Interview with Tom Waters, December 6, 2012

CRAIG BREADEN: My name is Craig Breaden, I’m the audiovisual archivist at Duke University, and I’m with Kirston Johnson, the curator of the Archive of Documentary Arts at Duke. The date is December 6, 2012, and we’re in Lexington, NC talking with Tom Waters about his life and family, and particularly about his father, H. Lee Waters. Please state your full name, your date of birth, and your place of birth.

TOM WATERS: My name is Charles Thomas Waters, I was born in Lexington, NC at 405 West Side Drive, in 1934.

BREADEN: Thank you, sir.

Waters: Thank you.

KIRSTON JOHNSON: Do you remember your father filming in Lexington and making movies of local people?

WATERS: No.

JOHNSON: No. So would it have been done when you were very young?

WATERS: He started when I was two years old, and then he finished when I was six or eight years old. He stopped in ’42 when my little sister was born.

JOHNSON: Ok.

WATERS: Matter of fact, that was his agreement with my mother, since she was about to have another child. She said “you need to come off the road and stay home and be a daddy.”

JOHNSON: Really?

WATERS: It was time to quit though. He gave up all of his 16mm projectors and his (indiscernible) projectors. ’42 was when the war was really getting in and serious. (indiscernible) about that time. Pretty heavy. And people had their pictures made to send to the servicemen, and the servicemen would have theirs made, when they come home for a little, with all of the ribbons and buttons and everything -- and my mother would color those pictures, and get the ribbons to be the appropriate colors. A magazine came out with a double spreadsheet of all the ribbons and awards the servicemen could get, and she got that and used that as her guide. The people would
tell her what the ribbon was for, and she’d look it up on this chart and color it exactly--
and all these ribbons would show up on the uniforms. But there was little color
photography back in those days, so she did hand coloring for the servicemen. Some of
them are quite delicate.

JOHNSON: Wow, that’s wonderful.

WATERS: By that time, their business had picked up in the studio, and they were able
to make it with the studio alone. But he did some unique things during the Depression.
He got the idea to put a special on, and it says “everybody’s got a dime,” and he had
this special where they could spend their dime and get a picture made, and he made
what they call a little sticky back. And then he put multiple images on a piece of printer
paper, and I forget how many little images would be there, but they were the about size
of a postage stamp--maybe a little bit larger--and he’d put it on their stationary so they
could personalize it.

JOHNSON: So they were multiple images on the postage stamp sized print?

WATERS: No, they were probably about eight by ten, or five by seven-- or whatever
size it was -- but the little pictures that came out, they were all images, and he’d turn
them over and put adhesive on the back of them so they could lick them and stick them
on their paper.

JOHNSON: That’s great.

WATERS: He’d charge ten cents. And they had people lined up all from their second
floor all the way down the steps and halfway up the street waiting to get in and get their
ten-cent picture.

JOHNSON: Was he doing this before he started out doing the movies of local people or
after?

WATERS: Yes. Before.

JOHNSON: Before.

WATERS: Yes.

JOHNSON: Was that something he did for many years as a studio photographer?
WATERS: Not too many. I think he got the innovation to go on after shooting some pictures around town here, to go to some other towns. He made the photos primarily of mill images, and then construction workers and sports, and high schools and students. He came from a textile background. His parents worked in the textile mills in Gaffney, South Carolina.

JOHNSON: In where?

WATERS: Gaffney, South Carolina.

JOHNSON: Gaffney, South Carolina, ok.

WATERS: That’s down near Greer. His dad came up here to find better work. All three of them eventually worked in Erlanger Mills up here. Called Parkdale Mills now. Up in that little community called Erlanger. At least now it’s in the city limits of Lexington, but then it was a separate little community. The people who put up the textile mill there, they’d go ahead and just build a whole community. They’d put up the houses, the grocery store, the five and dime-- whatever you call it-- general store, they’d have their own YMCA, their own ballfields, their own section of entertainment. My daddy would show the movies, silent movies in the theater there at Erlanger, part of the YMCA on the second floor or something like that. He’d start the movie, and then he’d go downstairs and play the piano.

JOHNSON: Oh, that's great--

BREADEN: And these were commercially released movies?

WATERS: Yes, the silent movies, right before they had sound movies.

BREADEN: And he’d play the piano for it.

WATERS: He’d play the piano for them.

BREADEN: Was he into photography by this time?

WATERS: Oh yeah, he started photography as soon as he got up here. There was a house up in Erlanger that they lived in at the time. It’s across the street from Mayes’ Jewelers - the second house on the left there right as you turn on the street. And they built it for one of the people in management-- I don’t know if it was superintendent or one just under the superintendent, but my granddaddy said now, he brought his whole family up here to work, and he wanted that house. And if they didn’t let him have that
house, then they wouldn’t come. But they did in fact let them have that house, and so my dad had his darkroom in the basement of that house. Even as a teenager he was into it. They moved up there when he was about sixteen or seventeen, something like that, and he’d work in the mill making fifty cents a day. He’d shuffle the little carts back and forth. My grandmother made labels, and my grandfather, Thomas Butner Waters he kept up the machinery-- he worked on the weavers, or the weaver machines, stuff like that.

BREADEN: What was his first name?

WATERS: Thomas Butner Waters, T. B. Waters.

JOHNSON: So H. Lee Waters was interested in photography even as a teenager. While he was working in the mills he had a darkroom at home.

WATERS: Yeah. And then in 1925 he started working for Mr. Hitchcock, who had a studio up on the second floor, second avenue on Main Street - 18 ½ South Main Street. He had the whole second floor up there, and my dad went to work for him. After about a year, he’d taken tips from Mr. Hitchcock--it was called Hitchcock Studio, by the way-- he said, “Herbert, you just make it work. I’m thinking about selling this place. Do you want to buy it?” By that time his father had already passed away; he had peri(odontitis) in the gums, and the stupid dentist at the time pulled all of his teeth out at one time, and within two days he’s dead. There was so much poison in his system at one time.

BREADEN: And this was T.B.?

WATERS: Yeah. Thomas Butner Waters. My dad by that token became the head of the house, but had to have somebody head of the house that worked in the mill full time, not a teenager. And they had to move out of house because the head of the house was no longer employed there. You know, at the time my grandmother and dad were still working there, and they still worked on at the mill, but they moved over to what they called the hotel. It’s still standing up there. It’s an old, green, large building, and they rented rooms up there. So they lived in a hotel for ten… I think she starts selling rugs, probably or something like that. And she was quite the salesman.

JOHNSON: This was your grandmother?

WATERS: Yes. Her name was Amanda Gertrude. She remarried, and the children of her husband, the grandchildren of her husband, her called her Aunt Gertie.

JOHNSON: So Amanda Gertrude was from Maine and she was married to T.B. Waters.
WATERS: And years later she married Mr. Sil Mitchell in Indicator, GA. She’d gone down to visit her sister, Lula, who had married a man there in Indicator, and she met Mr. Sil Mitchell and they got along pretty good so she married him. Be with her sister. Before that she lived in our house in a different bedroom. I still got her old bedroom suit, it’s an antique in itself. How did we get this far off-track?

(laughter)

BREADEN: We’re actually quite on track.

JOHNSON: It’s great. This is wonderful to hear all of this background history. I’m very interested in knowing that H. Lee Waters was interested in photography at such a young age.

WATERS: Yeah, he became quite accomplished at it. (indiscernible) That’s where he was, he and his mother. His father had already passed away. He was off at camp when this happened. When he got home, his father had already passed. But they bought it, and I don’t know if she loaned him the money or they paid someone or what the deal was, but the record of that transaction is right here in this library. The items are logged in and paid, they were--

JOHNSON: This is the record of the transaction of purchasing the photo studio?

WATERS: Yes.

BREADEN: And this was in 1926?


JOHNSON: How old would your father have been in ‘26?

WATERS: 24. He was born in 1902.

BREADEN: Did he ever talk to you about how he first got interested in photography?

WATERS: No, I don’t know what his first camera was or when his first sittings were. The only thing that could tell that story is a scrapbook, scrapbook with pictures in it. And he’s got little notes too, little subtitles for what each one of them is. And they had a garden in the back of that little house in Erlanger where they lived in. Divided gardens. And during the war they called them Patriot gardens. But my grandmother had already moved out by then, and then my sister came in ‘42. I was trying to find-- wondering
about where that scrapbook is, but I haven’t seen it in years. There’s another book that my daughter and I composed, put together. It was a project for one of her classes in school. On the Waters’ family heritage, and we found a lot of prints and pictures of his family history and ours too. But in there, it tells quite a story if you go along with it. I’ll go see if I can find that since you’re interested in this area also.

JOHNSON: We’re very interested in his history. That would be wonderful.

WATERS: If you’re that interested in it, it’ll take me a month or so to collect a lot of that sentiment that you’d be interested in.

JOHNSON: Ok.

WATERS: I was surprised. I knew about where it was the other day, but we’ve moved stuff around so much many times in the last ten years, and time goes by so fast at my age. It goes by real fast. It’s like you’re a ball going to the top of the hill and and the further goes down the backside the faster it gets.

JOHNSON: Are you in the house that H. Lee Waters raised his family in?

WATERS: Yes, and I was born in that house.

JOHNSON: You were born in the house that you live in now.

WATERS: I stay in the bedroom that I was born in.

JOHNSON: Wow, that’s amazing! So, you talked about a hotel that they lived in near the mill. When was H. Lee Waters able to buy this house after purchasing the photo studio?

WATERS: Well, after he purchased the photo studio, I think he got married in ‘26 or ‘27, something like that, on Christmas Day. I’ll have to look at the old family line to figure out what the date of the marriage was. But Bill Kursner, he wrote this article back in 2000 and it’s-- I ran across it just this morning. They lived in the studio in the front two rooms. In the two front rooms of the studio, they had a bathroom, it was in the hall. They didn’t have a shower or a tub, I guess they bathed as best as they could. But they had a sink in the front bedroom. There was the kitchen, and a second room up there, the front, was the bedroom. I don’t know how long they lived up there, but they moved out to a house on Station Drive, which is around the corner from where we live now. It was down near a creek, and the drain stopped up going down the road there and flooded the whole bottom end. They got flooded about once or twice, and said “that’s
enough of that,” so the went up the hill and bought this house. And the man who had built the house had just finished it, so it was brand new when he bought it.

BREADEN: And this was in the late ‘20s or early ‘30s?

WATERS: It had to be in the late 20s.

BREADEN: So his studio was doing well enough at that point --

WATERS: Yeah, that they could move out of the studio and moved into this little house behind where we live now. And after about a year, maybe less than that, they moved up here. They had just finished the house. He was able to do that. But I have all kinds of newspaper articles--

JOHNSON: This is great--

WATERS:--through the years--

BREADEN: He sounds like he was pretty clever at putting together ways to market his photography, like the sticky stamps idea.

WATERS: Let me tell you, it was quite an emotional roller coaster putting this together about his studio. I've come across things, found things that I never even knew about, and I just came to the conclusion that this man was a genius. I've never seen such animated ideas in my life. He made a special apparatus, I guess you'd call it -- I think there were two apparatuses, he made -- that he had them made or designed them, or had somebody make them or something or other-- a lot of things he made himself. He made this copy-- you'll see it in one of the movies here, I'll tell you, I'll bring your attention to it and show it to you. It was a thing that had a big square hole in it like this, and a sash that would go up or down-- you raised and lowered it like a window, and depending on what level you wanted to shoot it at. And a little backside right here it had florescent lights, not fluorescent, but regular bulb lights, real bright lights. And he put a mounting board back behind here, and put little pins up there to hold the picture in place. He would slide his camera up the hole and shoot through the hole. His pictures were being lit by these bulbs that were on the backside of the thing, so he'd get a reflection of the camera and he'd snap his copy-jobs through there in the magnifying glass on the lense. He'd look through the viewfinder, with (indiscernible) glass on the back, frosted glass you'd see the image on, and he'd shoot his copy-jobs through there. He'd get a perfect image of the picture he was copying. He would re-touch that, touch it up and do some modifications and make final prints of it. That way they would have very little to touch up once the print was made. He could re-touch, but my mother was much
better at it. She did all of the coloring and re-touching, but she could make the portraits too. Sometime after they moved into the studio, they went up to Winona Lake, Indiana to the School of Photography up there. And I ran across the annual, the graduation annual. I don’t know how long they stayed up there, but long enough to learn most of what they knew about professional photography. They went to a photography school.

JOHNSON: That really interesting--

BREADEN: Where in Indiana?

WATERS: Winona Lake, Indiana. There used to be a mill there called Winona. Winona Mills. It was right in the southern part. Matter of fact, it’s Moffett’s home, the mill - there was even a baseball field called Moffett Field out there.

JOHNSON: Do you think he went to this school to--

WATERS: My first sister, she was born about six years before I was. Annemarie. And they took their maid with them, and the maid took care of the girl, the baby, while they were at school. How they put all of that together, and had the money to do that-- I don’t know if his mother was helping them with that, or making that much out of the studio, or what the deal was. But he had a will. They say, “where there’s a will there’s a way,” and if he had the will to do something he’d find a way to do it. I’ve never seen anything like it.

JOHNSON: So he went to this photography school before he started to make the movies of local people.

WATERS: Yes.

JOHNSON: I wonder-- in his movies of local people, we often see these trick shots that he achieved through in camera manipulation, as well as manipulation of the film when he was editing. I wonder if he learned a lot of how to do those things on the job, while he was teaching himself, or if he learned that from somebody.

WATERS: I think he got it from the manual that came with the camera.

JOHNSON: Ok, that makes sense.

WATERS: I’m not sure, but I got a lot of this side-tracked. I’m trying to come back to where we were.
JOHNSON: It’s all interesting to us.

BREADEN: When he set out in 1936 to make the movies of local people--

WATERS: I was born in 34, I was 2 years old.

BREADEN: Did he take inspiration from anybody else who was doing similar kinds of work, or did he just have this idea that he would go out and film this?

WATERS: Not that I know of. It’s all his original work. I don’t know that he copied anybody, or got his ideas from anybody. I never heard that, but he may have picked up on something somewhere, but we don’t know anything about it. I never heard of it.

BREADEN: It sounds pretty creative, sounds like he probably-- he’d been out in the the community marketing before, so he sort of had the sense of that.

WATERS: The building projects, the photographic copies of prints. The other one that is very unique to me are these photographic baby pictures. Baby portraits. He’d have his little cabinet there full of toys and balls and whistles and bells, things like that, to attract. But he said “I have to be too active in that when I’m trying to make pictures.” And sometimes you’d get a response out of them, sometimes you wouldn’t. But you know, moving image will capture any child’s attention. Look at your T.V. today; the T.V. comes on and everything else is out the window. You want to teach them something, teach them on the screen. And what’s a screen before that? A person. Somehow, he got the gist of that, and understood that concept, so he built a theatre for them. It stood about this tall, and it had all kinds of child’s decoration-- things you would decorate their baby bed with or playroom with, all kinds of decorations on it-- and it had wheels on it so you could pull it around. On the backside it had a camera back there, right there, and cartoons. The children couldn’t read well, but it had writing on-- forward, backward, whatever-- and they’d project them on the back of the screen and the writing would come out backwards. The action was all the same, just reversed. And he’d sit there and show them a movie or cartoons, trying to get pictures out of them. And the portraits came out.

JOHNSON: Wow, that’s pretty astounding--

WATERS: It had a screen on it about this big. I think it was destroyed when we moved out of the studio, though. Nobody wanted it. Now, I think the copier rig still exists. I think it’s up in the museum. And his camera’s right there, it’s a large portrait camera. Great big, old, bulky things. You’ll see some of those in the Tom Whiteside’s work there.
BREADEN: Did he take any movies before he started out on the movies with people project? Had he taken any movies before then?

WATERS: I’m sure he had. I don’t know what though. He didn’t have a real high quality camera before this, he got one special. You can tell some of that in his early movies of local people. You can see in half those films. They got three reels of them, and in one of them I can tell they didn’t have them in any chronological order because of the quality of the film, and you can see the difference of the camera there, and the quality of the film. You can see the camera he was using. And you can pretty well date the camera, when he bought the camera, just by the cadaverous lense.

JOHNSON: He was so clearly a people person.

WATERS: He was, yes.

JOHNSON: He seems to me like he was so clearly a people person in that when he went into these small towns, you can see that the people he is photographing are very open to him photographing them. And it tells you a lot about H. Lee Waters himself. I wonder if you can speak to that. Do you think that-- I mean, he was ingenious, but he also seemed to really make people comfortable in front of the camera.

WATERS: He could meet a stranger. He’d talk to anybody. What was amazing to me was the rapport he had with the black people. And especially-- there’s one section of one of these things here somewhere that-- I think it’s in this one -- a whole section just on black people. That humanity. He had just as much rapport with them as he did with anybody else. And they seemed to accept him as such, and matter of fact, they got a kick out of him showing them that kind of attention.

BREADEN: Can I ask you a follow-up question with that? Did black people work in the mill, the textile mill that he worked with?

WATERS: I’m sure they did. They did mill work in Lexington, and in another place-- furniture factories. That was textile. There’s was about 6 textile mills here and about 6-8 furniture factories.

BREADEN: But he may have been maybe more comfortable going into African American communities than someone else from the time period might have?

WATERS: Well, he-- I coined a phrase years ago. He was colorblind. What color a person was made no difference to him. For the most part it has made no difference to
me. We lived next to a black family in Atlanta. They stayed next door, the next farm over. We stayed with my grandfather, my step-grandfather, the man that my grandmother married when she went down to Indicator to see her sister, and he had 40 acres there. We borrowed a tractor and made quite an elaborate garden there. About 100 yards up there was a black family that lived up there in a little shanty, and I plowed his garden at the same time I plowed mine. And when I watered the trees, we’d get water out of their well. And when their baby died of one of those instant crib deaths, we wept with them. They were some good people. When we were in South Carolina, going to Erskine College, I opened a little T.V. repair business there, and half of my customers were black. I got to work on their T.V.s-- if they didn’t have anything else, they had a television, and worked on them little T.V.s. And there was one time I dropped a tool and I had to go under the house to get it, because you could see right through the cracks in the floor. They used a wood stove, and most of the walls were black. That was a little shanty. Right across there was one black customer there, and he had as a nice a house that any white person had. He had an up to date T.V. and nice furniture, kept it spotless and clean. So, regardless of color or race, whatever, he just saw every social, and every ethic, and every financial limit that you could think of.

BREADEN: And I think that was some of the appeal of the films he made, that they took in everybody in the community. Were there any issues that you know about when he was showing the films, like if he had films of the black community, were the people in that community able to come and see the movies?

WATERS: Well, there was one, I forgot where it was it was, somewhere over near Chapel Hill. There was this black theatre and he would go in the all black theatre and show the movies. He’d made a specific film the black, the colored-- colored as they called them back then-- of those people in that community, then showed them the picture. He included the black workers and black people on the street, carrying the lumber down the street, all that kind of stuff. But you remember back then, they had segregation, and they had blacks upstairs in the balcony. The whites were downstairs. As best I can remember, it seems that the price range, what the tickets cost to get in, was sort of fascinating. He had this log book for the various towns that he went to. It had the number of the footage of the town. It held the black financial intake and the white financial intake-- how much ever of that percentage-- and all kinds of other details on that paper. They had a little logbook. Some of it was written in red. I don’t know if it shows up on the copy machine when the books are all copied over.

JOHNSON: I don’t think so. Ours is black and white, mostly.
WATERS: Well, in the logbooks itself it’s red lettering. They used red pencil, or red pen—red pen was fine—ballpoint pens weren’t out back in those days. Red pencil, and they’d give some details there that I’m not sure came out when you copied them.

JOHNSON: I don’t think so—

WATERS: I’m going to compare it sometime, and I’ll send you a copy of one of them.

JOHNSON: Ok. So it’s clear that he went into the African American neighborhoods of these various small towns with intention, and it was important to him.

WATERS: I don’t know how many he did, but I know of at least one.

JOHNSON: Quite a few. Well, I would say at least four or five. In the separate towns that we have in the collection, he’s gone into African American neighborhoods or parts of the community and filmed them. Do you remember him talking about that experience at all later?

WATERS: No. I was about four years old, and my experiences and memories aren’t as sharp as they used to be.

BREADEN: Did he ever give you any idea of how long he would spend in a town making a movie?

WATERS: He’d spend most of the week there.

BREADEN: About a week?

WATERS: Most of the week. He’d get around to athletic games, schools, factories, businesses. He made some of the first commercials that this country’s ever seen.

JOHNSON: It’s true.

WATERS: He’d make the commercial. He’s get an extra five, ten dollars, or twenty-five dollars for the commercial. He’d be paid that directly from the commercial agent there, rather than through the theatre. So he actually had two paychecks once you get down to it.

JOHNSON: That brings us to another question we had. Did the income H. Lee Waters get from this particular project have the intended effect on your family’s life? Did it support you?
WATERS: Yes—well, we were still living. (laughter) My mother would stay home and run the studio, and one, or sometimes two ladies would be up there helping her do the work, and wait on the customers. I remember two or three different maids we had, and they would stay at the house, wash the clothes, cook the meals, and take care of the children while they were at work. When mother had my sister, Mary Elizabeth, in ‘42 we had a lot going on for quite some time. She had another retouching desk that sat in our kitchen, in the little breakfast room there, and she’d bring out all of her paints and colors and she’d paint the pictures. Sometimes she’d stay up until one or two in the morning, trying to keep up with the work. But she did all of the retouching and coloring at the house, so she wouldn’t have to make a trip up to the studio. If the baby needed some special attention, she would be able to take care of that. Beulla was one of her first maids—I forgot what the rest of them were called.

BREADEN: So you’d see your father on the weekends— in those days would come home off the road.

WATERS: Yeah. I remember we’d be, my older sister and I, would be on the living room couch—and look out this great big picture window, about that large. And I can remember sometimes that the time would change—the days would get shorter as he’s coming home. By 5:30, it would be dark. And there were Saturdays—it was astounding how at 5:30 in the winter time it would be dark, and 5:30 in the summer it would be full daylight—we’d watch him come. And he’d travel in some weather that he really had no business being in. He never left a showing, he always made them. He’d leave with time left to get there. There was one time he was coming back from making the progress pictures of our dam construction—he just about didn’t make it home that night, it was a snow blizzard. He got to where he couldn’t drive in it, couldn’t move. So he found the old south bound railway—Winston-Salem southbound. It goes from here down to Avalon, Dayton and comes right by High Rock Dam. There’s a site down there. After he’s made his pictures he started trying to get back by the road, and he couldn’t do that, so he got on the railroad tracks and started walking in it. It was a little better. (indiscernible) and he came across a little farmhouse and knocked on the door and they put him up for the night. Til he could find a way to get out of there. It had to be—they built the dam over a 3 year period, and he used to have a lot of the prints of it. They’d have dates on the picture itself, what the date was on it. And it’s probably over a 3 year period. That was his first large commercial project, commercial bid he did. Then about 1926, ‘27, something like that, that the dam started. We see part of the pictures—he took over a hundred pictures.

BREADEN: So they hired him to do that?

WATERS: Yes. Alcoa.
BREADEN: Alcoa did?

WATERS: Yes. They didn’t pay him well for years. He’d take one right over the bases about every month or something like that. Maybe twice a month. I don’t know what the schedule was when took the pictures. Print out the pictures to see what the dates were on those. That was his first commercial project.

JOHNSON: Did he do other commercial projects like that?

WATERS: Not that big. He did some, he’d take commercial pictures of new companies, a stall, or a machine shop or something like that. He’d put one in cold dairy, brought us up there when they came out with the cardboard cartons, with the wax on the outside and inside of them. You know the cartons that you get today feel waxy. Kind they had back when they first came out, he took pictures of it. The machinery. The machinery that they were using in there, he took pictures of it at the time. He was far more innovative than I had ever known, until I started studying through his stuff as we’d unpack it. That studio was quite a chore, but it took us about 3 months to clean it out, before we decided to quit. We cleaned it out in ‘94, ‘95. I had just come out of a past surgery, and was in and out of home for a month or two before we started to clean stuff out of there. He’d already retired by then. Didn’t go back up there for much of anything. And he was getting to the point where he couldn’t keep the orders straight, and it was a shame-- that his mind had deteriorated as much as it did. But even in his older age, he would sit here, and he knew enough to do these interviews with the people that would find him.

JOHNSON: Til 2000?

WATERS: Well he didn’t live to 2000, he died in ‘97. September the 15th, ‘97. But this special that came out, they wanted the real side of that.

JOHNSON: I’m curious-- did he photograph the African Americans in the community in Lexington in his studio as well?

WATERS: Oh yes. Let’s see-- if they wanted a picture made he’d make it for them.

BREADEN: When he was making the films in the towns, where did he-- did he show them during the same time that he was making them, so did he process the film himself there in that town, and put it together for projection?

WATERS: No, not there. His movie films--
BREADEN: Yeah. Or did he go back to the town after he’d put them together?

WATERS: He’d go back to the town. He’d have to send them off and get them developed first, get them processed. Then he’d get them back and he’d edit them. Then once he got them like he wanted it, he’d go to the towns. It didn’t cost the people any more to get in than normal to pay, but he got a percentage of whatever the extra. The theatre manager was just delighted to get that extra crowd in there. Everybody wanted to see themselves on the screen. And those cities were flooded with people. And everybody was happy.

BREADEN: Would they typically be shown on a weekday or weekend evening?

WATERS: I’m not sure. I’m not sure about the days, but the logbook would tell.

JOHNSON: We have the logbook information, that’s right.

BREADEN: Because he would go back— certainly he would get the films back, he would edit them— so it would be the gap between him taking the movies and then showing them—

WATERS: It would end up being close to 2 weeks—

BREADEN: Ok. So, pretty soon.

WATERS: 2 weeks was about the average.

JOHNSON: While it was still fresh in their mind.

WATERS: He had banners and posters made up, and he had a mobile P.A. system that he carried around in his car, that had a record player in it. He had it run by a 12 volt battery. He had a battery charger in the little garage out behind us, and he’d keep the batteries charged up. He had a record player and an amplifier, and these great big speakers— and I still got all that stuff.

JOHNSON: I didn’t realize that he had the mobile P.A.

WATERS: Yeah.

BREADEN: So he would drive around announcing—
WATERS: Same thing in-- I think in one of these things, I think it was in this one, maybe it’s in the one Tom Whiteside did-- but there was a car sitting out front of a house with a lot of people... did you notice the big speaker on the front of it? And he went by and down the streets. I still have the microphone he used, and the microphone is in perfect shape, the amplifier’s pretty well gone, the record player’s pretty well gone-- it was all one unit. He used it, and he played ’78 records. The brittle ones would break, and he had a lot of those too. He had a couple stacks about like that.

JOHNSON: Oh, of him speaking.

WATERS: No.

BREADEN: Of just music.

WATERS: Popular music.

JOHNSON: Music, ok.

WATERS: Every kind of music. Tommy Dorsey and Les Brown. Les Brown was African American.

BREADEN: So he would play the record and then talk about the movie coming up?

WATERS: Play the record, talk about the movie. Come down the street, almost like a carnival announcer, or something like that.

JOHNSON: So he would go back and advertise maybe a couple of days before the screening? Or that day?

WATERS: On that day, but the advertisements went up when he was there making the movies, I think.

BREADEN: Did you go to any of these showings? Do you remember?

WATERS: I remember going to-- I don’t know if it was a showing or making of the movies. I think-- seems like one of them was in Roxboro. I think that’s the one I went to, and I went to another one maybe in Shelby or something like that.

BREADEN: What do you remember about it?

WATERS: I remember the motels where we stayed, the hotel-- you have to accept this for what it was. We got ready to settle down for the evening in one hotel there, on the
second floor--bathroom was down the hall. He said, “Go down and wash your feet in the lavatory.” And I didn’t know what a lavatory was. So I washed them in the commode. (Laughter) I’ll never forget that. It was the moment--I believe it was down in Roxboro--they didn’t have very clean (indiscernible) back then, but they had a water cooling system. Water would trickle down--they had a motor going and they cued it somehow or another so the water came down and it evaporated, and the water cooled. And in the theatre--the owner, the manager, whatever it was, shows that. Believe that was in Roxboro. We roomed at a house that time. I don’t know how many days we stayed there, but I was ready to go on that trip. I remember him sleeping in, trying to sleep in, and I would wake him up--“Get out of bed, let’s go!” And I’ve got one picture of me wearing his hat, carrying his luggage. Carrying one of these boxes that had some of his equipment or something in it, something like that. And you could see the theatre in the background. I must have been about 6 years old, or 7. And Marie’s old as 8, I don’t know. But he quit when I was 8 years old. I was 2 when he started. But I don’t remember, so that is very vague. It just kind of blends.

JOHNSON: Do you remember how frequently he was away during the year?

WATERS: Most every week.

JOHNSON: Every week, ok.

WATERS: Except if there was real bad weather, he wouldn’t try to get down there. He’d always bring some little something on him, some little prize. Some little gift.

JOHNSON: Do you think that your father has ever considered--this is one thing that Craig and I talked about--the movies he made having a life beyond their immediate purpose as he was making them in the ‘30s and ‘40s. Do you think he realized that he was creating these documents, these cultural heritage documents?

WATERS: Oh no, I don’t think that it ever entered his mind. He was there--he was in survival mode. And most people were in the Depression. He did whatever he could to feed his family and keep on having a place to stay. Roof over their head and clothes on their back. That was his primary motivation. Plus, he liked it. He loved it. He loved to get out meeting the people, he loved getting the people’s response--he just thoroughly enjoyed it. You’d have to go through all he went through to do it, you’d have done it. He carried all kinds of equipment with him, especially when it came to the (indiscernible) projectors. I got a picture of it here. Somebody got it off the internet just the other day.
JOHNSON: Of the projector? Do you think later on in his life, in the 1980s when he sort of revisited these films and started bringing them back to the towns where they were originally shot-- do you think at that point he realized what he had? What he had done?

WATERS: That's his projector right here. I don't think that he realized the scope that it has reached. He realized a part of it (indiscernible) - the way that they're being publicized today, and the interest is being shown today, he saw as a supplemental source of income. He says it helps getting old -- people are getting old -- made up, and no sense sitting here holding on to these things when I could sell them. With so much footage, could sell them by the foot. There was a mile of hope, down in the southeastern or somewhere, I've forgotten where--

JOHNSON: Siler City.

WATERS: Siler City, that's right. And somebody-- he got interested in dad's movies, and he made these contacts and arranged a deal, he'd get a percentage of what daddy sold. He had quite a few of them at one time. I wish I had a history of that, the second usage in that form. I wouldn't have the foggiest idea of how to put something like that together. I’d have to go back through his files and records to find it. And they're not all that intact.

BREADEN: Do you know if he, or if there were multiple copies made of these films, or were there typically just one?

WATERS: One of a kind.

BREADEN: One of a kind.

WATERS: One of a kind. These copies started being made in the preservation process -- that's the first that I'd known of it.

JOHNSON: That was my understanding.

BREADEN: When he came off the road, or after he came off the road and finished with that project, did he-- you've shown us a couple of films he did here and there after that - - could you describe some of those projects that he did in motion picture form after movies with people?

WATERS: Anything going on in Lexington, he had a moving interest in film there. Just through the years on occasion would come up. I don't know that there was any specific thing other than parades, things like that. Maybe a ball game. But he recorded them all.
His passion hadn’t left, but his interest was elsewhere. He had all he could do at the studio. He didn’t let it down, but he didn’t fan it to what he did at one time. Educators would come up here when they were travelling--

JOHNSON: Are there a lot of home movies of your family from that time as well? From the ‘30s to the ‘40s, or later?

WATERS: My best recollection is that there were quite a few. I don’t remember them, and then I haven’t see them in so many years. I can remember some that I could describe to you what was going on, and I would eventually do that, if I could get copies of these things made, get them safe to run through a projector.

END OF INTERVIEW