
Interview with Paul N. Lazarus

By Keith M. Johnston

Paul N. Lazarus started his career in movie advertising and promotions in 1933. Having worked at Warner Bros., United Artists, and Columbia, he became executive Vice-President of National Screen Service Corporation from 1965. This interview was conducted on 5th February 1994 - a full transcript can be found in Appendix 3 of my book *Coming Soon: Film Trailers and the Selling of Hollywood Technology* (McFarland & Company 2009).

KMJ [Keith M. Johnston]: Can you tell me about the formation of National Screen Service?

PL [Paul Lazarus]: Well, National Screen Service [N.S.S.] was set up as a way of getting the eight major companies out of the nickel and dime business of selling trailers and posters and stills to individual theatres. This was back in 1918 when these companies had to do it all themselves... At that time all the companies had their own trailer departments which created and produced trailers... as N.S.S. grew to a sizeable company representing all the industry the companies began to phase out their own trailer departments and asked N.S.S. to provide a talent base in each studio which would create and produce the trailers. This man was on National Screen's payroll but he was exiled to the respective studios - these were National Screen employees, paid very well because there were not that many of them about. These were specialists, these were men who could work on a picture from the time it got started, picking out key scenes, work with the director and producer and sales department and come up with a format which was acceptable to the company.

KMJ: How did National Screen make money? Did they charge the studios?

PL: No, no - National Screen set up their own distribution contracts, renting the trailers to the theatres and arranging for delivery... [at that time] theatres needed four trailers for the next week's program. N.S.S.

set up what we called a T-deal. These theatres made an overall contractual commitment to National Screen, and they paid per week as a regular fee. In return, National Screen agreed to fulfil all of their trailer requirements, which if they were playing four pictures a week could be 208 trailers a year.

KMJ: So how did National Screen work with the studios?

PL: N.S.S. was created to get the major companies back into their primary business of making movies and not selling trailers or posters or anything else. But none of the companies had a contractual relationship with National Screen - this was set up originally as a loose confederation - any company could pull out whenever it liked... Warner's was always a problem - they eventually set up their own trailer department in the mid-30s... Columbia was another one, though Arthur Houseman did most of their trailers, whether through N.S.S. or not.

KMJ: What was the financial advantage of the studios using National Screen?

PL: National Screen paid a royalty to the companies based on the amount of business done on trailers and posters - the percentage was established early on. The more theatres wanted to run the trailer the more money the studios would get.

KMJ: How were trailers regarded in terms of other advertising materials?

PL: There was a general consensus that the trailer was the most important: there was no waste, you had a captive audience in a movie theatre, every one of them was a potential customer. If you could intrigue them with what you showed on the screen, they'd come back the next week. The only one hundred per cent motion picture coverage was the trailer. It was like selling strawberries. If you want to sell a box of strawberries you make sure the big ones are on the top, the rotten ones are underneath. It was the same when they made a trailer: you pick only the scenes that'll help you sell your picture.

