

Disneyland Dream

By Liz Coffey

The history of 20th century America was written on film, and personal histories are no exception. Although Hollywood has often focused movie lenses on the life of the American people, it was the amateur filmmakers who were best placed to record the intimacy and everyday reality of their own lives.

Working alone and in hobby clubs, amateurs have been making films since the beginning, working in a parallel dimension to the pros. These one-camera productions focused on all manner of things, from simple family celebrations and events to procedural documentations. Reversal film stock, first available in the 1920s, made filmmaking easy and fairly inexpensive; the film that went through the camera was developed as a positive, then run through a projector. Use of reversal film also meant individual home movies and amateur films were unique, usually existing only in one, easily damaged, physical object.

Films were cut and glued together at home; on-screen titles were created by the filmmaker or shot professionally through a mail-order or camera shop service. Usually these films were silent (amateur cameras didn't have sound pickups) but tape recordings or live narration often accompanied them during screenings. Living rooms became cinemas, and those filmmakers with more ambition entered contests, showing their films at clubs and local events, occasionally on a national scale.

Lifelong amateur moviemaker Robbins Barstow brought passion and playfulness to all aspects of his life. With wife Meg and their three children, Robbins not only documented everyday life in home movies, but also tackled theatrical themes, re-interpreting Tarzan as a teenager from his suburban, film-loving perspective, and creating engaging travelogues and documentaries later in life. In addition to amateur filmmaking, he was a conscientious objector in WWII, a conservationist, an educator, and an advocate for whales.



In this frame enlargement, Mary, Daniel and David Barstow hold a handmade poster summarizing the film's plot. Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.

In 1956, when Scotch brand cellophane tape announced a slogan contest for which the prize was a trip to the newly opened Disneyland, Robbins enlisted the help of his entire family and documented the adventure with his 16mm camera. The resulting epic, "Disneyland Dream," is a well-paced, playful documentary/home movie/amateur film, complete with visual jokes. Although long for an amateur film at nearly 35 minutes, it is compelling, and moves along jauntily.

"Disneyland Dream" is an adventure in three acts, each of nearly equal length. Act one: *Connecticut, 1956*. Scotch Tape announces a contest, and the entire Barstow clan takes part. Robbins documents the affair, from the promotional advertising of the contest to the delivery of a telegram. Act two: *Barstows Go West!* The family heads to California in their matching but various colored Davy Crockett jackets, which will help us to recognize them in a crowd. Final Act: *The Disneyland Dream Realized*. The family spends four days exploring the theme park, and the 16mm camera loaded with Kodachrome is like a sixth member of the family, the one who remembers every detail.

The narration by Robbins was there from the beginning. In a 2009 interview with UnionDocs, Robbins recalled showing the film to friends and neighbors soon after it was completed, talking his audience through the story. Eventually, after multiple show-

ings, the narration took firm shape, and the polished version Robbins later recorded was well known and well rehearsed.

Something of an archivist at heart, Robbins had his films transferred to VHS in the 1990s, allowing him to record for posterity what was usually his live narration. He was able to distribute his films on tape, later on DVD, and showed them on local cable access television.

In 2003, Robbins, then age eighty-four, made the trek from Whethersfield, CT to the first annual Home Movie Day in Boston, MA, having heard about the event at his local public library. His films "Tarzan and the Rocky Gorge" (1936) and its sequel, made 40 years later, were a big hit.

Robbins attended many subsequent Home Movie Day events, sparking a re-discovery of his work. His enthusiasm had not waned since he started making films as a teenager in the 1930s, and finding a new, enthusiastic audience in amateur-movie-loving film archivists and the Center for Home Movies, only fanned the flames.

Robbins and his wife subsequently traveled all over the country with his films and he became an advocate for the appreciation of home movies and amateur film. He was able to distribute his own films internationally on "the world-wide internet." He also

made them available at local libraries and donated the originals to the Library of Congress in 2007, where, of course, he brought his movie camera to record meeting the Librarian of Congress and signing the agreement gifting his films to our country.

How many of us wish we had our family's adventures documented with such loving care? The Barstow's recorded memory is added to the national patrimony with the donation of the film to the Library of Congress, a stand-in for many Americans' mid-century experience.

Born in 1919, only seven years after the introduction of the first amateur film stock, Robbins died in 2010. His eye, voice, and sense of humor live on in "Disneyland Dream," the fifth home movie added to the National Film Registry.

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

Liz Coffey has been the film conservator for the Harvard Library since 2006, and has been working with film in one way or another since 1996. She has run a Home Movie Day event annually since 2003, and occasionally shoots her own home movies on Super 8. She is a cyclist, a vegetarian, an atheist, and collects typewriters and toasters.