

# New York World's Fair, 1939-1940

By Caitlin McGrath, Ph.D.

I came to Bucksport in July 2010 to review films from more than 15 NHF collections containing footage of the New York World's Fair, 1939-1940. The relatively ephemeral time frame of fairs as well as their conscious (re)construction of society through exhibitions often brings into sharp relief developing trends and preoccupations. Moving images were central to the 1939 New York World's Fair; around 500 films were shown on the grounds to help establish the Fair's theme of "The World of Tomorrow."

Thanks to the promotional work of Kodak, the Fair was a frequent subject for home movies that offer contemporary, immediate reactions of what each filmmaker found most striking. I got a better sense of who these filmmakers were by not only viewing the original films, but also reading the collection notes (which contain information given by the donor) and viewing other films shot by the same filmmaker. With all these pieces to the puzzle, I began to build a picture of what kind of filmmakers they were, how often they made films, what types of events and subjects they chose to film, whether they shot on 8mm or 16mm, and how they chose to edit (by looking at the actual film and counting splices).

While images from home movies of the New York World's Fair have been circulated, as in the **Medicus Collection** in the Internet Archive, they are not the predominating images of the Fair. The iconic images come instead from official sources presented by the Fair planners and participating commercial and industrial companies. In these are ubiquitous panoramic camera movements showcasing the fairgrounds, in particular the signature buildings of the Fair, the Trylon and Perisphere, as well as the gargantuan George Washington statue.

Kodak and the Amateur Cinema League both provided advice to amateur filmmakers as to how best to film the Fair through their publications, *Ciné-Kodak* and *Movie Makers*. NHF has thoughtfully preserved both in their

periodicals collection. In these articles, home-movie makers were provided with technical advice about shooting in the unusual environment of the Fair, with advice about the exposures required and the filters necessary for accurately filming in such a bright, white-washed outdoor space. In addition, both periodicals cautioned against the temptation to pan buildings too quickly or to film too close to the subject of the shot (buildings, fountains, displays, etc.).

## Cracks in Vision of the Future

The home movies that I viewed contain the iconic images, but most do not adhere to this advice about how best to film them. Instead, they reflect the overwhelming nature of the fairgrounds, manifested in shots that repeatedly sweep across façades and jump from one pavilion to the next, often in no coherent order. Broadly speaking, image-making is to claim an object for oneself. The overarching motto of the Fair was "The World of Tomorrow," and to film the Fair meant to have a stake in this vision of the future. These films, however, also reveal the cracks in the vision of the future not acknowledged by the Fair planners. The Fair was spectacular and striking, but as is seen in these films, it was also mundane and pedestrian. These films capture not only the fireworks, but the dirty puddles, too.

Of the films and collections I looked at, the most exciting is the **Cyrus Pinkham Collection**. Shooting on 16mm, Cyrus was a committed recorder of important events that occurred in his family. He captured memories with a level of artistic awareness; his skillful use of match-on-action editing, dynamic camera movement, shot/reverse shot, and close-ups elevate his films above standard home movie fare. His film of the Fair begins with a pan over numerous publications featuring stories on the Fair, (newspapers, magazines, posters), and the shots give not just information, but whimsical commentary on the events. His attention to composition required a level of premeditation that is rare in home movies where the immediacy of recording the event usually takes

precedence. In his film of the Fair, Pinkham seems to have utilized the advice of both Kodak and the Amateur Cinema League. Remarkably, however, many of these techniques are also in evidence in his films dating from two years earlier. Had I not seen all of his films, I might have assumed he simply was following the ACL's or Kodak's guides. Instead, his Fair film is one highlight from an entire body of work of a skilled and sensitive chronicler of his environment. Sadly, the Pinkham films suffer from vinegar syndrome and are badly in need of preservation.



*Cyrus Pinkham, Cyrus Pinkham Collection.*

Taken together, the home movies I viewed at NHF reveal the variety of home-movie-making practices at one of the most filmed events of the 1930s. The films were a memento for these fairgoers, a way to hold onto their place in the Fair. The most ubiquitous souvenir of the Fair came from General Motors' Futurama exhibit. Unlike the souvenirs of other pavilions and exhibits, which were frequently scaled-down models of the building, or miniature versions of their signature product, the Futurama memento was simply a button that read "I have seen the future." The appeal of having one foot perpetually in The World of Tomorrow is clearly in the minds of these filmmakers. The implied motto that unites these films is, "I have filmed the future." ■

Does your family have amateur film of the New York World's Fair? We're becoming familiar with Zones, buildings, amusements, sculptures. Just ask Aimee Dus, our spring semester Simmons intern. Please join us at [fairfilm.org](http://fairfilm.org).