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Eradication Campaign

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# THE BUREAUCRATIC ACTIVIST

JENNIFER ZWARICH

Federal Filmmakers and Social Change  
in the U.S. Department of Agriculture's  
Tick Eradication Campaign

Ed F. Pickering, traveling motion picture exhibitor and federal agent, was proud of his work. On August 25, 1922, in a lengthy letter to his supervising officer in Washington, DC, he indicated as much. Pickering had encountered many remote landscapes and isolated peoples during the previous year's travels around the Southern United States in the Bureau of Animal Industry's (BAI) specially appointed motion picture truck. On one occasion, after spending seven laborious hours traversing a 9-mile stretch of very rough road (which required jacking the truck over tree stumps and rocks and even towing it with a team of mules), he and his fellow government officers approached one rural mountain village with what must have been a sense of trepidation. Only a few weeks earlier, a lecturer on tick eradication had been crudely stoned by an unappreciative audience in the same village. Pickering hoped the motion pictures he carried would secure a friendlier reception.<sup>1</sup>

His program of films was drawn from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's expanding motion picture catalogue (Figure 1). On this trip, it included a few short

subjects about sheep and strawberries mixed with a humorous cartoon and an instructional film concerning the cattle fever tick. It was designed to entertain rural audiences and to explain the benefits of the department's tick eradication campaign. The program's format had already made some friends of skeptical farmers in other areas by exploiting the relative novelty of the film

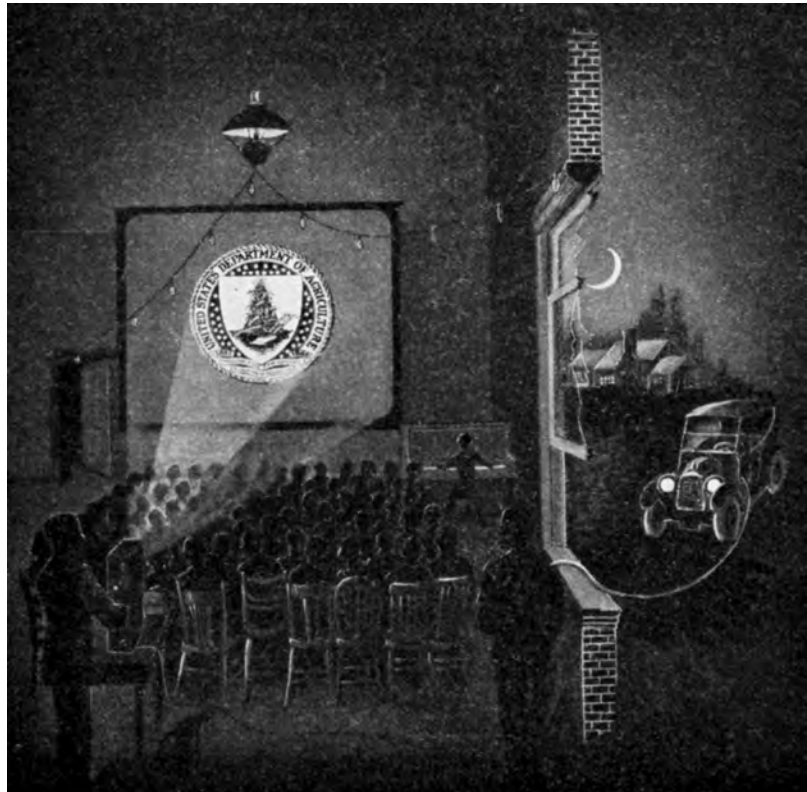
**Figure 1.** Cover of *Department Circular 114* (July 1920), prepared by Fred W. Perkins (far left, at the projector), assistant in charge of motion pictures, and George R. Goergens, chief cinematographer. Perkins became head of the department's new Office of Motion Pictures the following year.



medium in those remote areas. Upon their arrival in this next village, officials were relieved to find a similarly receptive audience. They secured a suitable public space, rigged the projector up to the battery of the truck, and invited all in the area to a free motion picture show (Figure 2). At the close of the evening's screening, both the films and the accompanying talk by the government lecturer were met with cheers and invitations to stay on until the next day. But, as Pickering described it, "we knew we had made a good impression, and did not care to risk spoiling it. We had, metaphorically speaking, gotten 'their names on the dotted line, sold them on the idea,' and it was time to 'beat it.'" Satisfied, the exhibitors packed up their equipment and headed to the next remote village.<sup>2</sup>

While the traveling motion picture truck idea was relatively new in 1922, federal bureaus like the BAI had already been experimenting with motion pictures for some time. Since at least 1901, a handful of Washington bureaus had been collecting and producing informative films for display at world's fairs, augmentation of public lectures, and internal communication and training. In

**Figure 2. Powering the projector from the truck battery.** Detail, cover illustration, *Use of Motion Pictures in Agricultural Extension Work*, USDA Miscellaneous Circular No. 78 (November 1926).



1904 and 1905, for example, the BAI exhibited motion pictures detailing its work at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis, Missouri and at the Lewis and Clark Centennial in Portland, Oregon. In 1913, Congress funded a large exhibit of films showing the work of multiple federal bureaus for display at the Panama Pacific Exposition. By the time the exhibit won the Medal of Honor at the fair in 1915, the Departments of Agriculture, Interior, Navy, and War were on the road to granting official status to their blossoming film programs. Many other departments and independent agencies, encouraged by the high profile work of the Committee on Public Information (CPI) toward the end of World War I (WWI), would follow this lead.<sup>3</sup>

Touting the educational possibilities of motion pictures, federal filmmakers were participants in a larger shift in thinking about the medium that had also been occurring beyond their municipal, and indeed national, borders for some time. Amid anxieties about the moral influence of commercial motion pictures, progressive reformers throughout the previous decade had supported the rise of visual education movements in North America that promoted the public service potential of film.<sup>4</sup> The beginnings of WWI had sparked the formation in numerous countries of official motion picture units meant to fashion supportive wartime citizens. These years also saw the development of tens of thousands of Americanization programs run by both public and private organizations, many with film components.<sup>5</sup> By the middle of the war, commercial motion picture outfits in the United States began to get on board as well. "Thoughtful people all over the country who have the best interest of the growing generation at heart have been demanding pictures of this kind," declared Thomas Edison in a 1917 letter to the Secretary of Agriculture. A project of "wholesome, educational" films, he said, would enlighten the American public.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, in Canada as early as 1917, government and community-based film programs embarked on educational film enterprises with citizenship training in mind.<sup>7</sup> Across the Atlantic, by 1920, the postwar French government was screening educational films in cities and rural areas that were meant, in the words of one official, to "nourish the mind with useful knowledge" and direct the citizenry "toward morality."<sup>8</sup>

U.S. government filmmakers in the post-WWI period retained their faith in the social utility of education even as the progressive zeal of the previous era was eclipsed by the reactionary furor of the early 1920s. Indeed, their work continued to be defined by the ideals and energies of progressive reform as well as its shortcomings. Like earlier progressives, these bureaucrats saw publicity as a key instrument in establishing new policies that would effect social change. As historian David Kennedy has noted, underlying such faith in publicity was a firm belief in the essential rationality of humanity and

widespread confidence “that informed public opinion could substitute for radical institutional reordering or for the naked brandishing of state power as a solution to the problems of the day.” Progressive reformers envisioned publicity not as an empty marketing ploy, but as a way of opening up government work to public understanding and inquiry. It was a reform methodology that worked to secure changes in society without defying the status quo.<sup>9</sup>

The adoption of the moving image as a means of publicizing administrative activity was motivated to a large extent by these ideals of government transparency and public education. The mass appeal of the medium and its potential for factual display excited federal bureaucrats most. “The film has come to rank as the very high medium for the dissemination of public intelligence,” remarked President Woodrow Wilson in a letter supporting CPI publicity work during the WWI, “and since it speaks a universal language, it lends itself importantly to the presentation of America’s plans and purposes.” Put another way, as BAI agent Pickering later framed his “selling” of the tick eradication idea to rural farmers, “we cannot bring these people out into the world, so it would appear that the next best thing is to take the world to them in the form of motion pictures. That we make better citizens out of them, as well as convert them to our particular work, can scarcely be denied.” Officials trusted that the informational and factual motion picture would go far in helping to create informed citizens who would be better equipped to participate in the democratic process. By explaining the government’s “plans and purposes” (and, not incidentally, gaining public support for them), federal filmmakers positioned film production as a rational task for an expanding administrative government that took seriously its stewardship of the common good.<sup>10</sup>

Of course, as many studies of progressivism acknowledge, this stewardship was rife with contradictions, compromises and failings; these too helped shape the concerns of bureaucrats and their film agendas. The uncritical reliance on top-down dissemination of expert knowledge, the failure to address racial injustice, and the willing imposition of normative morals and values via coercive and repressive strategies, which were sometimes associated with progressive reform, all had consequences for the film production models that were developing during the postwar period. The demands of the normalcy agenda only amplified and encouraged progressivism’s shortcomings. The return to more conservative principals of order, the bolstering of established American values, and the invasion of Washington by business interests helped foster film productions that embraced a changed brand of progressivism.<sup>11</sup>

As Alan Dawley has argued, the end of WWI did not mark the death of progressive activism. Rather, the challenges posed by the reactionary turn of the early 1920s

brought forth a “leaner and tougher” progressivism bent on economic strategies of reform. Much of this rebirth occurred within the labor and peace movements that continued after the war, but this melding of older progressive ideas with economic concerns gained a particularly strong foothold in the postwar South. As historian Dewey Grantham notes, the modernization efforts of reformers in the New South after WWI and their alliance with farmer, business, and state-sponsored strategies of economic reform were endeavors firmly rooted in older progressive traditions that valued efficient, pragmatic approaches to social change. It was along the same dirt roads and stump-littered byways traversed by the BAI’s motion picture truck in 1922 that many ideas about the best methods for tackling the depression in agricultural prices, the boll weevil infestation, rural flight, and other pressing Southern problems took shape.<sup>12</sup>

In Washington, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) sought diverse ways to effect positive changes in the South, but most of these policies had economic recovery at their center. The strategies of scientific rationalism, increased efficiency, and rural modernization that dominated the department after the war helped define the development of one of the earliest and most prolific government film programs. Together with a handful of other departments, the seventeen bureaus of the USDA aimed to tackle particular social problems in the pragmatic, efficient manner that was a hallmark of progressivism. In the postwar decade alone, these bureaus and other executive branch departments produced films to combat: children’s health issues, labor abuses in factories, accidental forest fires, urban and rural poverty, foodborne illness, wildlife habitat destruction, species endangerment, female wage discrimination, prenatal malnutrition, farm pest devastation, natural disaster damage, illiteracy, public disease communication, negative stereotypes of Native Americans, industrial accidents, environmental pollution, and illegal drug trafficking.

While few studies of these federal films exist, recent scholarship and archival work has begun to explore the wider landscape of educational and state-sponsored films and their nontheatrical ilk.<sup>13</sup> Such studies begin to push our understanding of the history of state film sponsorship beyond the rubrics established by the previously dominant scholarship about John Grierson and, to a lesser extent, Pare Lorentz. However, in spite of these signs of renovation, the critique of state sponsorship registered in this older work continues to define the study of these films.

Addressing the model of Grierson’s work, this critique holds that the constraints of institutional sponsorship prevent these kinds of films from engaging social issues in a way that could effect real change. Intimately tied to the interests of the established order that sponsored them, government films were not in a position to reform that

order. Indeed, as Brian Winston, Joyce Nelson, and others have argued, the whole point of these films was to manufacture consent to that order.<sup>14</sup> By this logic, these films' overt concern with public relations, with instilling higher regard for the institutions they depict, precludes a critical analysis of underlying social conditions and causes state-sponsored films, as Winston puts it, to "run from social meaning."<sup>15</sup> Nelson anchors this critique in problems inherent in the bureaucratic progressivism Grierson embraced. She sees Grierson's faith in the rational, efficient administrative work of the state weakening the depth of the social analysis attempted by these films. Winston likewise suggests that state-sponsored films have done little to move audiences toward social action. Too limited in distribution and too reliant on narratives of victimization and government rescue, he argues, these films encouraged public complacency and deference to state authority instead of involvement and action.<sup>16</sup> The bureaucrat engaged in a project of citizenship training through film, by this line of reasoning, becomes a purveyor of palliative propaganda or a broker in state domination rather than an agent of the kind of meaningful, public-minded reform that would bolster democracy.

Although this critique helps conceptualize the repressive element in government-authored discourse, as a framework for the analysis of state-sponsored films it needs amendment and elaboration. Certainly, government films often functioned as authoritarian technologies bent on shoring up the status quo along the lines outlined by Winston and Nelson, but they rarely did this in a tidy way. Especially when Grierson's film "tradition" becomes *pars pro toto* for all state-sponsored moving pictures, a sense of the complexity of the enterprise gets lost. Given that we still know relatively little about the reception of these films, an overarching theory of their operability seems premature. Ultimately this critique fails to account for the diversity of formal strategies which government films adopted, the range of political contexts that influenced their production and the ways that different exhibition venues and reception frameworks might have changed these films' meanings or restricted their authority.<sup>17</sup>

Certainly, films such as those in Agent Pickering's tick program functioned as propaganda for the ideologies of the administrations that produced them, but that is not the only way they functioned. As my research for a larger project on the history of U.S. government film suggests, at times these films actually succeeded in effecting social changes that benefited the lives of many people. Their victories were often small and never without conflicts and ironies, but they were not insignificant. Examining these successes helps underline the ambivalence at the heart of government film production in democratic contexts. The full landscape of this ambivalence is often obscured by the connotations of exploitation and dominance associated with projects of cultural hegemony.



Rather than functioning efficiently as always already configured arms of a cohesive “state,” these films were often sites of negotiation over competing definitions of that state and its role in society.<sup>18</sup>

## BUREAUCRATIC ACTIVISTS

In 1914, the Smith-Lever Act (or Agricultural Extension Work Act) established the Cooperative Extension Service, which functioned as the outreach section of the USDA. The many films produced in the teens and twenties by the Extension Service are now ripe for renewed study. As Gladys Baker and Roy Scott suggest in their successive studies of the Extension idea among academics, business owners, and government agents, the biggest challenge of reformers in this sector lay in finding efficient means of establishing a relationship with farmers that would result in better agricultural practices.<sup>19</sup> Films could potentially serve this purpose. The relatively unknown bureaucrats who produced these films in the department, even though they ultimately embraced much of the logic that Grierson would later canonize, quietly fashioned a distinct film program, and on grounds which deserve greater scrutiny. Although it sometimes subscribed to the national publicity ideal that would become central to Grierson’s work for the British government, the USDA embraced a more specialized model of film production in these early years. As titles such as *Gravel Road Construction* (1915), *Fighting Western Pine Beetles* (1919), *Dust Explosions in Mills and Elevators* (1921), and *Wheat or Weeds* (1924) suggest, in this period the department saw film as a tool for use in conjunction with targeted campaigns that aimed to improve life on the American farm. The logic behind the hundreds of Extension Service campaign films stemmed from a measured, relatively responsive, pragmatic kind of progressivist thinking. The archival traces of these productions offer a window on that mindset.

The bureaucrats who produced these films used the era’s characteristic strategies of rationalization and faith in scientific progress to support what I argue was ultimately an activist project, one that was far from socially ineffective or meaningless. Seeing government film producers as “bureaucratic activists”—with all the inefficiencies, entrenched rigidities, red tape, politics and establishment loyalties implied by the term—is useful here. It captures the contradictory nature of an enterprise that actively and optimistically sought (and sometimes secured) social change from within the confines of the status quo.

At the heart of the Department of Agriculture’s founding mandate of 1862 was an obligation “to acquire and to diffuse among the people of the United States useful

information on subjects connected with agriculture, rural development, aquaculture and human nutrition in the most general and comprehensive sense of those terms. . . .”<sup>20</sup> This directive gave the department latitude in the development of methods of communication with the interested public. After the Smith-Lever Act solidified federal funding for extension work that was previously carried out through piecemeal cooperation among the states, the ensuing centralization of the Extension Service offered a fertile environment for the department’s budding motion picture program. Where critics might have seen the perfect avenue for a project of cultural dominance, the bureaucrats who worked within the extension branches of the government in this period envisioned a system of enlightened service. These officials embraced the same brand of optimism about the power of communication media that the philosopher Jurgen Habermas would later detail in his essay “The Tasks of a Critical Theory of Society”: that communicative acts, in their essence, have a communal aspect to them that can potentially bring people together in cooperative relationships.<sup>21</sup> The dissemination of scientific knowledge gained from government research—in the form of lectures, farm demonstrations, pamphlets, lantern slides, and eventually motion pictures—was coupled with reciprocity under the extension model; field agents responded to questions and heard the concerns of individual farmers, collected data about the activities and problems of specific communities and reported their findings and experiences back to the department. These field reports played a part in shaping larger research and regulatory initiatives. They were intended to keep department programs useful and relevant. Not insignificantly, they also helped the department refine its methods of communication.

The USDA’s film program grew exponentially under the umbrella of the Extension Service. Previously stuck in inadequate attic, and then basement, quarters with little funding, the motion picture office won what it called “definite status” in July 1922 with a new film processing laboratory and administrative headquarters in the Office of the Coordinator of Extension Work.<sup>22</sup> During the previous decade film work had been proceeding on a more tentative level, operating with personnel from the still photography lab and cobbling together money for motion picture film wherever it could.<sup>23</sup> The USDA film unit had played a significant role in printing the scores of government-sponsored 35mm films produced in 1912 and 1913 for the San Francisco International Exposition. Funded by special appropriation from the Government Exhibit Board, production work for the fair by this central lab (and other USDA bureaus that employed their own photographers) expanded the activities of the fledgling program. In 1914, the Committee on Motion Picture Activities was formed to investigate the usefulness of films in the regular

work of the department. By 1921, this became an official overseeing body, the Office of Motion Pictures, which was able to secure more funding to centralize activities and to organize production.

In its earliest years, however, distribution proved difficult on such a budget. The committee's November 1914 report claimed that "motion pictures [have] gained so strong a place in the life of the people of the country that the department [can] no longer neglect an investigation into the possibilities of this medium of publicity in its educational field work," but, the report continued, "it has been impossible, with the present equipment, to prepare enough positive prints to meet the needs of the department's own demonstration workers." Where 35mm prints could be furnished, however, the potential was made manifest: experimental screenings of department footage for rural audiences "in every case," claimed the committee, attracted much larger audiences for extension talks. Where only ten to twenty people typically came to lectures that utilized stereopticons, noted the report, in experiments conducted during 1913–14 motion pictures regularly attracted an audience of seventy-five to one hundred to the village halls and church basements where demonstration work was presented.<sup>24</sup>

In spite of the evident popularity of movies, the department approached the motion picture program's development with skepticism. Up against a stigma that associated moving pictures with lower-class amusement, the proponents of USDA film work had to convince higher-ups that, as one federal filmmaker put it, "Charlie Chaplin films where someone threw a custard pie in his face" were not the only models for film production.<sup>25</sup> They developed a production scheme that prioritized informative, educational films tailored to the objectives of bureau campaigns. These targeted pictures on narrow subjects augmented the extension lecture format, and they dominated the bureau's early output. Initially, department officials were worried that films with generalized themes or indiscriminate distribution would fail to have any significant effect on rural problems. "Moving pictures undoubtedly have their place in any general scheme of extension work," wrote the assistant secretary of agriculture in response to a congressman's endorsement of a privately-run, two-man, rural exhibition idea in 1915, "but . . . it is not believed that [rural exhibition] will be of much permanent benefit unless it is simply a part of a well-organized and consistently prosecuted extension campaign."<sup>26</sup> After an initial period of experimentation, the motion picture would become, in the words of the USDA's first film bureau chief Fred W. Perkins, "one of the essential field guns in any educational campaign."<sup>27</sup> In its extension use, the medium would function alongside the distribution of information in other forms, as well as face-to-face exchanges between farmers and field agents.

The development of this system of field exhibition and farmer interaction was complicated by the intractable nature of segregationist policy in the South. Prior to 1906, the system of rural demonstration required white agents to work in both black and white communities. However, in cooperation with the Tuskegee and Hampton Institutes, black extension agents soon came under government employ. The USDA produced some films, notably *Helping Negroes to Become Better Farmers and Homemakers* (1921), specifically for use in African American communities. Others were produced for a broad audience and circulated with agents on both sides of the color line. Carried with other demonstration materials in specially appointed trucks, motion pictures were one of the highlights of both black and white demonstration work.<sup>28</sup>

Because they usually involved regions in multiple states, these extension campaigns required federal coordination and support. However, the reception context for the actual lectures and demonstrations required films that could connect with smaller personal concerns, while also resonating on a community level. Thus, while USDA filmmakers often lent import to their narrow, targeted work by rhetorically linking it to a larger, more abstract project of citizenship training, many of their films tended in their ideological address to combine local, regional, and national appeals in a manner meant to influence the thoughts and actions of individual farmers. The end to which such persuasion strategies were put became a constant object of scrutiny by both proponents and detractors. As the promotional power of government-backed films became more evident, and the potential for co-optation by private entities increased, USDA filmmakers eked out guidelines for their work that prioritized their duties as servants of the public interest even as they worked to protect the agriculture industry and its special interest groups. The history of film work in the department is littered with the ambiguities and ironies inherent to such a process. But in the case of the scores of Department of Agriculture films that endeavored to solve specific problems afflicting agricultural communities, the question remains: Did the establishment loyalties or industry sympathies of USDA filmmakers preclude the production of films that could benefit farmers' lives? A look at a series of tick eradication movies made by the department in the decade after WWI suggests that some extension film campaigns did achieve the social changes they were after.

### TARGETING TICKS

The federal campaign to eradicate the cattle fever tick from the South, carried out over several decades in cooperation with state and local governments, was one of the Department of Agriculture's most successful campaigns of the pre-World War II (WWII) period. The

films produced to aid this campaign, several of which still exist in some iteration in the vaults of the National Archives, played an important role in its success.

**These tick films aimed to communicate information that would help improve the lot of Southern farmers, all of whom were struggling with the devastating effects of the post-WWI depression in agricultural prices, the boll weevil epidemic's destruction of their cotton cash crop, and the increasingly disheartening loss of farm labor to the draws of city life.<sup>29</sup>**

In response, Extension Service campaigns, in cooperation with the department's BAI, promoted in Southern states a program of diversification, crop rotation, and commercial livestock production. The campaigns aimed to widen the economic base of Southern farmers and help them transition away from an ailing one-crop system.<sup>30</sup>

These proposed changes required significant cultural adjustments on the part of Southern farmers. The epistemological leaps needed were not always easily made. In attempting to change livestock raising habits from subsistence to income-producing levels, for example, USDA officials ran up against a culture wherein many Southern farmers who didn't already have significant cattle holdings displayed little interest in making the necessary capital investment in milk or meat production. Cotton had traditionally been industry enough in the South. Furthermore, Southern livestock, which had a reputation for being underweight and fetching low prices at market, had long suffered from infestation by warm weather ticks that carried a disease known as Texas fever. Southern cattle had developed a tolerance for the disease that reduced mortality rates, but resulted in stunted weight development, reduced milk production, and decreased fertility. The highly communicable disease was not endemic in the North, so when unexposed Northern cattle contracted the disease it resulted in staggering mortality rates. Without a cure, the carrier status of Southern herds triggered great controversy and border violence in the late nineteenth-century when the driving of cattle to Northern markets caused epidemic deaths of Northern herds. The federal government was eventually forced to intervene in the growing battle over Texas fever by establishing a national quarantine line above which Southern cattle could only venture under strict limitations. The quarantine was accompanied by a marked increase in USDA-sponsored research into Texas cattle fever, which led a few years later to the groundbreaking discovery by government researchers of the protozoan carrier of the disease and the role of tick bites in its transmission.<sup>31</sup>

After a period of experimentation with immunization and some isolated eradication work that met with spotty success, in 1906 Congress designated funding for a sustained tick eradication campaign. The work that ensued faced major challenges, not least of which stemmed from the difficulty in simply explaining the tick's role in disease transmission—a paradigm-shifting concept—to skeptical laymen farmers who were already inured to the proliferation of unsubstantiated theories about the causes of Texas fever.

**Even if agents convinced farmers of the merit of the science behind the program, they still had to overcome the dominant belief that eradication on such a grand scale was impossible or too cost prohibitive for the average farmer.**

The method of eradication eventually settled on by the government required farmers to drive their cattle to public dipping vats every two weeks during the high season of tick reproduction, a project that required considerable outlay on the part of the cattle owner (Figure 3). For these and other reasons the first decade of eradication work proceeded slowly. In spite of initial projections of a two-year timeline for successful eradication, after nearly ten years only a third of the infected area below the quarantine line was designated tick free.<sup>32</sup> The program would require total participation if it was to be successful—a few holdouts in any community could cause complete reinfestation.

Public skepticism and denial—some of it stemming from ignorance and some from self-interested cost–benefit analysis—were, according to USDA officials, the main obstacles to total participation.<sup>33</sup> The farming public's confusion, resistance, and lack of access to information presented the opportunity for early proponents of film to experiment with the motion picture as a tool for targeted public instruction and persuasion. The results of initial test screenings were encouraging. A tick eradication reel tentatively entitled *The Life of the Cattle Fever Tick and the Method of Dipping Cattle* was prepared and included in one of the first experimental screenings of USDA films to a rural audience on October 25, 1913, in an auditorium of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Department officials placed a local newspaper ad announcing “free moving pictures” for the public.

According to the department's report on the screening, a large audience consisting mostly of country people and villagers turned out for the screening in spite of heavy rains and bad road conditions. Mr. Davis, the department official who ran the event noted in his report that the turnout surprised him. He had expected to run the projector once but instead was forced to run the full program three times in front of capacity audiences that cycled through the four hundred seat auditorium. “I wish you could have



Figure 3. Dipping cattle to eradicate ticks. Photograph from *USDA Farmers' Bulletin* 569 (March 21, 1914; revised November 1928), 4. John R. Mohler, Chief of the BAI, authored the bulletin.

been present,” wrote Davis in his anecdotal account of the evening’s success, “for I cannot convey to you the enthusiasm and interest of the audience.” He continued: “These pictures on bees, corn, cotton, cattle fever, and club work must surely have given those people as much information on these subjects that they could take home, as sending an expert to lecture on each subject would have given them. As Congressman [John Humphrey] Small [of North Carolina] remarked, ‘I notice that these pictures reach even the man of low mentality who is inattentive when one is lecturing.’”<sup>34</sup> Another government agent in attendance noted: “we must have motion pictures, that is what they want.”<sup>35</sup> The smashing success of the experimental screening in Chapel Hill pleased the motion picture committee and no doubt encouraged the BAI and the Extension Service to seriously consider the positive effect that films could have on its tick eradication campaign. As evident in this early experiment, audience response to screenings was often read by government officials as proof positive of the power of the moving image to communicate otherwise tedious information to a less educated sector of the public. Indeed, the class prejudice evident in the congressman’s comment would help shape the style and form of a wide range of future films that were produced for this kind of white, under-educated, rural audience.

Indeed, the form and content of tick films was inextricably linked to the problems of the racially segregated systems of tenancy and indebted servitude that continued to rule the South. As Jack Temple Kirby notes in his study of the South’s transformation between 1920 and 1960, the middle-class, and largely Midwestern, reformers who peopled the Washington offices of the USDA often failed to connect with poor farmers in the South. Although purportedly carried out in the public interest, their strategies for reform more often involved alliances with business and academic concerns. Rather than simply relying on the attraction effect evident in this initial screening, future tick films had to find ways to inspire action in differing types of viewers.<sup>36</sup>

The series of tick eradication films produced by the department in the decade following this initial screening would exemplify the filmmakers’ willingness to adapt to audience tastes and, when needed, to alter film content to make the campaign more effective. By the end of WWI, the eradication effort had made inroads into quarantined communities. More than 60 percent of the original quarantined territory was released from restrictions by 1920.<sup>37</sup> However, within the remaining areas, opposition to federal efforts grew, as dipping work took much longer than the USDA first estimated. The immediate postwar years saw a sharp increase in violent resistance to dipping vat laws. The department responded with *Mollie of Pine Grove Vat* (1922), a three-reel film made in cooperation with the North Carolina State Board of Agriculture. Personally directed by Fred Perkins, the



head of the USDA Office of Motion Pictures, it addressed what federal bureaucrats thought were the root causes of the resistance.<sup>38</sup> An analysis of this production and the pair of films that immediately preceded it suggests that the repressive and progressive forces of the tick film campaign in this period were not necessarily mutually exclusive.

## THE CHARGE OF THE TICK BRIGADE AND MAKING THE SOUTH TICK FREE

In 1918 the Department of Agriculture obtained a \$10,000 appropriation for motion picture work.<sup>39</sup> The film program was growing rapidly. Recorded audience numbers had increased from a half million to 2 million over the course of four years. Aiming the eradication campaign at the broadest possible audience, the USDA commissioned Bray Studios to produce an animated film, *The Charge of the Tick Brigade* (1919). Written by Max Fleischer shortly before he gained notoriety for the *Out of the Inkwell* series, this one-reel cartoon (running approximately seven minutes) gives a humorous account of a naïve cow couple that unwittingly suffers the deadly attack of a sneaky “brigade” of tick thugs. After being tricked by the tick ringleader into fetching her husband to defend her honor, the wife-cow flees in horror, as she and her husband are pursued by a previously hidden army of ticks that has rapidly descended on their pasture (Figure 4a). After infestation, both cows decline and die in exaggerated fashion over the course of a short montage, which concludes with an image of little cow angels playing harps over their corpses (Figure 4b). In the second act, the intertitles offer a statistical analysis of the life cycle of the cattle tick, and then cede the stage to an animated mama-tick who screens a brief film about her prolific family tree. This film-within-the-film uses simple animation to visualize the amazing reproductive capacities of a single female tick. “Mrs. Tick,” by the end of her account, becomes the “mother of nearly four thousand healthy ticklets” and the “proud grandmother of 8 million bouncing youngsters,” who are represented by an explosion of wiggly dots on the screen-within-the-screen (Figure 5a). *The Charge of the Tick Brigade* concludes with a map of the Southern quarantine line, indicating areas where tick infestation was still problematic (Figure 5b). (The USDA made updated maps as progress was made and inserted those into prints used at later screenings.) The final intertitle implores viewers living in those regions to “Dip that tick now. The United States Department of Agriculture will be glad to show you how without charge.”

As an entertaining cartoon that served up a side dish of information about the cattle tick’s fertile reproduction cycle and the danger it posed, *The Charge of the Tick Brigade* enjoyed long-lived popularity on the department’s distribution circuits. The inclusion of the film in the Secretary of Agriculture’s special screenings for the White



Figure 4a & b. Frames from *The Charge of the Tick Brigade* (1919). In the USDA-commissioned cartoon from the Bray Studios, a thuggish tick leads an army's charge into a cow pasture. A cow couple succumbs to the deadly infestation. National Archives and Records Administration.

House in 1921 and the Congress in 1923 indicates the high regard those in the department had for this little cartoon. Indeed, as noted in the few extant exhibition reports, *Charge* consistently achieved in one reel what many government films of the period never achieved: an emotional connection to its audience. As eradication agent Pickering's anecdotal report on the "psychological aspects" of the reception contexts for USDA motion pictures noted, the humor and simplicity of this cartoon's narrative was a recipe for success. In describing his yearlong experience heading the BAI's traveling motion picture truck work in several Southern states, Pickering gave *Charge* a glowing review—after more than 350 screenings.

And that old "tick brigade" how they do enjoy it. Ticks that don't look like ticks, and any high school boy or girl could draw a better cow, and we who are sophisticated used to say "that kind of thing did not kill any ticks" but there must have been someone in the Bureau with vision enough to see that "getting the last tick" where the "hard-boiled" were concerned was a matter of kidding them a little, educating them a little, and coaxing them a little, and at the last when you have developed sufficient sentiment, bringing a little legal pressure to bear. It isn't supposed that Broadway would use it to open one of their million dollar picture palaces, but it makes our simple audiences roar with laughter. . . .<sup>40</sup>

The attitude of superiority evident in this "sophisticated" agent's description of the program's appeal to the "hard-boiled" eradication holdouts or the "simple" viewer that found *Charge* funny is indicative of the paternalistic class bias of much government policy in this era. Taken with Davis' 1913 report, which noted the ability of the moving image to reach persons of "low mentality," Pickering's account reveals again just how entangled the tick eradication program had become with the class prejudices of government officials. However, the rapidly rising number of viewers for government films and the reported popularity of the "tick cartoon" suggests that audiences were either unaware of or (more likely) were willing to tolerate such attitudes in exchange for useful information presented in entertaining form.

As a stand-alone film *The Charge of the Tick Brigade* inspired much laughter, but, as Pickering noted, it necessarily functioned in tandem with a more typical "straight" information film. *Making the South Tick Free* (1920) served to supplement the entertaining cartoon with 10 minutes of persuasive data about the eradication campaign.<sup>41</sup> The film displays in montage the devastating effects of Texas fever on livestock,

then details the life cycle of the tick-carrier, in more depth than the animated Mrs. Tick could muster in the time allotted her. The emphasis on the tick's life cycle and habits explains the logic behind a regular dipping program. "Before they are through laughing over the funny antics of the ticks," Agent Pickering wrote to his bureau chief, "we are busy telling them about the serious side of it." But, in the transition to the more "serious" *Making the South Tick Free*, the program usually lost a portion of the audience, those not interested in the instructional slant. "As I understand it," Pickering continued, "the new picture, which is in the making at the present time, undertakes to remedy this defect by putting the tick propaganda in the middle of an interesting story."<sup>42</sup>

The balance between entertainment and information in the department's educational films evolved over time, as the program tested different kinds of films on a variety of rural audiences. But department officials were quick to differentiate their "higher purpose" films from those of the entertainment industry. A 1921 report, "What the Department of Agriculture Is Doing with Motion Pictures," noted:

Until recently, nearly everybody had the opinion that a motion picture could be used only for the purpose of entertainment. It was thought almost unani-  
mously that the highest use of the motion picture screen was to portray the  
adventures of a vampire, or to expose the villainy of a bewhiskered bad man.  
But now the beginning of the educational motion picture has been made and  
there are many students of the subject who believe that in power and influ-  
ence—to say nothing of benefits—the educational type of picture will far outlive  
the theatrical type.<sup>43</sup>

By separating the kind of films they were producing from the presumed triviality of the "theatrical type," government officials tried to give the moving image more credibility and authority. Yet these same officials often found that audiences weren't necessarily interested in such authoritative discourse. In late 1923, the USDA issued an internal report on motion picture use that indicates a reconsideration of the value of films that exposed "the villainy of a bewhiskered bad man" in story form.

All Department of Agriculture motion pictures, whether existing or to be produced in the future, are classed as educational films. The pictures now existing may be divided into four groups: 1. Didactic or teaching films . . . 2. Publicity films . . . 3. Propaganda films . . . 4. Semi-entertainment films . . . It is probable that the Department will continue to produce films of all the four subdivisions



Figure 5a & b. In the second act of *The Charge of the Tick Brigade* (1919), "Mrs. Tick" narrates an educational film-within-the-film, telling viewers of her alarming fertility rate. Later, a map of the Southern quarantine line shows cattle owners where infestation rates were worst.

noted. The question of what type of film is best for a particular purpose depends upon the varying circumstances, but as a general proposition, the most valuable films appear to be the teaching films in which the subject matter is presented simply and clearly, and in which the various scenes are linked together by a story that can be well interpreted by amateur actors.<sup>44</sup>

This revaluing of story films was the result of trial and error. Officials collected reports about the exhibition of their films from extension service agents nationwide. They could therefore judge which kinds of films performed best. In the tick eradication campaign, the unusual success accorded the exhibition of *Mollie of Pine Grove Vat* suggests that white audiences in the rural South preferred to absorb the government's "education" through the very tale of heroism and villainy that the department had disdained only a few years earlier.

### **MOLLIE OF PINE GROVE VAT (1922)**

"Fight Against Fever Tick Is Making Georgia a Paradise for Cattle Raiser" ran the headline in the *Atlanta Constitution* on March 21, 1920. The spread, which filled an entire page, marked the beginning of a concerted effort on the part of the federal government to target Southern areas where the eradication campaign was progressing slowly, or meeting with local attempts to vote down dipping laws. It was authored by Perkins, who had assumed charge of the USDA Office of Motion Pictures a month before. In the years to come, he would oversee the construction of the new lab and administrative headquarters for the film program. He reorganized its production and distribution procedures, expanding the audience for department films from seven hundred thousand to a reported 10 million people by 1926.<sup>45</sup> Perkins' familiarity with the obstacles encountered by tick eradication agents is evident in this long article. He covers the history of the tick campaign and answers common objections and misconceptions. Perkins also personalizes the potential benefits for the Georgia farmer and rancher, arguing that the campaign will increase the value of cattle per head and, in a sentimental appeal, lead to "improved milk and better, healthier babies." He writes, "This is the year of the 'big drive' in Georgia against the tick." He further notes that the warm climate and richness of the state's grasslands give "reason to hope that Georgia will become a center of the production of beef and dairy cattle," once the tick is eliminated. By improving the conditions for raising livestock, the USDA hoped to ease the economic blight brought on in 1915 with the arrival of the boll weevil. In 1921, the tiny pest destroyed more than 45 percent of the state's

cotton crop, reducing the number of bales harvested from an all-time high of 2.8 million in 1914 to only six hundred thousand by 1923. Discontent wrought by this and other rapid changes in the region (including the ongoing closing of the open range) contributed to an increasingly vocal resistance to the burden of compliance with eradication work. Resistance was especially vehement in counties along Georgia's southern border.<sup>46</sup>

Early in the spring of 1922 the *Atlanta Constitution* reported that a group of south Georgia "cattle growers" in Echols County held a mass meeting and announced to the local government that the citizens of the county would no longer be complying with state dipping laws, "because of the expense." The meeting began months of fighting. On March 23, 1922, two years after Perkins' optimistic publicity piece, the *Constitution* reported that three public dipping vats in neighboring Lowndes County had been destroyed by dynamite during the night. On June 17, two more vats were reported dynamited in Echols County. The following day a gunfight between vat guards and dipping opponents in the same town resulted in one death and three serious injuries. "They are blowing the vats up about as fast as we can build them," claimed the county commissioner in a letter requesting help from the governor. On July 13, while the state legislature was drafting a bill to repeal the tick eradication laws, sixteen more vats were dynamited across the Lowndes-Echols border. Clearly many farmers and ranchers had had enough of compelled dipping.<sup>47</sup>

The production of *Mollie of Pine Grove Vat* was part of the USDA's response to the troublesome violence. Although shot in North Carolina, the new film drew on the sensationalism of real-life vat destruction in Georgia (as well as Arkansas, Texas, and other states) and sought to "put the tick propaganda in the middle of an interesting story," so as to maximize its effectiveness. In October 1922, department photographer Eugene Tucker journeyed with Motion Picture Chief Perkins to the town of Washington, North Carolina, to spend a planned seven to ten days shooting amateur actors on a working farm. The resulting film mirrors the style and narrative arc of popular prewar heroine serials like the *Perils of Pauline* (1914), but it combines this with a generic local aesthetic that emphasizes problems, locations, and characters familiar to the film's rural audiences. The intertitles are peppered with common objections to the eradication program, voiced by Pine Grove citizens, which the film then attempts to counter.

*Mollie of Pine Grove Vat* opens with a familiar American tableaux: the exterior of a farmhouse. Mollie and Philip Sawyer sit with their children on their front porch discussing money worries. The boll weevil took much of their crop last season, and times are tight. Mollie opens a letter and finds a loan check for \$100 from a cousin. He claims that the livestock and dairy business is booming now that the tick has been eradicated from

his area. When Mollie asks her husband why their community is still plagued by the cattle tick, Philip responds with a fervent headshake: it is “too much trouble to dip cattle.” Mollie stands and puts her arms defensively around her children: “Some day, Phil, this farm will belong to the children. Will we have to leave them the ticks too?” With these words the film introduces tick eradication as both a financial imperative and a moral obligation for the family farmer.

In the next scene, a government agent hands Mollie a flyer announcing the free screening of films that evening. In a scene over the dinner table, during which they run out of their daily milk ration, Mollie and Philip decide to attend the screening to give their kids a chance to see a motion picture for the first time. In the Pine Grove Community Hall, a friendly government agent shows a movie for the audience that includes clips from yet another film, *The Cattle Fever Tick* (an actual USDA production, ca. 1920). This informational film-within-the-film (within the Mollie film) relies heavily on the genre’s typical static shots and instructional intertitles, but it keeps its points brief. A series of magnified close-ups give the audience an intimate and sensationally disgusting view of the female tick’s ability to lay thousands of eggs (Figure 6). A visual comparison is made between sickly and healthy cows and a map of the quarantine line shows the progress of eradication work. This film hits all the instructional highlights and, in its brevity and embedded nature, tries to avoid the loss of audience attention that dogged earlier exhibition experiments.

Upon the conclusion of this film-within-the-film, the plot thickens as we are introduced to the local malcontent Hort Ledbetter, who, an intertitle announces, “runs the store and would like to run the whole county.” He voices his disapproval of the “poison hell holes” and, echoing Phil’s protest in the opening scene, proclaims that the project costs too much. Hank Ledbetter, his scruffy nephew from the other side of the creek, applauds. The Ledbetters are established as the “bewhiskered bad men” of the narrative, but their characters also reference real figures from the South Georgia “cattle wars.” Local cattlemen, some with political ambitions, and their reactionary, pyrotechnical counterparts were the main agitators in the *Atlanta Constitution*’s coverage of resistance to tick eradication. Against Hort and Hank’s uncouth behavior, the film juxtaposes the reasoned deliberation of the county commissioners, who in the next scene vote to enact dipping laws. During the building of the vat, a comic interlude plays off audience anxiety about the loss of rural labor to urban areas and solidifies antipathy toward the Ledbetters. Hort’s visiting city-boy son takes a tumble into the dipping bath. Later, when Hank provokes a fistfight over the merits of the dipping program with the recently converted Philip Sawyer, the portrait of the Ledbetters as ignorant, self-interested





Figure 6. The BAI's *Mollie of Pine Grove Vat* (1922) inserts this shot (taken from its own earlier production *The Cattle Fever Tick*, ca. 1920) into an unnamed film-within-the-film. Citizens of the fictional Pine Grove watch the unnamed campaign film within the narrative of the didactic *Mollie* drama.

malcontents begins to take on violent undertones. The government official asks Philip to “ride the range” to help compel his neighbors to dip their cattle; Hank stalks him on the job and shoots him in the arm (Figure 7a).

Seeing his riderless horse returning to their front gate, Mollie valiantly jumps to his rescue. While her husband recovers, she assumes his duties as the range rider (Figure 7b). Rather than resort to fistfights, she appeals to the community spirit of her neighbors. In a scene where she encounters an older couple, Mollie and the wife discuss how eradication work will help them. “The tick costs us people enough to give every child an education,” Mollie announces. “Your grandchildren are the best reason for making this work a success.” She wins their cooperation by giving them a pass on their first violation and, echoing the opening scene, appealing to their moral responsibility for the welfare of future generations.

In the final reel, the Ledbetters make one last stand and dynamite the Pine Grove dipping vat. But the community pulls together to rebuild it and Mollie brings in the bad guys (although footage of this is missing in the National Archives reference copy). A montage of shots showing healthy cows, dairy silos, and prosperous times follows the announcement that the town has been released from the quarantine. In the concluding scene, a tableaux that recalls the film’s opening shot finds the Sawyer farm transformed. A prominent sign above the gate reads “Pure Breed Cattle,” indicating that the success of



Figure 7a & b. Frames from *Mollie of Pine Grove Vat*. The heroine's husband, Philip Sawyer (above, right) volunteers to "ride the range" for the USDA, but malcontent Hank Ledbetter shoots Philip in the arm. Mollie (below, right) assumes her recovering husband's duties as a range rider.

the dipping program has allowed the Sawyers to add livestock income to their farm income. A crowd of well-wishers from the community gathers around the Sawyers as a county commissioner hands Philip plans for the new creamery going up outside of town. He hands a second set of drawings to Mollie, who finds that the town is planning to build a new community house named, as the intertitle notes, for the “heroine of Pine Grove Vat” (the film’s original title). She smiles and puts her arms around her children as a reverse shot frames the members of her community erupting in applause.

Produced in a period when movie serials had largely replaced their adventurous heroines with brave male heroes, *Mollie of Pine Grove Vat* seems an anachronism at first. However, the thrill of Mollie’s desperate ride to save her husband and arrest the villain was still fresh for rural audiences, even if it had gone out of style in the city. Certainly the positioning of the female lead was a strategic one on the part of the scenario writers. Against a larger backdrop of violence perpetrated by men against federal agents in hold-out communities, the film puts a civilizing front on the eradication effort. It makes its appeal directly to community-minded individuals and asks them to band together to overcome the self-centered resistance of those “ignorant” men who oppose the dipping vat. Elements of the mise en scene of *Mollie*, especially costume, reference the history of progressive reform movements that were community based and often run by women. The Ledbetters, on the other hand, are positioned as scruffy, egocentric individualists. The objections they express to eradication work—that it is poisonous, expensive, and too much work—sum up the objections of many anti-dippers. The film sets the selfless community and the self-centered individualist against each other, as it tries to persuade its audience that with some sacrifice, they too could enjoy the benefits of healthy cattle.

According to agriculture department reports, *Mollie of Pine Grove Vat* enjoyed great success among audiences in the South. In 1923—after several months of motion picture truck exhibition throughout southern Georgia—the department issued a press release that claimed the film had “made friends of the dipping vat” in formerly hostile areas and on one occasion had even changed the mind of a man who had threatened to blow up the motion picture truck!<sup>48</sup> In its annual report, the BAI singled out the film as having “been especially useful in preliminary tick eradication work.” The department had developed a new coordinated distribution effort whereby films were trucked to rural exhibitions the year before eradication work was slated to begin there. This system, according to the department, persuaded people of the value of tick eradication before they had to begin to work toward it. “These motion pictures are in constant demand,” noted the 1923 annual report, “and seem to be very effective in

bringing together practically the entire community for entertainment and recreation and at the same time conveying to cattle owners and their families some wholesome information.”<sup>49</sup>

The community-building aspect of the department’s motion picture work is clearly referenced in the government screening scene in *Mollie*. As the agent readies the film for projection, the camera pans across the audience that has filled Pine Grove’s community hall. Behind them on the rear wall is a prominently displayed American flag (Figure 8). The wide framing emphasizes the size of the crowd, but the slow movement of the camera allows time to consider faces of individual citizens as they listen to the extension agent’s introductory lecture. Kids fidget restlessly, some looking directly at the camera, while men and women, old and young, thoughtfully place their hands on their chins. Upon completion of the screening, the camera captures an eruption of lively discussion between members of the audience. A group of viewers seeks out the extension agent to ask questions and shake his hand. Underlying this picture of public education and neighborly exchange is the idea that the motion picture created this response. In their reports

on such screenings, government officials continually emphasized both the attraction effect of film and the communicative structure it supported. While this structure was largely top-down, it also left room for deliberation among audience members.

**Figure 8.** Frame from a panning shot in reel one of *Mollie of Pine Grove Vat*. Thoughtful locals (played by an amateur cast from Washington, N.C.) gather in the Pine Grove Community Hall to watch a free screening of tick eradication films.



Of course, as Claire Strom has argued, and as the violent resistance to dipping laws indicates, the benefits of eradication were not enjoyed equally by everyone in the community. The campaign presented a hardship to some subsistence farmers and smallholders who could not afford the time and expense involved in driving cattle to and from the dipping vats. These men were often skewered in government discourse as selfish, ignorant individualists—not unlike the Ledbetter gang in *Mollie*. But their resistance, Strom suggests, stemmed not from ignorance but from frustration with the marginalization of their interests in favor of the interests of other farmers and the larger cattle and dairy industries.<sup>50</sup> In its promotion of a cooperative, community spirit wherein personal interest was voluntarily subordinated to the greater public good, the tick eradication program tried to overcome minority opposition. *Mollie*'s narrative does not allow skeptical comments any traction, even though the cost and difficulties were legitimate concerns for many farmers and cattle raisers. Total cooperation was essential to the tick campaign—without it, land would become reinfested.

When these explanations rang hollow for some, the film's cultivation of community spirit sought to persuade the majority to convince their reluctant neighbors to cooperate. If this, too, failed, part of the stated goal of tick film exhibition was to encourage Southern counties to vote in laws compelling the cooperation of resistant farmers. As Agent Pickering made clear in 1914, if "kidding them a little" and then "educating them a little" was not enough, the campaign would "bring a little legal pressure to bear." This ultimately proved a successful formula.<sup>51</sup>

In Georgia, the intensification of film exhibition efforts in the early twenties helped rapidly overcome resistance in holdout areas. By December 10, 1924, enough cooperation had been enlisted to move the entire state off the quarantine list.<sup>52</sup> By 1933 all but a few small regions in four states had been declared tick free, and in 1943 the federal government completed the tick eradication campaign.<sup>53</sup> According to USDA reports, these films played a significant role in persuading people to cooperate. The tick campaign eventually succeeded in affecting changes in the social and economic fabric of the South.

## **The wide dissemination through films of government research on the cattle tick helped change the way the medical and agricultural community thought about disease transmission.**

The success of the eradication campaign sped the decline of less efficient agricultural practices. In many states cattle became a viable cash crop, giving a boost to the beleaguered Southern economy. Between 1924 and 1948, cattle revenue in Georgia increased from 5 million to 40 million dollars. Along with the closing of the range and the introduction of

mechanized technologies, tick eradication greased the wheels of scientific progress and helped modernize American agriculture.<sup>54</sup>

That there were human consequences to this progress is not surprising, given the vast forces at work on the South beyond the narrow limits of the tick eradication campaign. In spite of its larger success, the injustice wedded to the eradication of Texas cattle fever speaks to the ambivalence at the heart of the government film project in this political and historical context and, indeed, at the heart of many progressive projects of social changes in the American South. Yet, even in this post-WWI period when business interests co-opted the energies of progressive bureaucratic activists, government did not always operate in a unified manner to shore up these interests. In screening films that supported diversification and crop rotation among Southern tenant farmers and black sharecroppers, for example, Cooperative Extension Service agents sometimes ran into trouble with landlords who did not want tenant independence. That spaces for encounters like this sometimes opened up in the endeavors of bureaucratic reformers suggests that the kind of activism they embraced was not entirely beholden to monolithic establishment interests. Indeed, the correspondence of government film bureaucrats in this period documents that these officials were concerned to act in the public interest and to be arbiters of the powers at play in that sphere. The legion of experts, scientists, and researchers that labored under the seal of the USDA helped propel rural America into the modern age. While the merits of agricultural modernization remain debatable, the bureaucratic activism that fueled (pun intended) the motion picture trucks of the federal tick eradication campaign should likewise be recognized as an intricate and knotty endeavor.

## NOTES

I am indebted to Dan Streible for his patient editing of this article, and to Robert Sklar, Howard Besser, and John Wayland for their useful advice at various stages of its drafting.

1. Pickering's enthusiasm for the ameliorative aspects of motion picture exhibition in the tick eradication campaign was rooted in part in his personal experience with acts of (and threats of) violent opposition to the eradication campaign during his tenure as the "tick inspector" in various counties in the South. On December 13, 1920, for example, Pickering filed assault charges against cattlemen in Texas. After a hearing about funds for eradication work, they had allegedly started a "fistic battle" in front of the Harris County courthouse. "Cattlemen Charged with Assault Upon Officers," *Galveston Daily News*, Jan. 1, 1921.

2. Ed F. Pickering to Chief, BAI, Aug. 25, 1922, Record Group 16, Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, General Correspondence files, National Archives and Records Administration II, College Park, MD. Unless otherwise noted, all government documents and correspondence cited are from these NARA RG 16 files.

3. S. R. Burch to Secretary James Wilson, May 12, 1905; Report on the Exhibit of the Department of Agriculture at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition (1904); and "List of Awards to U.S. Government Exhibits," July 6, 1915, RU 70, Exposition Records of the Smithsonian Institution and the U.S. National Museum, 1867–1940, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Washington, DC.

4. Elizabeth Wiatr, "Seeing American: Visual Education and the Making of Modern Observers, 1900–1935," (PhD diss. University of California Irvine, 2003). While the ideas and work of visual educators before the 1920s certainly influenced government officials who were disposed to the idea of film education, during and after WWI, the government played an integral role in lending legitimacy to the idea of motion picture use, as Wiatr notes (46). Quoting words written by two visual educators who had spent significant amounts of time in the 1910s and 1920s employed by both commercial and government film programs, she writes, "The attention given to motion pictures by the Government during the war gave [motion pictures and those who promoted their educational use] an impetus, a dignity and an importance as a medium of conveying information that they never had before." See Don Carlos Ellis and Laura Thornborough, *Motion Pictures in Education: A Practical Guide to Users of Visual Aids* (New York: Thomas Y. Cromwell, 1923), 21. The careers of both Ellis and Thornborough are representative of many advocates of the public service value of motion pictures in this period who tended to move in and out of government employ but formed a common community out of public and private film organizations that shared ideas and resources.

5. See Howard C. Hill, "The Americanization Movement," *American Journal of Sociology* 24, no.6 (May 1919): 609–42, and John F. McClymer, "The Federal Government and the Americanization Movement, 1915–24," *Prologue* 10, no.1 (Spring 1978): 23–41. For evidence of broad motion picture use by such organizations, see Jack Connolly to Chief Clerk, Children's Bureau, Jan. 3, 1921, General Correspondence files, RG 102, NARA.

6. Thomas Edison to Secretary David Houston, Jan. 17, 1917. "I am interested in the motion pictures that your department has been progressive enough to make," wrote Edison, who was seeking to include some of the Forest Service's films in his program. For a study of Edison's educational project, see Jennifer Horne, "Nostalgia and Non-Fiction in Edison's 1917 Conquest Program," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 22, no.3 (2002): 313–31.

7. See Charles Tepperman, "Digging the Finest Potatoes from their Acre: Government Film Exhibition in Rural Ontario, 1917–1934," in *Hollywood in the Neighborhood: Historical Case Studies of Local Moviegoing*, ed. Kathryn Fuller-Seeley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 130–48, and Charles Acland, "Mapping the Serious and the Dangerous: Film and the National Council of Education," *Cinémas* 6, no.1 (1995): 101–18.

8. French official Auguste Bessou, from a 1920 report quoted in Alison Murray Levine, "Projections of Rural Life: The Agricultural Film Initiative in France, 1919–1939," *Cinema Journal* 43, no.4 (Summer 2004): 77.
9. David Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 47.
10. Wilson to William A. Brady, June 28, 1917, copy transcribed in George Creel to William Bacon, July 25, 1917; Ed F. Pickering to Chief, BAI, Aug. 25, 1922.
11. See, for example, John Whiteclay Chambers II, *The Tyranny of Change: America in the Progressive Era, 1890–1920* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 293–300; Alan Dawley, *Changing the World: American Progressives in War and Revolution* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003), 297–332; Michael McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870–1920* (New York: Free Press, 2003), 279–314.
12. Dawley, *Changing the World*, 9, 294; Dewey W. Grantham, *Southern Progressivism: The Reconciliation of Progress and Tradition* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1983), 419.
13. The success of the Orphan Film Symposium, the growth of the Internet Archive's Moving Image collection, and the 2002 addition of the Prelinger Collection (forty-eight thousand "ephemeral" films) to the Library of Congress are proof positive that institutional boundaries are shifting. Recent scholarly publications also bode well. See, for example, (along with those by Levine, Tepperman, Acland, and Wiatr cited elsewhere in this article): Jonathan Kahana, *Intelligence Work: The Politics of American Documentary* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); Zoë Druick, *Projecting Canada: Government Policy and Documentary Film at the National Film Board of Canada* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007); Alison Griffiths, *Wondrous Difference: Cinema, Anthropology, and Turn of the Century Visual Culture* (Columbia University Press, 2002); Rick Prelinger, *The Field Guide to Sponsored Films* (San Francisco: National Film Preservation Foundation, 2004); Ronald Walter Greene, "Y Movies: Film and the Modernization of Pastoral Power," *Communication and Critical Cultural Studies* 2, no.1 (Mar. 2005): 20–36; Gregory A. Waller, "Free Talking Picture—Every Farmer is Welcome: Non-theatrical Film and Everyday Life in Rural America during the 1930s," in *Going to the Movies: Hollywood and the Social Experience of Cinema*, ed. Richard Maltby, Melvyn Stokes, and Robert C. Allen (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2007), 248–72; James M. Burns, *Flickering Shadows: Cinema and Identity in Colonial Zimbabwe* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2002).
14. Brian Winston, *Claiming the Real: Griersonian Documentary and Its Legitimations* (London: BFI, 1995), 37; Joyce Nelson, *The Colonized Eye: Rethinking the Grierson Legend* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1988), 13, 35–36. For a somewhat softer critique of the "elitism" inherent in Grierson's tradition, see Paul Swann, *The British Documentary Film Movement, 1926–1946* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 177–79.
15. Winston, *Claiming the Real*, 37, 69–73.
16. *Ibid.*, 42–44, 47.



**17.** Levine, in "Projections of Rural Life," argues, similarly, that scholars have been too quick to accept the totalizing rubric of Althusserian "ideological state apparatuses" as a means of explaining the relationship between these kinds of films and their viewers. She rightly calls for increased attention to the "lived experience of the viewing public" (78). Indeed, her article is one of the rare few able to draw conclusions from an extensive audience response survey conducted by the sponsoring bureau. Tepperman, likewise, in "Digging the Finest Potatoes," asserts that "the variation in exhibition context, film selection, and audience composition must surely have influenced, if not seriously compromised, the supposed instrumentality of [government-produced] films" (139). In this recent work, both scholars make enlightening and much needed moves toward the enrichment of the landscape of state-sponsored film history.

**18.** Larger evidence of this negotiation is given in my forthcoming dissertation on the history of U.S. government-produced films between 1901 and 1940.

**19.** Roy V. Scott, *The Reluctant Farmer: the Rise of Agricultural Extension to 1914* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1970); Gladys Baker, *The County Agent* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939).

**20.** Agricultural Organic Act of May 15, 1862, chapter. 72, 12 Stat. 387, codified at U.S. Code 7 §2201.

**21.** Jürgen Habermas, "The Tasks of a Critical Theory of Society," in *Habermas on Society and Politics: A Reader*, ed. Steven Seidman (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 91–92.

**22.** Submitted Draft of the Annual Report of the Office of Motion Pictures, fiscal year 1923, Office of Information, RG 16, NARA; Stanley Brown and Virgil E. Baugh, comps. *Preliminary Inventory of the Records of the Extension Service*, PI 83, NARA (1955), 4.

**23.** George R. Goergens, undated personal descriptions of USDA laboratory and equipment, from the collection of Charles "Buckey" Grimm.

**24.** Report of the Committee on Motion Picture Activities, Nov. 30, 1914.

**25.** Goergens, undated personal descriptions of USDA laboratory and equipment.

**26.** Assistant Secretary Carl Vrooman to Rep. William L. Igoe, Mar. 31, 1915. In addition to government and to itinerant individuals like those mentioned in this letter, business interests were also experimenting with film at this time. International Harvester, in January 1911, exhibited a film on the evolution of the grain harvester during Farmer's Week demonstrations at the Universities of Missouri, Illinois, and Wisconsin. See Roy V. Scott, *The Reluctant Farmer: The Rise of Agricultural Extension to 1914* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1970), 192.

**27.** Fred W. Perkins, "Twelve Year Trial of Educational Films," reprinted from *Transactions of the Society of Motion Picture Engineers* 26, no.3 (1926): 51.

**28.** Larger issues of race and uplift in USDA films, as well as a study of the Tuskegee Institute Movable School and films produced for African American audiences, are addressed in my forthcoming dissertation. See also, J. Emmett Winn, "Documenting Racism in an Agricultural Extension Film," *Film & History* 38, no.1 (2008): 33–43.

- 29.** Dan Streible notes the following. The USDA was not the only organization making educational films about cattle ticks in the 1920s. *Cattle* (1928, Eastman Teaching Films, Inc.), one of twenty 16mm one-reelers in the Eastman Classroom Film series, includes a sequence showing how cattle “are dipped in vats filled with disinfectant to destroy a tick which causes cattle fever.” George W. Hoke, who produced the series in concert with the National Education Association, was familiar with USDA work. The study guide he wrote referred to the BAI’s pamphlet, *The Story of the Cattle Fever Tick* (1922). The Teaching Films were initially used in a nationwide experiment involving schools in twelve cities, including Winston-Salem, North Carolina, and Atlanta. The films also had a life well after that. In 1945, Encyclopedia Britannica Films, acquired the footage, updating *Cattle* as EB Film no. 1084. Ben D. Wood and Frank N. Freeman, *Motion Pictures in the Classroom: An Experiment to Measure the Value of Motion Pictures as Supplementary Aids in Regular Classroom Instruction* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1929), 240–42.
- 30.** USDA, *Diversified Farming under the Plantation System*, Farmers’ Bulletin 299 (Washington, DC: GPO, 1907); “Farm ‘Revival’ for Texas Now Being Planned: Corps of Fifty Experts May Come to Preach Diversification Gospel,” *San Antonio Light*, Dec. 6, 1914; “Diversification in South,” unnumbered draft of *Department Circular* (1915), 15.
- 31.** This discovery created a paradigm shift in disease research that later opened avenues for the development of vaccines for similarly transmitted diseases, including malaria and yellow fever. See Claire Strom, “Texas Fever and the Dispossession of the Southern Yeoman Farmer,” *Journal of Southern History* 66, no.1 (Feb. 2000): 51–56, and Holly Hope, *Dip That Tick: Texas Tick Fever Eradication in Arkansas, 1907–1943* (Little Rock: Arkansas Historical Preservation Foundation, 2005), 6–8.
- 32.** “Cattle Tick Campaign,” unnumbered draft of *Department Circular* (1915), 15.
- 33.** Ed F. Pickering to Chief, BAI, Aug. 25, 1922.
- 34.** Mr. Davis to Thomas N. Carver, Oct. 26, 1913. John Humphrey Small served in the U.S. House of Representatives, 1899–1921.
- 35.** Mr. Spoon, Bureau of Public Roads, quoted in Davis to Carver, Oct. 26, 1913. Spoon continued: “I have still pictures [to show] but I hate to follow this. We must have moving pictures, that is what they want. I shall write my bureau to that effect.”
- 36.** The absence of depictions of tick eradication work in *Helping Negroes to Become Better Farmers and Homemakers*, a film depicting the main aspects of extension work among rural black communities—made during the height of the tick campaign—suggests that African American sharecroppers and tenants were not a significant audience for these films.
- 37.** Annual Report of the Department of Agriculture, cited in *Iowa Record*, Jan. 7, 1920.
- 38.** Fred W. Perkins (1890–1974), writer, filmmaker, bureaucrat, and later “dean of labor reporters,” came from a Southern family (the son of a Confederate cavalry officer, no less). Born in West Virginia, Perkins no doubt had a better rapport with Southern subjects than many of the Midwesterners who predominated in USDA bureaus. Obituary, *Washington Post*, Dec. 13, 1974.

**39.** Agricultural Appropriation Act for the fiscal year 1919, Oct. 1, 1918, Stat. 40, c. 178.

**40.** Ed F. Pickering to Chief, BAI, Aug. 25, 1922. In the same report, Pickering cites motion picture chief Perkins as placing much value on these sentimental and humorous plotlines which “the people at Hollywood call . . . hokum” and which, according to his experience, audiences often “accept as a beautiful thing” with “a murmur of admiration” or by “roar[ing] with laughter.”

**41.** Filmmaker George R. Goergens completed *Making the South Tick Free* in 1920. NARA’s Archival Research Catalog dates the film as “1924?,” which may refer to an updated edition of the film. The catalog record describes the film: “Shows emaciated cattle, victims of the cattle fever tick, in markets and on ranges. Dead cattle strewn snow-covered plains. Illustrates the life cycle of the tick. Cattle are dipped into vats to kill the ticks and ranges are quarantined.”

**42.** Ed F. Pickering to Chief, BAI, Aug. 25, 1922.

**43.** *What the Department of Agriculture Is Doing With Motion Pictures*, ca. May 1921. It is likely the term *vampire* used here refers to the popular “vamp” films of the era (e.g., Theda Bara as the sexual vamp in *A Fool There Was*, 1915).

**44.** *Report on Motion Pictures*, Oct. 31, 1923.

**45.** Annual Report of the Office of Motion Pictures, Extension Service, Fiscal Year ending June 30, 1926.

**46.** P. B. Haney, W. J. Lewis, and W. R. Lambert, “Cotton Production and the Boll Weevil in Georgia,” *University of Georgia Agricultural Experiment Stations Research Bulletin* 428 (Nov. 1996): iii. The cotton industry in the state never fully recovered from this devastation. Attempts at eradication of the boll weevil in Georgia continued into the 1990s. For more on how the closed range affected Georgia’s agriculture, see Shawn Everett Kantor’s economic history, *Politics and Property Rights: The Closing of the Open Range in the Postbellum South* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

**47.** All items from the *Atlanta Constitution*, 1922: “Tick Eradication Work Is Defended,” Apr. 23; “Vats Dynamited in Lowndes County,” Mar. 24; “Governor Asked to Aid in Tick Case in Echols,” June 22; “One Man Is Dead and Three Wounded in Echols Warfare,” June 23; “Warrants Issued in Anti-Dip War,” July 4; “Bahnsen Scores Echols Officers for Lawlessness,” July 6; “Tick Eradication Repeal Favored,” July 14; “Sixteen Dipping Vats Dynamited Near Valdosta,” July 15; “A Backward Step,” July 16; “Six Colquitt Cattle Owners Are Indicted,” July 22. A similar wave of violence recurred early in 1923. See *Atlanta Constitution*, “Feeling Is High in Dalton Over Tick War Death,” Feb. 14, 1923; “U.S. Government to Move against Agent’s Slayers,” Feb. 18, 1923; “Attorney General Leaves for Echols Cattle War Hearing,” Mar. 13, 1923. See also *Annual Report of the Department of Agriculture* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1923): 231.

**48.** “Tick Vat Film Wins South,” USDA press release, reproduced in *New York Times*, June 15, 1923. The claim that the film prevented another threatened dynamiting incident is repeated several times in internal reports and memos of the BAI and the Office of Motion Pictures.

**49.** Annual Report of the Department of Agriculture (1923), 202, 231.

50. Strom, "Texas Fever," 69–74.

51. *Report of the Committee on Motion Picture Activities*, Nov. 30, 1914. The USDA obviously hoped its films would persuade viewers to support the tick eradication campaign. However, in the absence of eyewitness descriptions of people's experiences during screenings, it is difficult to make further claims about how these films fared with specific audiences. On the whole, the department judged them to be integral to the success of its campaign, but the films no doubt fared differently with different audiences. Indeed, some relevant audience studies even question the efficacy of motion pictures. As Elizabeth Wiatr notes in her study of the visual education movements of the era, sometimes an "unruliness" to the images employed in educational films threatened to contradict or obscure the pedagogical voice these films adopted. Likewise, as Alice Murray Levine writes in "Projections of Rural Life", rural French audiences in this period found educational fare boring at times, especially when an exhibition lacked a program designed to hold audience interests (85–89). The USDA, anticipating similar problems, took great pains to control distribution and exhibition contexts for its screenings. Prints were largely limited to use by county extension agents as just one part of a campaign. Film presentations were reinforced by other pedagogical methods, such as lectures and demonstrations addressing local or regional needs. In the case of the tick eradication campaign, these films also operated in tandem with enforcement of local dipping laws.

52. "Tick Quarantine Lifted in Last 4 Georgia Counties," *Atlanta Constitution*, Dec. 10, 1924.

53. While the South was declared "tick free" in 1943, careful monitoring and occasional eradication work continues today in a few vulnerable areas directly adjacent to the "permanent quarantine line" running along the U.S.–Mexico border. See, for example, current status reports published online at: [www.aphis.usda.gov/vs-tx/tick.htm](http://www.aphis.usda.gov/vs-tx/tick.htm).

54. Hope, *Dip That Tick*, 5, 15; J. Crawford King Jr., "The Closing of the Southern Range, An Explanatory Study," *Journal of Southern History* 48, no. 1 (Feb. 1982): 53–70; Strom, "Texas Fever," 73–74. Although the making of a tick-free South had nearly been achieved by 1933, the USDA made a revised cut of *Mollie of Pine Grove Vat* that year, indicating that some use of the movie was being made in the final decade of the tick eradication campaign.