rural Americans.
- 1908 Brinton retires from travelling moving picture exhibition and begins managing the Graham Opera House full-time.
- 1919 Frank Brinton dies, aged 62, leaving much of his estate to his widow Indiana Putman Brinton.
- 1955 Indiana Brinton dies, leaving no descendents. Many of the artifacts in the estate are transferred to a neighbor, Victor Masson.
- 1981 Michael Zahs purchases the remains of the Brinton estate from Masson, including 5 hours of cellulose nitrate film.
- 1981 The American Film Institute is entrusted with a majority of Brinton's original cellulose nitrate films to preserve in the vaults at The Library of Congress. Michael Zahs is given black and white copies on safety film. Many of the films will remain unidentified for another 30+ years.
- 1997 Zahs holds the first ever "Brinton Film Festival" showing copies of the films at the Opera House in Ainsworth, Iowa, a town of less than 600 people.
- 2013 Humanities Iowa and The University of Iowa Libraries, Special Collections become aware of the collection and Zahs public exhibitions. Zahs agrees to begin transferring the entirety of the collection to the University. The sudden interest soon attracts widespread media attention. Filming on Saving Brinton begins.
- 2016 George Méliés "The Triple Headed Lady," restored by Serge Bromberg and Lobster Films, is publicly exhibited for the first time in over a century at Il Cinema Ritrovato in Bologna, Italy.
- 2016 Zahs presents digitally restored prints, recently created from the original hand-colored cellulose nitrate, at the "Brinton Extravaganza" at Washington, Iowa's State Theatre (originally the Graham Opera House). At the event, Guinness World Records confirms the State as The World's Oldest Continuously Operating Movie Theater.
- 2017 Saving Brinton premieres.

SUPPORTING CAST



Greg Prickman

The head of University of Iowa Special Collections, Greg doggedly pursues rare and historic artifacts for the library archives. Having recognized the significance of the Brinton collection, he encourages Mike's dream of keeping the discoveries in Iowa—all 8,000 items. "You can just see that there's a real story to weave together here."



George Willeman

The genial vault manager at The Library of Congress tends to the world's largest collection of films. Among them: the original cellulose nitrate reels from the Brinton Collection. "To actual save them all these years for someone, that's really cool. Otherwise all it is is old film sitting on a shelf somewhere." He loves visitors.



Kathy Fuller-Seeley

An effervescent film professor at the University of Texas at Austin, Kathy literally wrote the book on barnstorming exhibitors of the early 1900s, but she's never seen a collection this deep. "I love early film...it's like the earliest days of YouTube, we're at a similar moment of experimentation."



Serge Bromberg

The charismatic Frenchman is an early cinema expert par excellence known as the world's foremost authority on George Méliés. "Finding a Méliés film is a miracle. Always." His Lobster Films archive in Paris contains a copy of every Méliés' films known to survive. He's happy to get his eyes on the Brinton films—"we have a new one!"



Rick Altman

A renowned film professor and expert on early cinema, Rick delights in the details of the collection—"it gives my goosebumps"—and what it takes to put on a good show. A bit of a vaudevillian at heart, he's also happy to tickle the ivories and lead the crowd in a sing-along.



Harvey Solberger

The eccentric modern composer has been called in to put music to the silent films in preparation for a public performance. Looking at the century-old films is a real window to the past. "It's a magical feeling, because you feel you are transcending time. That's more exciting than space travel."



Tommy Haines and Andrew Sherburne

(directors) are documentary filmmakers based in Iowa—yes, Iowa. The duo’s debut, *Pond Hockey*, chronicles rink rats in their return to the outdoor ice and has been dubbed “the best hockey movie ever” by *ESPN*, it has been broadcast to over 2 million viewers in North America on PBS and the NHL Network. *Gold Fever*, an examination of a destructive gold mining operation on a remote village in the Guatemalan highlands won the 2013 International Federation for Human Rights Film Award and has screened at festivals and venues in over 250 locations in 35 countries worldwide. The duo has been awarded grants from The Iowa Arts Council and Humanities Iowa. In addition to filmmaking, Sherburne founded FilmScene, a 501(c)3 nonprofit cinema in Iowa City, where Haines serves on the Board of Directors. The tandem have served on festival juries and currently curate the well-regarded Vino Vérité screening series. *Saving Brinton*, their most recent feature film, will premiere at AFI Docs in 2017.

John Richard (director of cinematography) is an independent documentary filmmaker, video producer and photographer living in Iowa City, Iowa. He works on a variety of projects for clients including *The Guardian*, *LA Times*, *New York Times*, *BBC* around the world and has a background in photojournalism. Richard’s work combines a strong visual sense with intimacy and humor. His short films have won top prizes at festivals including the Nordic International Film Festival, Chicago International REEL Shorts Films Fest, Cedar Rapids Independent Film Festival and Iowa City Documentary Film Festival.



ADDITIONAL CREW



Michael Kramer

(composer) is an award-winning composer, multi-instrumentalist and producer for film, television and video games. A graduate of USC's prestigious film scoring program, he was nominated for an Emmy in 2017 for his work on the hit Cartoon Network TV series LEGO Ninjago: Masters of Spinjitsu, for which he also won a BMI award in 2012 and nominated for an Annie award in 2015. Kramer's music has previously collaborated with Haines and Sherburne on Gold Fever and his work is featured in films such as Thor: The Dark World, and Furious 7.



Brandon Proctor

(sound design) is a Sound Designer and Re-recording Mixer who joined the Skywalker Sound team in 1998. He graduated from San Francisco State University with a broadcasting degree while working at the renowned The Plant Studios in Sausalito (known for Fleetwood Mac's Rumours and Stevie Wonder's Songs in the Key of Life) and Coast Recorders in San Francisco. His filmography includes Borat, Bruno, Aqua Teen Hunger Force, Shortbus, Mud, Finding Neverland, Creed, and Allied. In 2014, he was nominated for a BAFTA for Best Sound for JC Chandor's All is Lost. He most recently finished mixing Despicable Me 3.



Scott Duncan

(additional cinematography) has earned 10 Emmy Awards for Individual Achievement in Cinematography and Best Documentary and has received a total of 26 Emmy nominations throughout his career. His diverse network client roster includes NBC Sports, CBS Sports, ESPN, Versus, TNT, and Hallmark Channel. His career as a documentary filmmaker has spanned monumental events from Nelson Mandela during the Independence of South Africa to the war zones of Afghanistan. Scott has collaborated with award-winning filmmaker Elizabeth Chai Vasarhelyi on two feature documentaries I Bring What I Love and Touba.



Michael

Sandness (colorist) Michael is a full member of the Colorist Society International (CSI). A dedicated colorist for both cinema and broadcast, his recent credits include ABC's "In An Instant," and the History Channel's "America UnEarthed," and feature credits include Zanuck Independent Films' Voice From the Stone starring Game of Thrones' Emilia Clark.



ADDITIONAL CREDITS

A film by
Tommy Haines
John Richard
Andrew Sherburne

Directed by
Tommy Haines
Andrew Sherburne

Produced by
Andrew Sherburne

Cinematography by
John Richard

Edited by
Tommy Haines
John Richard

Executive Producer
Trish McDonald

Co-Producers
John and Kay Hegarty

Associate Producers
JT Haines
Scott Duncan

Additional
Cinematography
Scott Duncan
Tommy Haines
Andy Kromphardt
Andrew Sherburne
Nic Wynia

Original Score by
Michael Kramer

Additional Music and
Orchestrations
Jesi Nelson

Additional Music by
The Pines
Red Cedar Chamber
Music

Post-Production Sound
Service by
Skywalker Sound

Sound Editor
Brandon Proctor

Engineering
Scott Brewer

Digital Intermediate by
Splice

Colorist
Michael Sandness, C.S.I.

Online Editor
Nick Gumm

Post Producer
Drew Sondeland

Accounting Services by
Bill Thomasson, WAT
Technologies, Inc.

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University of Iowa
Libraries, Special
Collections

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The MediaPerserve
Colorlab
Lobster Films

Special Thanks
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Gary Rydstrom
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The James Gang

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W.C.R.F.
WASHINGTON COUNTY
RIVERBOAT FOUNDATION

Frank and Indiana Brinton Charitable Trust

IOWA ARTS COUNCIL
IOWA DEPARTMENT OF CULTURAL AFFAIRS



**National
Endowment
for the Arts**
arts.gov



“Saving Brinton” was
filmed on location in
(in alphabetical order)

IOWA
Ainsworth, Cedar Rapids,
Dubuque, Eldon, Grace
Hill, Haskins, Hiawatha,
Iowa City, Kalona,
Marion, Paris, Riverside,
Strawberry Point,
Washington, Wellman

Bologna, Italy
Boscawen, NH
Chicago, IL
Cranberry Township, PA
Culpeper, VA
Paris, France
Pittsburgh, PA
Rockville, MD

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**Saving
Brinton 12**