

## From Stump to Ship

By Karan Sheldon

“From Stump to Ship” is a narrative of the Maine lumber woods in the first part of the twentieth century. The film is a complete record of the annual cycle of a long log business, sawing forest trees to make boards: winter cutting and transport, river driving, mill operations, and sailing finished lumber to market. “Great footage of inestimable historic value,” wrote Malcolm T. Taylor, Holderness, NH (March 1986), “There is so little documentation of forest work in the East.”

The footage was shot by Alfred K. Ames (1866-1950), owner of the Machias Lumber Company, in the last months before he sold 115,000 acres of company-owned woods to a paper pulp company, since long logs for construction no longer yielded profits. Ames enlisted Washington, D.C., physician Howard Kane (1887-1946), to shoot interior footage in the sawmill. While there is no direct evidence, it is likely that Kane delivered the processed reversal footage to Ames, who edited the film. In creating a record of the Machias River area in Washington County, Maine, Ames captured landscape and technology, the forestry practices of a cohort of workers in his employ, not including women such as Agnes Dinsmore, who worked for the company in town. Ames is not known to have made any other films and there are no known outtakes. But Dr. Howard Kane, the friend who shot the mill interiors, was an avid amateur filmmaker. Kane, from Machias, Maine, was a George Washington University obstetrician. His 16mm collection is archived at Northeast Historic Film, [www.oldfilm.org](http://www.oldfilm.org). Kane’s work, in the [James Marsh Collection](#), includes travel film, views of Machias, and medical reels.

I propose that “From Stump to Ship” is two films. Alfred Ames’s first production with no titles, intertitles or credits, was made in 1929-1930 as a silent, edited, black and white 16mm film that was accompanied with live narration read by Ames to his audiences in the 1930s. The second version (1985), also a 16mm production, is an edited work using the footage with added titles, a recorded soundtrack from Ames’s typed narration, along with traditional fiddle music. Likely it is the second one, copyright University of Maine, Orono, that is primarily thought of as the title on the National Film Registry.

Had Ames’s narration script not survived, the visuals alone convey the sense of hard winter work with saws and axes, men with horses and the Lombard log hauler moving the trees to



*“From Stump to Ship” frame enlargement. Alfred Ames on the right, with a Machias Lumber Company employee. Courtesy Northeast Historic Film.*

the river to wait for the spring thaw, and the river drive moving logs from the upriver forest down to the mill in the town of Machias on the Atlantic coast. With the 13-page narration, the men become individuals with names; the camps, river places and vessels are identified, and the character of Ames as a paternalistic, nostalgic business owner becomes clear. Alfred Ames’s tone is predominantly pride in forest management practices—and melancholy at the end of his era. He jokes about the immobile men lined up outside the woods camp for a group shot saying, “but I did get a kick out of Paul Mealey,” as one man dances a step.

When the film was relaunched in 1985, some long-lived audience members remembered the era of axes, horse-logging and river drives, and many more were engaged by the completeness of the narrative and its flow as a work-process film. I would argue that “From Stump to Ship” exemplifies a genre of amateur expression that will become even more broadly recognized: works that skillfully deploy film in inscribing first-person knowledge and feelings for work life. “[Maine Marine Worms](#)” (1941) by Ivan Flye is a Kodachrome example.

For both versions of “From Stump to Ship,” the specifics of filmic performance added to the significance of the work. Ames was a public figure, serving three terms in the Maine Senate. The Machias Lumber Company employed Washington County workers and had a company store. Ames was owner of the Machias Lumber Company and president of the Machias Savings Bank. He twice ran unsuccessfully for governor of Maine, in 1932 and 1934. In the first race the film was his primary campaign tool, as recalled by those who saw the film

and as reported in the press. "He is making no political speeches. At the same time he is talking a lot. Sounds odd, but it is true. His is a motion picture campaign." (*Lewiston Evening Journal*, April 23, 1932, Magazine section, A-2; also *Machias Valley News*, May 4, 1932.)

The screening sites in Ames's 1932 Republican gubernatorial campaign, "churches, granges, Legion posts, any sort of an organization can get him..." resonate for the second version, too, since 16mm prints with recorded narration and music toured Maine in 1985 and 1986, exhibited in grange halls and other public gathering places. Funded by the Maine Humanities Council and Champion International Corporation, reaching audiences in dozens of free screenings, "From Stump to Ship: A 1930 Logging Film" (this version's full title) in the mid-1980s was an artifact of the end of 16mm. As a marker of technological transition, in this case from film to analog video, the 16mm presentation tour is an echo of the first "From Stump to Ship," which marked the conclusion of the area's lumber industry.

Creating an audio recording of Ames's typed script resulted in a synthetic object that obscures the first film in several ways. The actor's voice (Tim Sample) has a personality of its own, very unlike Ames's delivery, according to elders who remembered him. The new 16mm version and soundtrack were edited for projection at 24 frames per second, a regrettable technical compromise. Moreover, the context of the film's creation and use are thrust into the background with few viewers knowing how Ames used the film, including at the Machias Lumber Company workers' lunch in March 1930, or the position of this work in amateur, industrial and political moving image history.

The work has been used in social studies classes, selling over 14,000 copies in the hard media era (16mm prints, VHS and DVD) and being viewed 100,000+ times online. "From Stump to Ship" in the twenty-first century represents an artifact in the developing understanding of nonfiction film. It may be seen as a hybrid factual work and advocacy piece, recording a company's logging practices in a time of technological transition. "Ames's system of practical forestry relied upon the reproductive capacity of the spruce-fir forest and involved commonsense measures to protect young growth and encourage rapid regeneration." (Richard Judd, *History*, University of Maine, Orono, in *From Stump to Ship: A 1930 Logging Film* viewer guide, 1985.) When "From Stump to Ship: A 1930 Logging Film," premiered as a reconstruction in 1985, it was considered a documentary. As amateur film gained ground among media historians, in some quarters it was thought of as an amateur industrial. Considering the film's intent and uses, it might also be considered an Educational film, Environmental film, Autobiographical film, and arguably, a precursor to

Political television commercials. (See Library of Congress Genre/Form Terms, <http://id.loc.gov/authorities/genreForms.html>)

At the end of the 20th century, "From Stump to Ship: A 1930 Logging Film," seen on 16mm prints, was recognized as an exemplary project by the National Endowment for the Humanities Division of State Programs and reviewed in journals including *The Public Historian* and *Forest History*. It was later preserved to 35mm film by Cineric and has been presented with live reading of the original script, while projected at 18 frames per second.

#### SEE ALSO

Library of Congress catalog record for "From Stump to Ship," <http://lccn.loc.gov/88708240>

"From Stump to Ship" in the Fogler Library Collection, Northeast Historic Film, Bucksport, Maine  
[http://oldfilm.org/collection/index.php/Detail/Collection/Show/collection\\_id/79](http://oldfilm.org/collection/index.php/Detail/Collection/Show/collection_id/79)

Jones, Janna. 2003. "From Forgotten Film to a Film Archive: The Curious History of "From Stump to Ship"." *Film History*. 15 (2): 193-202.

Eagan, Daniel. 2010. *America's film legacy the authoritative guide to the landmark movies in the National Film Registry*. New York: Continuum. See pp. 175-6

Ames Family Papers at Raymond H. Fogler Library Special Collections, University of Maine,  
<http://www.library.umaine.edu/speccoll/FindingAids/AmesFamilyinventory.htm>

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

*Karan Sheldon is co-founder and board member of northern New England's moving image archives, Northeast Historic Film, www.oldfilm.org, recipient of the 2013 Silver Light Award from the Association of Moving Image Archivists. The archives, in the 1916 Alamo Theatre in Bucksport, Maine, is home to an annual summer film symposium. Her project, Poets of Their Own Acts: Personal Films 1915-1960, will bring home movies and amateur films into fine art museum galleries.*