

Cicero March

By Nancy Watrous

A powerful and blunt expression of the explosive climate surrounding the mid-twentieth century civil rights movement, "Cicero March" serves up pure cinematic vitriol that is neither tempered by reason nor compassion. It is a raw slice of *cinéma vérité* and a great, albeit somewhat accidental, piece of journalism.

The filmmakers who documented this march comprised a fledgling Chicago company called the Film Group, a young and fluid production studio that was breaking into the business of commercials and industrial films. Mike Shea, the cinematographer, had an accomplished background in photojournalism and was just learning what he could do with the motion picture camera. Mike Gray, who manned the sound that day, was a wordsmith ... a commercial copywriter. Jay Litvin, the editor of *Cicero March*, was a young intern at their studio.

Few schools in Chicago, or anywhere for that matter, offered filmmaking classes back then. It was a craft you learned on the job. In the late 30s, Mike Shea himself dropped out of Farragut High School on Chicago's west side to pursue a career in photography. He had talent, and after a short stint in the army, his work soon began appearing in *Ebony* and *Life* Magazines. Mike Gray, a graduate in aeronautics engineering at Purdue University and a political conservative from the small town of Darlington, Indiana, arrived in Chicago during the early 60s. With his extraordinary gift of storytelling, he was attempting a career in advertising on Chicago's north side.

Meanwhile, an array of other self-taught filmmakers had begun emerging from various Chicago neighborhoods. During the late 40s and throughout the 50s, Haskell Wexler was shooting industrials and pro-wrestling matches at the Marigold Gardens and the International Amphitheater. In 1953 William Friedkin, barely making it out of Senn High School on Chicago's north side, began working in the mailroom at local television station WGN. A few years later he directed *The People vs. Paul Crump*, a documentary that helped a convicted murderer escape the electric chair. Composer Ed Bland, who grew up



A man from the white working class suburb of Cicero hurls insults at a group of African American protestors. Courtesy Chicago Archives.

on Chicago's south side, was creating his first and only film *Cry of Jazz*, a cinematic essay that melts concepts of blackness and jazz into a singular expression inaccessible to whites. Avant-garde jazzman Sun Ra, living and performing on Chicago's near north side, provided the sounds that carry Bland's highly stylized narrative. "Film Doctor" Howard Alk, who was then co-launching *Second City* in Chicago's Old Town neighborhood, was hired to edit this beautiful cinematic mess. The young Gordon Quinn who would in a few years become co-founder of Chicago's *Kartemquin Films* was attaching himself to any one of these fellows before spinning off on his own. These emerging Chicago talents were testing what they could do together and apart in the high voltage political environment of the '50s and '60s, an environment that encapsulated rampant housing discrimination, structural civil rights abuses and the Vietnam War.

During that summer of 1966, the Chicago Freedom Movement was in full swing, and Martin Luther King, Jr. was in town to confront the nation-wide issues of fair housing and job discrimination. Animosity towards demonstrators at the various rallies and protests throughout the city ran at such a feverish pitch, King couldn't help but note how it equaled if not surpassed his experiences in the south. On July 31, 1966, King was knocked to his knees by a rock to the head at a non-violent march in Marquette Park on Chicago's southwest side. Cars were torched and dragged into lagoons. Windows were smashed, and marchers were injured by bottles and stones. Amidst this ever-present violence

erupting throughout the city and nation, Chicago's Mayor Richard J. Daley brokered a housing deal with King behind closed doors. The deal included King's promise to be absent at an upcoming march for fair housing rights in Cicero, a suburb just west of Chicago. Robert Lucas was not part of that deal.

On September 4, Lucas, who was President of the Chicago branch of the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE), led a march of black protestors through this thoroughly white working class suburb, deflecting (and often returning) toxic insults hurled from locals who lined the streets and hung out their second story apartment windows. National Guard and police barely contained residents on the ground who stressed out the police barricades protecting the marchers.

Meanwhile, business had been slow for The Film Group, and this march was an opportunity to sharpen their skills. With gear in hand that hot summer day, Shea and Gray headed to Cicero. Shea immediately spotted the story and planted himself in the midst of the black protestors marching through the main business district of Cicero. He aimed his camera towards the sidelines. Tanks, batons, police, housewives in curlers, fathers, babies and punks. A quick glimpse of the Nazi swastika unfurls in the frame. Shea captured these images as Gray, (clearly Shea's dance partner at this event), recorded the corresponding audible slurs and invectives lobbed back and forth amidst the ever present whirl of helicopters above. Parallel streams of angry marchers and angry spectators were barely separated by the blue police line that occasionally gave way to violent skirmishes. This "non-violent" march oozed decades of gathering venom. The atmosphere was combustible with not a trace of victimhood apparent on either side of the police line. Bill Cottle, another member of the Film Group, remembers that after the march, Shea and Gray returned to the studio with the reels of footage and handed it off to Litvin to assemble something that would later be known as Cicero March.

The Film Group returned to their advertising work, applying new cinéma vérité techniques to Colonel Sanders Kentucky Fried Chicken and Commonwealth Edison commercials. It wasn't long before Mike Shea moved to New York and then LA to pursue a career in feature films. Meanwhile, Mike Gray became transformed by the violence at Chicago's 1968 Democratic Convention. He formed a creative

partnership with Howard Alk that resulted in the feature length documentaries "American Revolution 2" and "The Murder of Fred Hampton." Leaving advertising once and for all, Gray headed west to Hollywood and penned the prophetic screenplay "China Syndrome." Jay Litvin, meanwhile, ventured out to Boston where he joined Mel Lyman's Fort Hill Community, an experiment in communal living. He eventually settled on a Kibbutz in Israel.

In 1970, Bill Cottle incorporated the dormant Cicero March into an educational series along with six other short films crafted from riot footage shot during the 1968 Convention. The footage in each of these modules was edited without voice-over, presenting seven constitutional dilemmas to be considered and discussed in the classroom. The series was called The Urban Crisis and the New Militants and was briefly distributed by Henk Newenhouse before it found a secure (and somewhat buried) place in the Chicago Public Library's collection.

Thirty-five years later in 2005, the Chicago Film Archives (CFA), a newly created Midwest film archive, stepped into the public eye. Michelle Puetz, a PhD candidate at the University of Chicago's Cinema and Media Studies program, was part of the seedling group that gave impetus to CFA in its infancy. She nosed around the only collection CFA had at the time – the Chicago Public Library Film Collection. Among these 5,000 films (lovingly arranged in alphabetical order) she chose five films for one of CFA's first public screenings...among them the exquisite "Cicero March."

The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

Nancy Watrous is founder and executive director of Chicago Film Archives, a Midwest regional film archive in Chicago, Illinois. She attended Miami University in Oxford, Ohio and later received her BA in Latin American Studies with certification in International Studies from the University of Illinois Chicago. She found work in film production in New Orleans and later moved back to Chicago where she joined the Directors Guild of America. After years of working on commercial spots, industrials, educational and feature films, she founded CFA when the Chicago Public Library could no longer keep their massive 16mm film collection. CFA currently archives and preserves over 100 collections consisting of over 25,000 films that reflect the Midwest.