



Essanay Centers Finds, Acquires Natural Vision Camera

Camera Represents an Iconic Piece of Chicago Film History

A piece of silent film history has returned to its Chicago birthplace. George K. Spoor’s Natural Vision Prototype has been located by the Essanay Centers, and the Centers will have it on an initial one-year loan from the University of Illinois at Chicago.

George K. Spoor made a name for himself in the film industry just as the art form was being developed. In 1907, he formed the Essanay Film Manufacturing Company with G.M. Anderson in Chicago. Along with other Chicago-based film companies, Essanay was responsible for producing 20% of the films being produced during the 1910’s. Gloria Swanson, Charlie Chaplin, Ben Turpin and Wallace Beery were all Essanay players early in their careers, but by 1918 Essanay had shut down. Spoor’s love for the film industry, though, did not end there. Instead, he turned his attention to Natural Vision.



Natural Vision Camera Prototype, on loan from the University of Illinois at Chicago

Natural Vision was one of Spoor’s most ambitious undertakings. The technology used a film strip that was much wider than the typical film, and would have demanded a viewing screen 24’ tall and over 64’ wide. When the film was presented in 63.5 mm the film strip was synchronized in projection with a separate strip of 35mm sound film. The last known display of the process was at the 1933 World’s Fair in Chicago. An auditorium known as Spoor’s Spectaculum was built at a cost of \$125,000 purely for the presentation of Natural Vision.



Demonstration of Spoor’s Natural Vision Camera, featuring Gloria Swanson behind the camera. George K. Spoor picture at right (without hat)

(Chicago History Museum)

The location of the Spoor Natural Vision Camera prototype was determined based upon the review of a UIC Master’s Thesis by George H. Sheetz, now Director of the Batavia Public Library, as reference support for the construction of the Essanay Studios Historic Structures Report. The thesis was originally used as a resource for the Uptown Historical Society in the mid 1990’s.



Essanay Centers

EARLY FILM CULTURAL PERFORMANCE
A DIVISION OF ST. AUGUSTINE COLLEGE

“Saving One of the World’s First and Last Silent Film Studios”



The last section of the thesis stated,

“Spoor did not cease his film activities with the demise of Essanay. In 1925, he screened 3-D films in Chicago, then renounced them as ‘impractical and too expensive.’ Spoor also worked with P. John Berggren on the development of a wide-screen process known as Natural Vision. The invention used a film 70 millimeters wide and was shown on a screen seventy feet wide by thirty-four feet high. Spoor spent the last four million dollars of his fortune on this venture. Although Spoor has always claimed that the Motion Picture Producers Association (‘most of whom I put into the picture business’) persuaded RKO to discontinue use of the process, Natural Vision was introduced at an unfortunate time, just before the advent of sound. When sound did come in, theatre owners could not afford both innovations. The depressions of 1929 and 1932 killed Natural Vision. The surviving equipment is now in storage at the University of Illinois, Chicago Circle campus.”

Spoor succeeded in making one film, *Danger Lights*, which was a showcase for the technology. It was distributed and sold out runs in New York and at the State Lake Theater in Chicago.



Entrance of the historic Essanay Studios, designed by Mary Spoor Brand (inset)

Ultimately, however, it was a bad time to be introducing yet another innovation to the world of theater. Theaters large and small were gearing up for sound, investing in new projectors and sound amplification systems. An innovation that would require yet another projector and new screen parameters was not well received. Spoor famously destroyed 11 of the 12 projectors for his Natural Vision films.

Since locating it, the prototype for Spoor’s Natural Vision camera has moved from the University of Illinois at Chicago to the Essanay Centers headquarters, located in the historic Essanay Studios complex in Uptown Chicago. The Centers, now owned by St. Augustine College, still feature the iconic terra cotta Essanay entrance, designed by George Spoor’s sister Mary Spoor Brand. The Centers have embarked on a \$3 million restoration project to help turn the complex into a center for early film, focused on housing film-related archives. The restoration was recently bolstered by a generous donation from the estate of Gordon Spoor Brand and Mary Ellen Brand.

In his obituary notice, *Variety* stated, “[George Spoor] made Chicago the film capital of the world.” With their restoration efforts, the Centers aim to preserve the legacy of George Spoor, Mary Spoor Brand and the entire Essanay company.

To learn more about the Essanay Centers, please visit www.essanaystudios.org.



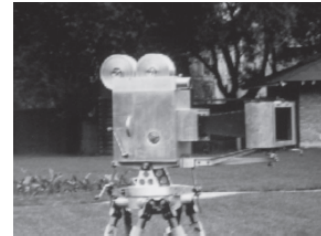
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Natural Vision



Conrad Luperti, Essanay cameraman, and Per Johan Berggren (straw hat) with the Natural Vision camera in 1922.

The camera on display is the first production model of the Natural Vision camera made by Per Johan Berggren, financed by George K. Spoor in 1922 at a cost of 1.5 million dollars to that point. It was supposed to be a 3D, widescreen system with a film size of 63.5mm which made it possible to project onto a huge screen. It shot footage of Niagara Falls in 1923 that was stunning, but a feature film, *The American*, directed by J. Stuart Blackton in 1925 was deemed a failure and never released, nor does the film survive.

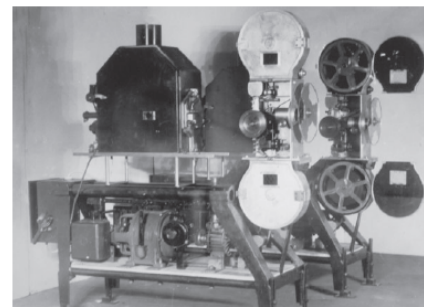


George Spoor and Johan Berggren with experimental Natural Vision camera.

Spoor and Berggren began working on the project in 1916 and soon came up with an experimental camera to demonstrate the concept.



Johan Berggren and George Spoor with last Natural Vision camera.



Natural Vision projectors.

The 3D component was abandoned by 1926 with the final version of the camera produced in 1928. In 1929, George Spoor produced a feature, *Danger Lights*, made in the widescreen process, and also in the traditional 35mm format. Directed by George B. Seitz and starring Jean Arthur and Robert Armstrong, it was released at the State-Lake Theater in Chicago on August 21, 1930. The timing of its release was all wrong, coming as talkies and The Great Depression were making headway, with no chance for Natural Vision to co-exist. Spoor lost a total of 4 million dollars by the time he was finished in 1933, and went bankrupt. This caused the loss of his studio building and everything in it. Twelve Natural Vision projectors were put into storage, and their whereabouts are currently unknown.