

INTERVIEW WITH STEPHEN LABOVSKY

Steven S. Rowland

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STEVEN ROWLAND: Tell me a little bit about your interest in American history and how that's kind of changing your life at this point.

STEPHEN LABOVSKY: Well, my interest in American history grew out of some projects that I've been involved with, pieces that I've done for museums. Also, I've always been interested in reading history, and more so the popular history books that you see on the best-seller list: David McCullough and Joe Ellis.

However, as I started making films for museums that had a relationship to historical matters, I just got more and more interested in it. Various assignments helped me to understand a little bit more what historians do.

SR: What do you need to do to make a historical documentary film, in terms of the skills as a documentary producer versus the skills as a historian?

SL: Well as I say, I'm really learning about the skills of the historian. I oftentimes can fault the so-called history documentary, where there's no real peer review. There's no real interest in accuracy. I don't think any historian could get away with what a film documentarian gets away with. You know, it's a wholly different discipline.

The tendency of a filmmaker is to produce a film with not that much interest in [historical] accuracy. I mean, you can use a single source and never really question if there are other opinions. One of the things that I am interested in as I go forward is to somehow strike that balance between the roles of the filmmaker and the person who writes history. To marry those two tasks would be important.

I think a lot of universities today are kind of realizing that history doesn't only have to be told as a written document. It can be a moving picture, or an audio document. And you know, it's just another way of expressing it. But I think you do have to start from the historian's point of view, not from the filmmaker's.

SR: Well, that's important. Are there particular things that you put into place when you're planning or producing the film to address this issue and keep you from having potential inaccuracies or problems?

SL: Well, that's evolving as I learn more about history as a discipline. The thing to avoid is kind of just starting at the beginning, and going from point to point to point, without really doing a lot of hard research to begin with. The history documentary, as I see it, and as I see a lot of people who practice that, tends to use a lot of academics.

So I think that it would be important for all documentarians who are working in history to do all of the research first, instead of finding yourself going from person to person to person.

SR: Well to me, in my productions, sometimes the interviews are part of the whole research process. I can't do the research first, and then do the interviews, because the interviews are the research.

SL: Well, okay, but I've realized that there's a lot more to the process. I'm taking a different view, that you should gather up more material before you actually conduct the interview.

SR: Oh, well I don't go into the interviews unprepared.

SL: Correct, but if you knew, for instance, that there are a number of different points of view about a particular topic. Take the American Revolution, for example: was the Revolution a conservative or a liberal movement? There's a great amount of material on either side, and it's been debated in American history for well over a hundred years. Now, if I go to the person who subscribes to one of those two doctrines and I present that, without at least knowing that there's another viewpoint, am I really doing the job that a historian would do? I think you should take in all of those points of view.

You also have peer review, and in peer review, you have someone who can say to you, "You're missing a viewpoint," or "You're missing an element that's important."

SR: Before we started, you told me that your career evolution has been from working on Madison Avenue as an advertising producer and writer, to coming down to Wilmington and working with museums.

SL: And corporations.

SR: And now you're going into historical documentaries. Is it financially feasible to make historical documentaries now?

SL: It remains to be seen [laughs].

SR: Is that your plan?

SL: Yes. The digital revolution has allowed me to own broadcast-quality cameras and post-production gear. Ten years ago, I would probably have been in an on-line studio doing the final piece. Today, I have a broadcast-quality system and I have to go out for some graphics, some additional work, but for the most part I can do it all in-house. So as the digital revolution goes faster and faster and faster, the costs come down and down and down.

SR: Okay, we may get back to this, but let's talk about this film in specific.

SL: The title of the film, *In the Dead Fire's Ashes*, is borrowed from a line in a poem by Langston Hughes. The poem is called "The South." A line goes: "Scratching in the dead fire's ashes, looking for a black man's bones." It's a reference to this really bizarre practice in lynchings, of souvenir seekers who came to look for relics, you know, body parts. It's come to mean, for me, a kind of metaphor for the things that people do as they research the subject of lynching, that is, kind of scratching through the ashes to maybe discover something new about the topic and to bring it to a wider audience. There's been lots and lots of work done, and it's very academic.

SR: Okay, and what are the origins of this particular film? How did you get started?

SL: I was doing a film for the Farnsworth Art Museum in 2000. The title of the film was *One Nation: Patriots and Pirates*. The subject was an exhibition of patriotic paintings, or illustrations, by N.C. Wyeth and Jamie Wyeth. I think the exhibition started at the U.S. Capitol, and then it went on to four museums around mostly the East Coast, including the Brandywine River Museum. The Farnsworth wanted a companion piece. So I was doing research on N.C. Wyeth, reading a biography by David Michaelis. N.C. Wyeth came to Wilmington, Delaware, in the spring of [1903], and two months later the incident of George White, and the lynching of George White, occurred. Wyeth had written a couple of letters to his mother and they were referenced in this book. So

I actually spoke to David Michaelis, the author of the book, I asked him, just as an aside, "What is this story?" He said, "Oh, it's a very well-known story." I said, "A burning? Thousands of people burning a black man in Wilmington, Delaware?" And I just sort of put this idea in the back of my mind, as we all do, thinking "that would make a good documentary."

A year, year and a half later, I was in the library researching something else, and I came across the microfilm of the two newspapers in Wilmington: the *Morning News* and what was called *Every Evening*. The date was June 16th, and there it was, this huge, huge story [on Helen Bishop's death].

What struck me about it was the incident happened twenty-seven miles from where the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution were signed. This was something that was a story about Wilmington, but for me there was a wider implication, because it had all of the elements of every kind of lynching that ever occurred in the United States, not just in the North, but also in the South.

SR: Meaning what?

SL: Well, it was called a spectacle lynching, which was a thing that happened predominantly in the South. And all of the so-called lynchcraft—all of the things that went into a mob having the task of dispensing with another human being by means of fire, was something, in terms of lynchcraft, was something that people knew about, because they read about it in other newspapers. It just mirrored everything that you read about lynchings that occurred in other places, particularly in the South. And it happened in the North. And that's also true of other northern lynchings that happened, say, in Coatesville, Pennsylvania, and in Ohio and so forth. These were all very similar kinds of acts, and they always reflected what happened in the South. And so I said, "Well, I'd be interested in making a film about lynching." It just so happens it's an account of a northern lynching.

SR: You made a reference, or there is a reference in the film, that there might have been, almost, a professional lyncher who came up from the South?

SL: I included that because it appeared so often in the accounts from the newspapers. And that's something else we can get into, because there was very little primary source material that I could find. A large part of

this story is based on newspaper accounts, newspapers not only in Delaware, but in Philadelphia. The *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*—it was a national and international story.

So I reconstructed the story of the lynching based on newspaper accounts, which were very inaccurate. But the story of the Virginian, who was supposedly part of the lynching, I've always been very dubious about. I had to start selecting what I thought was hyperbole, or exaggeration, from what wasn't. But there were so many accounts of this man I felt I had to include it.

SR: Remind me, what was the length of time between when [White] was arrested and when he was murdered?

SL: It was exactly one week between the arrest and the burning.

SR: So these newspaper articles were basically relegated to that one week?

SL: No, they went on after that. There was all sort of public opinion. You know, ministers would write. And of course, the aftermath also dealt with a race riot that happened immediately after an individual was arrested. There was a grand jury that heard evidence against eight individuals who were considered ring leaders in the lynching. So the story really goes on well beyond the actual lynching itself. Robert Elwood, the minister who was held accountable for inciting a lot of the mob action, was tried before the [New Castle Presbytery]. So there were many stories related to his so-called trial. It was really just sort of an inquest.

SR: Robert Elwood gave a sermon on whether or not this person should be lynched?

SL: I think if you read the text very carefully, he—I kind of always liken it to Marc Antony's speech in *Julius Caesar*, where he's really playing both sides of the street. [Elwood's] actually saying that White should be lynched if certain things aren't fulfilled, if he's not brought immediately to trial. He really was not in any way advising against it. In fact, the title of his sermon is "Should the Murderer of Helen Bishop be Lynched?" And he never answers the question.

SR: One of your jobs, in putting this together, is to be a storyteller, to be a historian. How do you balance these roles? What was your story that you were trying to tell here?

SL: I really was trying to take that story as I understood it and present it without any of my own editorial views. Like all filmmakers, at least I've always understood as an editor, that editing is not putting things together. Editing is like sculpting; you have a big hunk of clay and you take things away. And what remains is the piece of work, it's the art within it. And just as you're recording an hour and a half, and I'm sure it will be ten percent of what I said, you'll have to take all this stuff away. So in the case of *In the Dead Fire's Ashes*, or other pieces I've done, I assemble a lot of material, and then start removing it. Underneath all of that is, I hope, a reflection of what could have happened.

SR: What were the initial stages of making the film? How did you decide to make it? Where did you go first? What about the funding? And then after we talk about that, I want you to tell me about how you chose the interviewees.

SL: Well, I kind of initiated it after doing preliminary research, just by going out and shooting what we call B roll: scenics of where it happened and countryside that I thought might have evoked the way it looked back in the time of, in 1903. And I think I maybe conducted one or two interviews, and then I really kind of stopped for a while. And I got a small grant from the Delaware Council on the Arts, which was my incentive to get the thing done.

This grant was pretty modest, but even so, it gave me that real impetus to go. And then I just proceeded without any other money. The lion's share of the cost is something I can take care of myself, because I have the equipment and the ability. So I was able to really complete it within about nine months from the time that I got the grant.

Some of the interviewers came out of just my research, and finding names, like Dennis Downey, who is an authority on vigilante justice, and in particular on some of the northern lynchings that happened right around the time of the George White lynching. And of course, Dennis co-wrote a book on this event that happened in Coatesville about ten years later [1911]. And I had contacted him and we had some discussions about it.

And then other things kind of fell into place. Roger Lane, who's also in the film, has done a lot of work on nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century criminal justice matters. He was kind of an obvious choice. Of course, when I found Roger, I also found that he had done a

book on William Dorsey, who had an organization called the Philadelphia African American Historical Society. And it was basically [Dorsey] collecting newspaper clippings, and some memorabilia, of anything that related to African Americans in the area. He was very interested in almost anything.

I think the printing presses in Philadelphia and New York were a lot more sophisticated. They were able to do a lot more graphic stuff. And I found political cartoons that were related to it as well. So that was a huge find for me, because it really opened up a lot more secondary source material. A researcher that I had engaged—which was another really big break—found some primary source information in the Chester County Court House.

There was actually material from an earlier trial of George White. The most interesting thing was it was a sexual assault case and it mirrored the Helen Bishop story. It was a young African-American girl who had been attacked, allegedly, by George White, on her way home from church. And she was attacked in the road, and that mirrored what happened to Helen Bishop. And we found other things, like some of George White's prison records.

And I think that my approach to the film really changed dramatically when I saw that material from that earlier trial. I mean, up until that point, I thought I was working on some kind of a detective mystery. . . did George White really do it? There were all sorts of questions about—and they were only based on what I could see in the newspaper. And when I found that, the court records, it really cast me down. I had, in the back of my mind, a story that was going to be about an African-American farm laborer who was unjustly accused. And I decided—and it was a good lesson for me—I kind of figured out: that really wasn't my job, you know. It was my job to, to somehow present the information, and not to try to solve a mystery that I could never solve anyway.

SR: What were you looking for from the interviewees? What were you looking for them to tell the audience?

SL: Well, I was looking for them to really comment and elaborate on, not necessarily George White, but for instance, well, Dennis Downey talks about northern lynchings, and talks about this—what he calls the “summer of our discontent”—this whole batch of spectacle lynchings

and burnings that happened in a very short span of time above the Mason-Dixon line.

I really wanted Philip Dray, who in my opinion has written probably the best general book on lynching, to present the whole topic of vigilante justice and how it evolved, and specifically his thoughts on spectacle lynching and burnings. You know, there were all manners, he says in the film, of lynchings, but this was probably one of the more dramatic.

So I really wanted to give people an idea about what lynchings were. I think I'm like most people who kind of get their notion of a lynching from, you know, a song like "Strange Fruit": "Black man's hanging from a Southern Tree." It's inaccurate in the sense that it didn't always happen in the South, and it certainly wasn't always a hanging. In fact, it evolved into much more brutal ways of execution—the burning, which is probably the worst you can imagine.

So one of my intentions was, after learning about the subject myself, to really try to explain to people what lynching really was. They were these huge spectacles, thousands and thousands of people. You know, they were like camp meetings. Trains were put on so people could arrive. They said, "There's going to be a lynching tomorrow," you know. And that was shocking to me and I thought it would be a good place to introduce the whole story of lynching within the context of my film. I really think that the film is not just a local story; it has a national implication.

SR: Let me ask you a little bit about some of the film techniques that you used. There's a kind of stark contrast that you set up in the film between the story as it's evolving, and the pastoral themes, the beauty of the area, and the music. Please talk about what your editing concept was, where the music came from, and what was the intention of that juxtaposition?

SL: I think in telling any—working on any historical documentary, you have that huge problem of reenactments. If you're doing a subject before 1900, you're going to be hard-pressed to find moving images. You're going to find some still images.

So you have this question and this problem: you need supporting material. So the first thing is to somehow represent a little bit of that story, and do it in a re-creation. And I guess in trying to do that, I had

the added problem that I didn't want to represent the actual lynching itself, the burning. I didn't think that was appropriate. And so the other problem was to find a place where I could film that the costs were not going to be prohibitive in terms of having to re-create the period.

And my answer was Lancaster County, just over the border from Chester County, in this valley where you still have people farming with horses. There is a kind of a beautiful pastoral scene that a lot of the houses aren't really twentieth century, or don't appear that way. So I was lucky enough to find that area. And then to find a Presbyterian Church where they were interested in the story and were willing to become my mob, as it were. So I was able to get seventy-five, eighty people, you know, in a setting that I thought was—that looked a lot like what I imagined the area where George White had been burned [pause].

SR: What about the music?

SL: I originally engaged a very close friend of mine, his name is Larry Hochman, to do the music. Larry's had three Tony nominations for Best Orchestration, and is a tremendous writer in his own right I know. First, I went to my stock library, and started looking for material that I thought would fit for the rough cut, and then I would take it to Larry, for him to do an original score. He told me that I had to make a certain date or he couldn't be available. And as it turned out, I was just not able to do that. I had an event—a little disaster in the shooting, which sort of prohibited me from making the day. So he went off into another project. Fortunately, the more I listened to the stock music, the more I thought, "Well you know, I think this kind of works!" [laughs].