

## Movie Review

# THE LOS ANGELES TIMES

Tuesday, January 12, 1982

## VAN DYKE: FOCUSING ON THE CAMERA

By SHEILA BENSON

Bless the documentary form. How effortlessly it broadens our knowledge of the world or lets us see in the round men and women whose names might only be impersonal landmarks in the history of a period.

**CONVERSATIONS WITH WILLARD VAN DYKE** (tonight only at the Nuart Theater) ranges over a variety of fields with photography as its central axis and an urbane and fascinating central subject.

Willard Van Dyke's name is known best to some as director of the film department of the New York Museum of Modern Art, a film library that became a true film department under his aggressive leadership beginning in 1965. "Artists can never be afraid of a fight" says Van Dyke's colleague Donald Richie, his cigarette holder clamped firmly between his teeth, "And Willard never, never avoided a fight."

To others, Van Dyke, 75, is a documentarian, co-photographer for Pare Lorentz on **The River**, and with Ralph Steiner on the witty and penetrating film, **The City**, whose famous lunchtime montage is excerpted here.

In the late 1970s, a third facet appeared, when Van Dyke's photographs of the '30s were mounted in an extensive New York gallery show and the field he had turned away from began to pull him again.

The man who emerges from Amalie Rothschild's hourlong loving portrait reflects the many facets of his career. Van Dyke now believes he left still photography, his first love, to avoid collision or competition with his closest friend and mentor, Edward Weston. We see the two men in interesting juxtaposition in an excerpt from *The Photographer*, Van Dyke's 1947 film on Weston. Weston fusses endlessly to catch one of his rolling anatomical seascapes, while behind him, Van Dyke's motion picture camera catches both.

Like so many artists of conscience of the 1930s, Van Dyke gravitated to social documentary hoping that it might change the world in the way he saw that still photographs never would. "Because poetry is the distillation of ideas," he says, and because at that time film makers had an interest in all art forms, the best of these landmark documentaries had a poetic spine. Pare Lorentz's hypnotic rolling narration for **The River** was a Pulitzer nominee for poetry.

Van Dyke's dreamlike documentary, **Valley Town**, is less well known, but may be even more daring. In it Marc Blitzstein's songs form the interior thoughts of the unemployed valley dwellers as Van Dyke's compassionate camera searches their faces. Made in 1940 just as a nation was gearing up for war production, **Valley Town**, got no distribution.

"It was out of step with its time-I won't say ahead," Van Dyke says gallantly, "just out of step."

Just what was ahead may be easier for later generations to judge. The excerpt we see is haunting. (**Valley Town**, rarely shown and unavailable at the Van Dyke press screening, will screen following the Van Dyke film and before Anne Hershey's short film on 92 year-old photographer Imogen Cunningham.)

Van Dyke is perhaps most eloquent over the disillusionment he and many others later felt with the compromised state of documentary film making during wartime. "It got so I dreaded going into another perfect American small town, visiting perfect citizens 100% behind the war effort." And after the war no word of protest was wanted, anything not "chauvinistically patriotic was

suspect." For a while Van Dyke shot films for Walter Cronkite's Twentieth Century program, but found that the films not only had no bite but also were distortions of what he had seen.

A stint doing Lowell Thomas adventure films was worse, as the film maker's job came down to inserting the world traveler into footage already shot around him. The Museum of Modern Art job came just in time to rescue Van Dyke, and his mandatory retirement after 65 still angers him.

Now Van Dyke has gone back to still photography and is experimenting again with 8x10 color Polaroid film. Rothschild's film ends on this positive note as the photographer has won grants to go to Ireland to continue his work.

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## **METRO / Media & Education Quarterly Summer 1983**

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### **CONVERSATIONS WITH WILLARD VAN DYKE**

**Review by Tricia Nilvor**

It's a pity that the films of Willard Van Dyke are not readily available in Australia, as Amalie Rothschild's **CONVERSATIONS WITH WILLARD VAN DYKE** has the effect of making you want to search them out, to scrutinise them for further evidence of the facts and ideas she presents, the anecdotes Van Dyke himself tells, and the companionship and respect his friends and fellow film workers reveal towards this man whose career is etched with the social conditions of his time.

Willard Van Dyke was one of the militant New York documentary filmmakers of the Great Depression. Originally a still photographer tutored by Edward Weston, he moved from California and, like other still photographers such as Margaret Bourke-White, Berenice Abbott, Ralph Steiner and Paul Strand, joined the New York Film and Photo League. Van Dyke turned to filmmaking because "I didn't believe you could change the world by still photography." Fifty years later he wonders "...whether I should ever have gone into film."

**CONVERSATIONS WITH WILLARD VAN DYKE** traces his studentship with Weston, his work as camera operator with Pare Lorentz on **THE HANDS** (1934) and **THE RIVER** (1937) and his direction of, among others, **VALLEY TOWN** (1940) and (with Steiner), **THE CITY** (1939). We hear him speak of his work as Government propagandist during the war, "because I hated the Nazis-what was the alternative?"; of post-war employment making U.S. government films on mental health and nutrition; "neglecting, or forgetting qualities or art"; of a flirtation with television as Walter Cronkite's cameraman and sometime director; and even of a Lowell Thomas adventure film in India.

Van Dyke went on to become director of the Department of Film at the New York Museum of Modern Art expanding and making it "amenable" to young filmmakers. It was there that he and Rothschild first met. Post his retirement in 1974, he established the film program at the State University of New York, continuing his work with new filmmakers.

The film is active on a number of levels. There is the documented history of one man's work, cut with archival footage and "now" time reunions with old colleagues; there is the story of a radical artist, once elevated, then struggling against the political and economic demands of an age, finding in his last years the space and creative energy to blend integrity and a life's work; and there is Amalie Rothschild's rendition of this, mixing her framing and shots in a way that evinces the memory of a still photographer at work in motion pictures.

It's the latter theme that ultimately holds your interest. In a rather long 59 mins. there are

welcome distractions - touches of wry visual humour and much evidence of photographic form and composition. In many respects the film succeeds as Amalie Rothschild's work rather than a document of the life of Willard Van Dyke. She underlines her own film in ways that reveal much of his and what she may have learned from him. One gets the impression that she cares very much for this man.

The film ends reassuringly with Van Dyke adventurously searching the countryside, armed with an ancient lens attached to a new polaroid camera. End credits are backed by stills from his (post this film) photographic trip to Ireland.

**CONVERSATIONS WITH WILLARD VAN DYKE** is good teaching material. Documentary in its own form, it deals with this subject at the personal level of choices, revealing in both form and content the problems and possibilities of the documentary filmmaker. For photography students there is much that delights and begs discussion. Van Dyke's account of his apprenticeship on **THE RIVER** is a study in composition and camera angles, and could lead easily to comparative discussions of the work of revolutionary Russian filmmakers.

Rothschild's work is also of interest. She is well known for her women's films such as **WOO WHO? MAY WILSON**, where she also draws a lively and sympathetic portrait of 'the artist'.

**CONVERSATIONS WITH WILLARD VAN DYKE** will be screening at A.F.I. cinemas in the next few months.

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## **THE INDEPENDENT Film & Video Monthly February 1982**

### **INTERVIEW WITH AMALIE ROTHSCHILD**

### **CONVERSATIONS ABOUT WILLARD VAN DYKE**

**by Kitty Morgan**

Kitty Morgan: How did you come to make your recent film, **Conversations with Willard Van Dyke**?

Amalie Rothschild: The film came about because of Austin Lamont, current president of the Boston Film and Video Foundation, who thought that Van Dyke would make a good subject for a film. He asked me to take on the project in 1977, three years after he had originally started it with another filmmaker who didn't work out. By the time the chance came for me to make the film, Willard and I already had a long history of discussing film ideas together, and we knew there were many areas of philosophical agreement. For me, the film was a chance to discover my generation's collective roots as social change filmmakers, by learning the life story of this man who WAS the previous generation. I first met Willard in 1968, but only began to get to know him in 1970 at the Flaherty Film Seminar, where **Woo Who? May Wilson** was shown. **May Wilson** was my first film, completed in 1969.

KM: When did you start shooting?

AR: On May 29, 1977. Austin put up a loan to film the big retrospective of Van Dyke photographs at the Witkin Gallery. I shot a day at the gallery, filmed a day of interviews with him in his apartment, then the opening. I then went up to the State University of New York at Purchase, where he was teaching in the film program that he started there in 1973. I filmed him for a day working with his students. The shooting worked out so well that the project took on a life of its own.

KM: Were you able to work full-time on it?

AR: No. At the time I was developing other film projects. I was teaching production at New York University; I was also on the Board of Directors of AIVF and very active with that. This was also the period during which I was finishing editing *Doing it Yourself, A Handbook On Independent Film Distribution* [available from FIVF: \$3.75/ AIVF members, \$5.50/non-members] which grew out of my work with **New Day Films**. For the first year and a half I worked part-time on **Conversations**. A couple of months would go by and I would tape some oral history interviews with him. Then we'd find out someone like Joris Ivens was coming to New York, and I'd pull a crew together. For example, we shot four days in May 1977, then in August for two days. The following November, we went to Vermont and filmed with Ralph Steiner. In January 1978 we did the first Polaroid shooting. In February we filmed Joris Ivens. In June Donald Richie, who lives in Japan, came to New York and we filmed him. The following October, Cole Weston came to the East Coast and we filmed a sequence with him. It went on like this over quite a long period until I finally settled down to cut the material.

KM: How long did the production take?

AR: Almost four years. It was your classic independent filmmaker's experience: I never had enough money to make the film, and it was start and stop. At one point I stopped everything for six months trying to raise money. After Austin's initial loan, I immediately began the usual grant proposal writing and submissions. I did get two grants from NEA. With Austin, the co-producer of the film, I raised more money from individual donations. I was able to negotiate a series of loans to tide me over, all of which will eventually have to be paid back. Until **Conversations**, no film of mine had cost more than \$20,000. It's quite another thing to make a film for \$104,000, which is what this film finally cost!

KM: Can you give us a brief background history of Van Dyke's accomplishments?

AR: I didn't know the details of Willard's background when I started the film. He lived in California and began his career as a still photographer. He was a colleague and close friend of Edward Weston, and also one of the founders of Group f/64, which was very influential in bringing to national attention the aesthetic of sharp-focus photography, which at that time was being deeply explored by photographers on the West Coast. Van Dyke was the youngest member of that group, which included Weston, Ansel Adams and Imogen Cunningham. Willard is not generally known for his still photography because he only worked extensively in the field for about seven years before commencing his main career in film. In 1935, he moved to New York and became a cameraman on Pare Lorentz's classic **The River**. That was his first big break. He went on to make his own films and set up production companies. He is probably best known for **The City** which he co-directed with Ralph Steiner. That film was made especially for the 1939 World's Fair, where it played four times a day for two years. It is a classic American documentary, still in widespread distribution through the Museum of Modern Art.

In 1940 Van Dyke made his favorite film, **Valley Town**, and worked for the Office of War Information's Overseas Motion Picture Bureau, during World War II. From the end of the war through the middle sixties, he made close to a hundred sponsored documentary films of all sorts, from 1958 to 1965 almost exclusively for television. He made a couple of High Adventure shows with Lowell Thomas and then eleven programs for CBS's *The 20th Century*, which were hosted by Walter Cronkite.

He became rather disillusioned with television and when the opportunity came in 1965, he left film production altogether to become Director of the Department of Film at the Museum of Modern Art. He is probably best known now in that role.

All his life he's been a champion of committed films, a believer that noncommercial films should be shown to as broad an audience as possible. People like me probably wouldn't be filmmakers if it weren't for the work of people like Van Dyke.

KM: The thirties were a particularly important time for documentary films in this country. Can you give us a historical perspective of that time?

AR: In my film Van Dyke says (speaking of the thirties): "I had the feeling that social injustices could be rectified by calling people's attention to them; not by making a revolution or by other violent action of some kind, but if artists would only use their minds and their work, bringing inequities to the attention of people, then people would automatically begin to take action for change." This optimism seemed to be prevalent. There was some government support for endeavors in all art fields towards constructive change, and this was the only period in American film history when documentary films actually had widespread commercial distribution in movie theatres.

After the war, the social problems were supposedly solved and there was no place for the kinds of films that had been made before the war. Van Dyke and many of his colleagues faced disillusionment; they found they could not continue to produce the way they wanted to.

KM: What are your thoughts on cinema verite'?

AR: It is widely thought in some quarters that cinema verite' has ruined the documentary form. The portable synch sound camera and Nagra tape recorder, which freed filmmakers to capture spontaneous, unrehearsed life, also gave a lot of people the notion that all they had to do was go out there, shoot a lot of film and put it together in some way, and this would make them filmmakers. Cinema verite' became an excuse for lack of craft, lack of technique, lack of control. I think it's time we understood, first, our heritage as filmmakers, and second, our responsibility to the craft of filmmaking.

Van Dyke, and the first generation of American documentarists in general, were complete professionals from the craft point of view. They made films that were aesthetically beautiful and carefully thought out. They didn't just point the camera and paste together what they got. They planned it, they lit it, they set it up. They were close to fiction filmmakers in many respects, but they did gather certain materials spontaneously. Remember, they didn't have synch sound, and all their films were 35mm.

When there was good material, sometimes they would stage additional shots for continuity. For example, there's a wonderful sequence in **The City** about the problems the Fire Department had in getting through traffic to a fire. One of the cameramen, Eddie Anhalt, was going home one night and got stuck in traffic. He had his camera, a 35mm Eyemo, sitting on the seat beside him, and there was a fire engine trying to get through the traffic. He picked up his camera and shot it. When the editor saw the shot, he said, "This would make a great sequence. What have you got to go with it?" And Eddie said: "Well, I don't have anything." So they staged a whole sequence within which they used the "real" shot.

KM: Of course, there are many people who would disagree with you about cinema verite'. Many extraordinary, moving films have been made in that style. Tell us about the techniques you use in your film, why you use them, and why you feel they are important. AR: There had to be some kind of mix between verite'-type shooting and some of the techniques of Van Dyke's generation, though I must say that nothing in my film was staged for continuity. I did try to use music as an important element, and I think the composer, Amy Rubin, did a terrific score. The excerpts from Van Dyke's films serve as examples of alternative forms within the context of material gathered in unrehearsed shooting sessions.

I did not have footage of Van Dyke making **The City** or shooting **The River** or working for the Office of War Information, or at the Museum of Modern Art. I had to rely largely on reminiscences. This poses problems in making portrait or biographical films. The director has to create as relaxed an atmosphere as possible that can enable the subject to relive the past in as exciting a way as possible - which translates to an audience as good storytelling. I also believe interaction between subject and director is often necessary. KM: When you begin a shoot, do you have an idea of what you want to happen?

AR: Yes, I always know what information I'm interested in going after. I have a series of questions, and directions in which I want to take things. In the sequences of Van Dyke with

Ralph Steiner, and also of him with Joris Ivens, there was such rapport and energy that certain key questions got them started; the conversations would take off because they really had things to talk about as part of their friendship. I became the catalyst, knowing that it would illuminate aspects of both men and be of value to the film. Of course, I'd done my homework, and knew Ralph and Joris - I'd studied their work and developed a feeling of trust with them personally. They weren't merely foils for Willard; they knew that they would have their own roles in the film, that they would appear as accomplished professionals in their own right.

KM: Did you have trouble editing so much interview material?

AR: Sure. Most films of this kind are really written in the editing room. I give a writing credit to Julie Sloane, who was my editor. Together we "wrote" the film using the material I had gathered - close to 50,000 feet.

KM: Did you expect to rely so much on an editor when you began the film?

AR: That's hard to answer, because I've always worked with an editor in close collaboration. I don't think it's an admission of inadequacy or failure to work with one. In fact, I think that many independent filmmakers make a mistake thinking they have to edit their own material. When you invest two, three, four years of your life on a project, you really don't see what's coming off the screen as other people do. I went through two editors and lost a year, reconstituting the film twice, before I found the right person who understood my point of view, could recognize the film I wanted to make in the material I had gathered and had the skill and taste to shape it.

KM: Did you feel you had to make any compromises in the editing for the sake of distribution?

AR: No. The only consideration of that kind had to do with length. The first cut of the film was ninety minutes. I liked it, but I didn't think an audience would have sat through it. Obviously, an hour is much better for distribution purposes, especially in the college market, where its long-range life will be, realistically.

KM: What was Van Dyke's role in the making of the film?

AR: He didn't participate in the editing, and didn't see any of the rushes until the film was basically shot. Then he looked at them all and went away. It was only when Julie and I had our first assembly, and at certain critical stages thereafter, that we'd call him in to look at it and give us his feelings. Most of it was the cogent criticism of a professional, and very valuable. Some of it, naturally, was simply personal. There were a few disagreements, but they were resolved. I think Willard is really quite pleased with it, though he still doesn't like the end of the film. He wanted us to use another sequence, but Julie and I felt that what he wanted wouldn't work.

KM: What considerations determined which excerpts from Van Dyke's films were chosen?

AR: They were carefully selected to represent his style, technique and artistry. At same time, we chose excerpts that we hoped would also illuminate the history of the period - the values and the politics of the times, so that you got a sense of how the filmmakers were working and what they were living through. A lot of stills were also used to help bring the past to life.

KM: How did you do the voice-overs? Van Dyke always sounds so natural.

AR: I have over thirty hours of oral history interviews with Willard, which I had transcribed, so we knew the history quite thoroughly. However, the information we needed for transitions was often convoluted and roundabout on the tapes. That's screen time and you can't do that. After struggling to edit the tapes to say what we wanted, we realized that wouldn't work either.

So Julie and I wrote out exactly the information we needed, went into a recording studio with Willard and he recorded the voice-over narration. We tried to write it the way he speaks, but in the recording studio he would often translate it into language that was more natural for him. When it didn't come across right we'd do a number of takes or change the subject. Willard knew that I knew all this stuff, but a lot of it was new to Julie, so she would conduct on-the-spot interviews to get him to speak about it in a fresh, immediate way. We did three recording

sessions and then picked what seemed most authentic and natural.

KM: You've had success showing the film at festivals?

AR: It was in Filmex this year, and a finalist at the American Film Festival. It won a Merit Award at the Athens Film Festival, and the CINE Golden Eagle. It just won the Bronze Award and the Best in the Fine Arts category at the San Francisco Film Festival. I'm beginning to sell prints, too, which is a surprise. I showed it at the University Film Association conference this summer. It was a small conference, but the people are film teachers and they really seemed to like it. I'm getting rental requests, which makes me feel good and optimistic.

KM: What's your next project?

AR: I have one grant for a film that I began before the Van Dyke film came along. It's an outgrowth of my experience as a community organizer in lower Manhattan, a film about the politics of real estate development dealing with the loft issue, zoning and the urban housing crisis. When I get sufficiently out of debt and the distribution of **Conversations** is in cruising gear, then I can turn my mind creatively to that project.

Kitty Morgan is the director of Independent Cinema Artists & Producers (ICAP), a nonprofit distributor of independent media to cable TV.

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## **TUESDAY / CALENDAR THE LOS ANGELES TIMES**

**January 12, 1982**

### **DOCUMENTATION OF A FILM MAKER**

**By LINDA GROSS**

"All of my life I've fought to be taken seriously" said Amalie R. Rothschild, a New York-based documentary film maker. "It's always been a double bind because there were double messages: 'Be a success and achieve' but, at the same time: 'Don't you dare'. While I had the will to do what I had to do underneath it all I didn't have the self confidence to be comfortable about it."

An assured and intense brunette who exudes pervasive professionalism Rothschild gives the impression of never having experienced any self-doubt. But that's far from true. In a recent interview the 36 year-old Rothschild talked forthrightly about her internal struggles as well as the difficulties of making documentary films. (Rothschild's latest film **Conversations With Willard Van Dyke**, a study of the photographer, plays at the Nuart today and is reviewed by Sheila Benson in the accompanying story.)

"For example," Rothschild said, "I never let the fact that there wasn't anybody else interested stop me from going to see a movie by myself. But once I got there I'd often be miserable because I'd see other people together. It's hard to overcome the feeling there is something wrong with you because you are alone."

"Thank God my inner resources didn't close me down. But they didn't make it easier either. A good part of my adult life has been spent becoming comfortable with independence and finding ways of overcoming the anxiety that one can easily fall into when you are alone."

Part of Rothschild's skill as a film maker comes from her ability to probe and ask disquieting questions. She's as tough on herself as she is on her subjects.

One of the qualities that attracted Rothschild to making a movie about photographer Van Dyke, whom she had known for 10 years as an administrator rather than as a film maker, was his ambivalence.

"Willard is a man who's not entirely satisfied with his life and career," she said. "I admired his

willingness to articulate his feelings particularly because he is a person that most of us consider a success.

"The truth is that the majority of people have mixed feelings about their lives," Rothschild said, "and that's not a negative thing. I think it's poignant. There is a lesson to be learned in Willard's story because some of us right now are at the crossroads where we still can perhaps make certain choices.

"It was more common for people from Willard's generation to make decisions without thinking that it would mean their careers were at stake. People now have more information to work with. God knows if we are going to make a better go of it than they did, let's talk when we are 70 and see."

Rothschild began making her documentary on Van Dyke in May 1977 while she also was teaching a production course in film making at New York University. Over a three-year period she shot 50,000 feet of film-25 hours. In addition she had 30 hours of oral history besides Van Dyke's own documentaries, all of which was eventually cut into a 59-minute film by editor Julie Sloane.

Like Van Dyke, Rothschild began her career as a still photographer. She did her undergraduate work in graphic design and still photography at Rhode Island School of Design. And, also like Van Dyke, Rothschild turned to film making because of her political convictions.

"I am a true child of the 60s," Rothschild said, "and feel very strongly politically. I fell in love with movies when I was 12 but it wasn't until my senior year at RISD, which I spent in Rome, that I decided it was right for me to pursue a film-making career."

Her first film, **Woo Who? May Wilson** (1969), is about the artist who became independent at age 60 after the breakup of her 40-year marriage.

In 1971 while making **It Happens to Us**, a documentary plea for legalized abortion, Rothschild helped co-found **New Day Films** along with Julia Reichert, Jim Klein and Liane Brandon. New Day became the first successful non-theatrical self-distribution cooperative formed. In 1974 Rothschild explored the relationship between her mother her grandmother and herself in the 47-minute autobiographical documentary **Nana, Mom and Me**.

"Whereas **Nana, Mom and Me** was a search for understanding my roots in my own family," Rothschild said, **Conversations** is a seeking of my film-making roots. I consider myself a member of a second generation of social documentary filmmakers in this country and Willard is certainly one of the grand old men of the first generation.

"Stylistically, early documentary film making resembles fiction," she said. "The film makers had a theatrical audience and their films were taken seriously the same way that Hollywood films were. I'm really sorry that documentary has come to mean boring TV. Television has really changed the genre into something that is associated mostly with news and reporting.

"I think it's too bad that the only documentaries which the public now associates with entertainment and the movies are the music films like **Woodstock**. Take a film like **Harlan County USA**. It's an enormously important and powerful film which even won an Academy Award. But even though it played theatrically and did respectable box office for a film of its kind, still it didn't make any real money.

"I think documentary has enormous potential. Yet it seems to be viewed as the ugly stepchild of the film industry because it doesn't have the commercial success attached to feature films. It's difficult to get widespread theatrical distribution and since there is generally not much money to be made back it's hard to find backers, and the commercial film people certainly don't take us seriously.

"What becomes increasingly difficult is getting the energy to initiate the next project," she said. "I spend 80% of my time doing things I don't want to do like raising money."



Rothschild's next film will be a documentary on the politics of real-estate development, which comes from her own experiences in New York City rewriting the zoning for her neighborhood and helping save her building from being torn down.

"Oh, how I long to arrive at the stage when it gets easier, but that doesn't seem to be the case," she said. "It doesn't matter how good your film is or what honors you receive. Every time you start another project you have to go through the same gobbledygook all over to convince somebody to give you the money.

"Making documentaries is really living out the myth of Sisyphus."

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## **THE BALTIMORE SUN** **Friday, February 5, 1982**

### **CLASSIC CAMERAMAN IS SUBJECT OF AWARD-WINNING DOCUMENTARY**

**By Carleton Jones**

Unless you have kept up to date on the history of documentary movies and still photography, you may never have heard of Willard Van Dyke.

But this pleasant, soft-spoken Coloradan, born in 1906, may serve as well as any as a model for the dilemmas of a Twentieth Century visual artist and the heartbreaking honesty of youth turning into the dodges and compromises of middle age.

In the 1930s when every tenth American was out of work - and 20 or 30 people a day were starving to death - Willard Van Dyke was in the field as the cameraman for Pare Lorentz's **The River**.

An epochal movie documentary of the Mississippi River and its share cropper millions, this 1936 film is regarded today as one of the touchstones of American documentary art.

Mr. Van Dyke went on to produce (with Ralph Steiner) the equally heavyweight **The City**, a dynamically jittery portrait of Manhattan, made for the New York World's Fair in 1939 with music by Aaron Copland. On his own he made **Valley Town**, a capsule of mill-town life in the upper Midwest, which said all he wanted to say about the plight of pre-World War II American industrial workers.

Austere honesty and uncompromising scripts captured world attention for these films. Then, when he is scarcely into his 40s, Mr. Van Dyke's career went into artistic eclipse. He found himself forced by economics (and a family) to produce things for the auto industry and for a wide variety of corporation and entertainment hacks. The 1930s were out of style and nobody was treating movies as an art form or even collecting prints.

He made films on marriage and courtship and mental health. He made Tarzan-like jungle scenes that were used in faking Lowell Thomas safari travelogues that made the world-traveled commentator look like he had been where he had not been.

And he made film for Walter Cronkite's documentary series in the 1960s (the Twentieth Century), film that TV editors hacked up out of all recognition and in violation of the tale his camera was telling. Television never offered him the chance to edit honestly.

Such actions violated his sense of authenticity, for it was part of the 1930s social significance canon that you should film only the truth, not doctor it, and from the truth came freedom. Only when working for the Office of War Information in the early 1940s did he feel that commercial movies were worthwhile and then "only because I hated the Nazis." His last major film, **Valley Town** was completed too late and was "out of step" with the times, according to the director, and

failed to get much distribution.

Joyous release from potboiling came to the artist in the 1960s when Mr. Van Dyke joined the art bureaucracy as director of the Department of Film for the Museum of Modern Art in New York. All of this and more is on view in the entertaining documentary, **Conversations with Willard Van Dyke**, a new one-hour film produced by the veteran camera artist, Amalie R. Rothschild, of Baltimore. The Van Dyke movie gets its Baltimore premiere at 2:30 pm. tomorrow at the Walters Art Gallery, arriving here laden with tributes, having won film festival honors in San Francisco, Los Angeles and Athens.

Mr. Van Dyke, retired since the mid-1970s from his museum job and very heavily into still photography, is quite the fashion today. Things like his great "cotton" sequences taken of Mississippi levee loadings and incorporated in **The River** are regarded today as classics. A sequence from the "cotton" filming is included in the Rothschild documentary, as are the musical scores of Copland and Marc Blitzstein.

Though he found his theme early, and after rewarding study with Edward Weston and other members of the California group f/64 in the late 1920s, Mr. Van Dyke says he still had to grope his way to major themes. At first, he says, he made the error of trying to turn his film into what he calls "a sort of animated still photography." Hours and hours went mistakenly into trying to "make it beautiful," for the camera, whatever it was, and regardless of the texture or the story to be told.

But the great lessons of the 1930s panoramas came pretty much all at once. East Side ambulance calls in Manhattan, Pittsburgh smoke, dingy mill-town hillsides, kids playing in gutters and fighting with the tops of garbage cans and swords made out of boards, cops assaulting strikers and cranes pushing over the stacks of old factories: these are the images that set the Van Dyke film style.

In one of them, an out-of-work milltown father, not a professional actor, from the Jimmy Cagney-Pat O'Brien generation, walks along a depression street and utters in a voiceover what might be one of the great mottos of the 1930s ordeal: "We gotta get outta this dump."

Today Mr. Van Dyke looks back on some of his early still photography ("I took it back up when I hadn't been in a darkroom in 40 years"); and says it is obviously "the work of a very young man."

As the Rothschild film shows he is now busily adapting the Polaroid instant color print to old fashioned box and bellows cameras. Enormous print sizes are resulting, and he has tried out the method on the lush Irish scenery, helping things along with a strobe light every now and then.

There is a must-keep-busy note to all of this in the film. "I can't rest...I can rest a long time when I'm dead," is the artist's comment. He adds that he might have gone on to greater achievements if he had insisted on working alone.

But somehow it didn't make sense to become a lone single artist, as he might well have become if he had stayed with still photographs. "I think of myself as an artist who prostituted or neglected the qualities I had as a person," he says today.

But there were still those wonderful years when it was all films of protest, films of revelation. "I was always under the illusion that I could make society over again with documentaries. It never happened," he says.

The program tomorrow at the Walters is free to the public and is sponsored by Maryland Cultural Resources, Inc. of Baltimore. Ms. Rothschild will be present at the screening for a discussion of the film. A reception for the artist will follow the program.

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# **THE SCOTSMAN, Edinburgh, Wednesday, September 1, 1982**

**Edinburgh Festival**

## **CONFESSING FOR THE CAMERA**

**by Michael Wigan**

American, Amalie Rothschild, made **Conversations with Willard Van Dyke**, a documentary principally rewarding for the good nature, high ideals and artistic genius of its subject.

Van Dyke is indeed a pleasant personality, a well-preserved septuagenarian, intelligent, a shade arrogant, gently confident of his abilities and the validity of his aims. Committed throughout his life to the principle of photography as a medium which could be responsibly used to illuminate social issues and bring about social change, his early stills and then his movie picture work is flush with fervor, artistry and feeling.

To an extent the film follows the inquiry he himself sets up- whether going into movies and eventually doing propaganda work for the War Department blunted his edge and de-routed him from his higher purpose in the aesthetic of photographic stills. He laments the impossibility in post-war America of continuing doing social documentaries.

Eventually he stopped making movies when film companies edited his material in ways he felt were untrue and unrepresentative. Having discovered, and deserted, the artistic damnation that is American television he became the vigorous head of the Department of Film at the State University of New York.

His relations with other documentary film makers (Joris Ivens and Ralph Steiner) are recreated as they meet up again and discuss their work. His debt to the great photographer, his mentor, Edward Weston, in which relationship he unhappily sensed a creeping element of competition, he expresses fulsomely. It is a well-made documentary which wisely leaves Van Dyke's stills and selected movie sequences to do most of the talking.