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'Miracle' Film Process Boon At Southbridge

By WILLIAM F. HOMER, JR.

SOUTHBRIDGE—American Optical Company has driven a spectacular \$12,000,000 stake into show business after a century and a quarter of making eye-

glass lenses and frames.

This is no optical illusion. It is rather a wide-screen, 2½-year "miracle" film process out of the Cinerama mold, called Todd-AO.

The "Todd" part is for Mike Todd, cigar-waving Broadway producer whose insistence and persistence finally led to "Cinerama out of one hole," — one camera instead of three.

4000 EMPLOYEES

AO, naturally, stands for American Optical, whose 4000 employees here and a \$70,000,000 yearly sales backbone from its regular products suddenly gave both skills and dollars an unexpected Hollywood touch.

What happens when the formerly austere largest maker of ophthalmic and optical products acquires a P. T. Barnum complex? Less than two weeks old is the first inclusive verdict from New York's Rivoli Theater.

"Oklahoma" is Okay!"

The new Todd-AO, draws its "miracle" tag from an unbelievable 2½ year development through two separate corporations.

The change from optimism to "Oklahoma" has yoked such improbable companions as Todd, American Optical's scholarly Dr. Brian O'Brien, 150 company engineers and researchers, a Dutch projector maker, filmdom's George Skouras, a devastating flood and a reluctant Rodgers and Hammerstein.

Serious, informative William F. Peck, now president and general manager of AO's motion picture products division here, after years as head of the Buffalo instrument division, can't estimate what Todd-AO means to the optical maker's profits. It's mostly on a fee and future dividend basis.

He can tell you how closely "Oklahoma" came to being rechristened "By the Waters of the Quinebaug."

PLANT FLOODED

Just two months and three days ago, four feet of Quinebaug water, revved up by a broken dam, raced through the lavish reception room where we talk. Thirteen feet, seven inches of water filled the sprawling brick main plant, one of 10 buildings, below the second floor stairway, and "wooden desks hung from the steam pipes."

In the path of the river, as it whirled flood and debris down Stricken Mechanic street, stood AO's research center full of Todd-AO equipment.

"Only good fortune and good construction saved the lab," Peck explains.

"Four feet of water raged outside the windows, as the research center became an island. Fortunately, doors and windows sat so tightly that only an inch of water seeped onto the floor. The only real Todd-AO delay we had was from the power failure."

The plant as a whole rallied from disaster as fast as a ball player to a steak dinner. By Oct. 1, in a month and a half, full production in all sections was resumed. Public Relations Director George Anderson places total damage at "nearer \$1,000,000" than first reports of \$10,000,000.

"We did work we could not have hired at any price," he explains, "in the greatest show of human spirit we ever saw. Time off meant nothing. We had a coffer dam under a corner of the ruined power house in three days. We opened up building walls to drive in tractors to scoop out mud."

SOUGHT SINGLE CAMERA

The Mike Todd spark of persistence that led to Todd-AO burned just as bright. He had worked on the Cinerama "roller coaster" film. He thought the process too complicated (three cameras, three projectors, three operators) and too costly. He started hunting for his "Einstein of the optical dodge."

Todd met Dr. Brian O'Brien, then director of the Institute of Optics at University of Rochester. The scientist was cool at first to the single camera idea, advised visiting the principal optical companies for necessary money and brains.

The Todd-AO laboratory luck in the flood held earlier. When Todd came around to visit American Optical, there was O'Brien installed as vice-president and director of research.

With O'Brien, younger AO executives convinced the then elderly president, Walter A. Stewart, that the Todd idea was feasible and that it represented progress from lenses and frames.

AO funds and manpower went to work in November, 1952, under O'Brien and E. Weldon Schumacher, then vice-president, now president of the company. By enlisting outside help, an estimated three years work was completed in four months.

By April, 1953, Todd-AO was into the development stage.

TODD-AO 'BUNDLE'

For financing this Todd, Skouras and AO formed Magna Theater Corporation. By June, 1954, Todd-AO Corporation was set up for licensing and commercial distribution. Magna and AO have equal voting power in this.

Technically, the Todd-AO "bundle" includes 70 mm. film, double the standard width; a tall, wide, deeply curved screen to cut distortion; a projector that handles 35 mm. as well as 70 mm. film widths; and a camera whose nine inch "bug-eye" lens gives a 128 degree field of vision. Cinerama gets only 145 degrees with three cameras. In Todd-AO, too, the audience "gets into the act."

Of the Todd-AO future, although there's "no business like show business," the optical company officials see it frosting on the cake. Lenses and frames are still the bread and butter.

But Todd, on his own, is using the process to shoot Jules Verne's "Eighty Days Around the World." "South Pacific" is in the offing. And even the hard-to-please Rodgers and Hammerstein agree that in the Todd-AO "Oklahoma," the corn is really "as high as an elephant's eye."