

Cologne: From the Diary of Ray and Esther

By Scott Simmon

From the National Film Preservation Foundation (NFPF) Treasures of the American Archives DVD program notes, by permission of NFPF and Scott Simmon



Amateur filmmaking captures lives and communities overlooked by professionals. “Cologne: From the Diary of Ray and Esther” is a superb example of how home-movie practice can produce a widely revealing social documentary.

Filmed in 1939 by the town doctor, “Cologne” is a personalized portrait of a farming community that merited only a single sentence in the WPA’s 1938 guidebook to Minnesota: “COLOGNE (945 alt., 355 pop.) is a German community named for the ancient city on the Rhine.” Dr. Raymond Dowidat and his wife, Esther, arrived in 1937 for his first practice after internship, and the impulse for the film seems to have arisen from their desire to document Cologne before they moved on to his next position in Minneapolis.

The film is “amateur” but highly crafted, tightly edited, and not at all naïve. It is unified by the clever conceit of Esther’s diary entries, date July through September 1939, which serve as most of the silent film’s intertitles. (Many amateurs had titles professionally photographed, as in “The Zeppelin ‘Hindenburg,’” but others took a homemade approach, as did Rev. Snodgrass with his sermon-board titles in “West Virginia, the State Beautiful.” “Cologne”’s thoughtful, canny structure begins with bucolic dairy farms and grain harvests and moves steadily toward quirkier aspects of this particular community. Indeed, Dr. Dowidat’s position in the town, as an outside who had come to know it well, allows the film both obvious love for the community and certain distance from it. There is affectionate wit to the sequence demonstrating that Cologne was “at

*Esther Dowidat writes in the diary that served as the focal point for her husband Ray’s home movies.
Courtesy National Film Preservation Foundation.*

one time” an important railway stop. But there is some irony, and darker visuals, in the intimate final sequence about the role of saloons in the social life of a town populated by the descendants of German settlers. “In Cologne, everybody drinks beer,” Esther’s diary tells us, and the town doctor could hardly have missed the less happy results. The diary’s closing reference to “bitter” memories goes unillustrated.

About the Preservation

The original 16mm film was rediscovered by Adelle Johnson, the filmmakers’ daughter. She was surprised to find it something more than a family movie and donated it to the Minnesota Historical Society, which made new preservation copies of the fragile acetate film in 1999 through *Treasures of American Film Archives* funding.

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

*Scott Simmon is Professor of English at UC Davis. His books include *The Films of D.W. Griffith* (1993) and *The Invention of the Western Film* (2003). Simmon’s informative essays have accompanied the NFPF Treasures DVDs as well as the Foundation’s free online release of Orson Welles’ recently discovered and preserved film “Too Much Johnson.”*