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*The Warren Family's 2005 Gift of Audio-Visual
Materials to the Robert Penn Warren Collection of the
Kentucky Library at Western Kentucky University*

JOSEPH R. MILLICHAP

Robert Penn Warren (1905-1989) remains the only writer to have won Pulitzer Prizes both for fiction and for poetry, the former in 1947 for *All the King's Men* and the latter in 1958 for *Promises* and again in 1979 for *Now and Then*. Warren's works include nine other novels, a volume of short fiction, another dozen poetry collections, three book-length poems, several plays and screenplays, as well as significant literary and/or cultural criticism, such as *The Legacy of the Civil War*. In a series of influential texts written with Cleanth Brooks, Warren also helped develop the New Criticism that dominated American literary studies for a generation. Most scholars consider him the foremost person of letters in twentieth century America, and his centennial in 2005 was marked by many honors including a United States Postal Service commemorative stamp issued at his hometown of Guthrie, Kentucky, as well as a series of tributes at Western Kentucky University.

The Center for Robert Penn Warren Studies was founded at Western Kentucky University in 1986 with the active cooperation of the writer and his family. Several donations and purchases, notably the archives and collections of Warren scholars Joseph Blotner and James A. Grimshaw, Jr., have built an important resource at Western, but the most significant of these additions have come as gifts from the Warren family. The earlier presentation of the writer's working library now is complemented by the donation of the family's photograph albums, home movies, and other audio-visual materials. These diverse materials will prove interesting in terms of future scholarship on Warren's career and canon, as they concern not just activities at the family's homes in Connecticut and Vermont but their literary gatherings and foreign travels as well.

This gift also will become significant for the development of new documentary and classroom programs planned by the Robert Penn Warren Center in future years.

The heart of the Warren family's recent donation includes nine albums of family photographs dating from the mid-1950s to the early 1970s and forty-one reels of eight millimeter home movies dating from 1958 to 1971. These materials were transferred to both DVD and VHS formats by Calvin Skaggs of Lumiere Productions for a projected documentary about the marriage of Robert Penn and Eleanor Clark Warren. Lumiere also videoed several hours of interviews with Saul and Janis Bellow, John and Kitty Galbraith, R. W. B. and Nancy Lewis, Cesare and Rysia Lombroso, and Rosanna Warren about the personal and professional relationship of "Red" and Eleanor Warren. Audio tapes of additional interviews with Tommie Lou Frey, Shirley Hazzard, Walter Sullivan, and Rosanna Warren were not available when I reviewed and appraised the other materials. Although the family's gift proves literally priceless in terms of its unique importance to Warren studies, it would certainly be highly valued in the literary marketplace.

Although this recent donation does not contain a vast amount of material, as did the earlier gift of Warren's working library, the final cataloguing of these audio-visuals certainly will involve a good deal of effort. For some reason, the home movies were not transferred to the VHS and DVD formats in the chronological order indicated by the mailing dates of the movie reel packages. As the eight millimeter originals would not stand up well to repeated handling, the newer formats will have to be re-mastered or at least re-edited before cataloguing can begin. An approximate dating could be developed by cross-checking the home movies with the photography collection, where some dating also can be found on both the individual photos and on the albums themselves. This chronology then could be verified from Joseph Blotner's biography and other Warren scholarship.

One way to trace the chronology of these images, both photographic and filmic, is by the ages of the Warren children, Rosanna and Gabriel. In fact, the central purpose of the Warren family's image-making seems to have been to preserve a record of

Rosanna's and Gabriel's development. A movie sequence even shows the traditional marking of the kids' growth on a kitchen door frame. I suspect that Eleanor provided the impetus for this parental image-making, as the packages of developed film are addressed to her, and she appears in these frames much less often than her husband. As we might expect, however, the children are featured much more often than their parents. At their most basic level, these audio-visuals provide a careful, loving documentation of the Warrens' life as a family, the sorts of things we would expect to find in any family's photo albums and home movies. One detail that took my interest was Gabriel's model railroads, an activity he has assured me that his father shared with him enthusiastically. Of course, the Warren family was comprised of four artists, so this domestic record of their pets and their picnics, their schools and their vacations, is charged with the creative energy that would shape not just Warren's works but Eleanor's, not only Rosanna's poetry but Gabriel's sculpture.

The photograph albums go far beyond the family's domestic developments, however, particularly in the recording of travels and of social events. For example, the pictures of Rosanna as a baby in Italy fairly resonate with the energies that animate Warren's Italian poems in *Promises* (1957). Likewise, there are many candid shots of the Warrens' wide acquaintance, ranging from old friends like Allen Tate and Cleanth Brooks to later ones like Ralph and Fanny Ellison. Indeed, some of the pictures of social and professional gatherings in the later albums were actually taken by Ralph Ellison, a talented photographer who supported himself working with cameras until the publication of *Invisible Man* (1952). Ellison's pictures are easy to recognize because they are so much better in terms of composition and lighting, and they remind us of how important photos and films are to his single great novel as well as to the posthumous *Juneteenth* (1999). Although Warren might not have been talented in photography, he was interested in the visual arts from his youth, and photographs and films are important signifiers in his fiction—including his one great novel, *All the King's Men* (1946)—and his poetry—especially his later poetry, such as "Old Photograph of the Future" from *Altitudes and Extensions* (1985).

The Warrens' home movies, like the photo albums, are for the most part concerned with quotidian family life, but, again like the still photographs, the moving pictures prove intriguing in terms of passages in Warren's work like this one on Jack Burden's Western trip from Chapter Seven of *All the King's Men*:

To the hum and lull of the car the past unrolled in my head like a film. It was like the showing of a family movie, the kind the advertisements tell you to keep so that you will have a record of the day Susie took her first little toddle and the day Johnny went off to kindergarten and the day you went up Pike's Peak and the day of the picnic on the old home farm and the day you were made chief sales manager and bought your first Buick. The picture on the advertisement always shows a dignified, gray-haired, kindly old gent, the kind you find on the whiskey ad (or a gray-haired, kindly, sweet-faced old biddy), looking at the home movie and dreaming gently back over the years. Well, I was not gray-haired or dignified or kindly or sweet-faced, but I did have a showing of my home movie and dreamed back gently over the years. Therefore, if you have any home movies, I earnestly advise you to burn them and to be baptized to get born again.

This passage presents a perfect microcosm of the macrocosm discovered in Warren's great novel, as I have demonstrated at some length in another essay, because it perfectly captures the consciousness of the novel's narrator and protagonist. Jack Burden was not Robert Penn Warren, of course, though there is something of a faint family resemblance between the two. Both were much younger and more cynical than the paterfamilias in the Warren family's home movies, and as far as we know, no one has ever tried to burn these movies.

It is indeed fortunate that such was the case, because these eight millimeter reels are filled with numerous images that reverberate far beyond their immediate contexts. Again, we have many of the diurnal events chronicled in the photo albums: the requisite family dinners, purchases of pets, birthday parties, private school programs, sailing trips, and beach vacations. Some of these images stand out from the more ordinary, such as the early reels of Italian sojourns,

the remodeling of the summer home in Vermont, a dude ranch stay in Montana, and a later Egyptian trip with Warren astride a camel in native garb and doing a fair take-off of T. E. Lawrence. Like the photographs, some of the film sequences seem close to Warren's poetry in the ordering of their images. For example, one winter scene somewhere in the Alps perfectly parallels the action of "Skiers," Part I of the sequence "In the Mountains" that concludes Warren's poetry collection *Incarnations* (1968). Skiers, perhaps the Baudouin and Annie de Moustier to whom the poem is dedicated, at first are tiny dots in a great white distance; then swooping downward, "With the color of birds or of angels," reveal themselves in all their smiling humanity as "They slowly enlarge to our eyes."

Needless to say, the interviews videotaped for the uncompleted Lumiere documentary do not contain the same sorts of primary revelations into Warren's life and work, but they are not without their own human and literary insights. Again, they are with Saul and Janis Bellow, John and Kitty Galbraith, R. W. B. and Nancy Lewis, Cesare and Rysia Lombroso, and Rosanna Warren—all of whom enjoyed personal and/or professional relationships with the writer. Rosanna's interview is the most important in personal terms, often recalling the imagery of the photo albums and the home movies, while R. W. B. Lewis's the most interesting in professional terms, with many insightful critical observations. The most intriguing interview in my view, however, is the one taped in 2000 with 85 year old Saul Bellow and his fifth wife, the writer and teacher Janis Freedman, balancing their infant daughter, Naomi Rose. Bellow is one of our greatest writers, of course, perhaps the only one of comparable talent among Warren's literary friends. The interview would be of much interest to a Bellow scholar, but it also is filled with notable insights into Warren as both a person and a writer.

In conclusion, the recent donation of the Warren family photo albums and home movies by Rosanna and Gabriel provides a perfect complement to the earlier gifts to the Robert Penn Warren Center. My brief introduction to this virtual treasure trove of audio-visual materials is intended more as an announcement, a sort of

preview of coming attractions. Once these items are catalogued and opened to access, they will prove an important resource to Warren readers, critics, and scholars in the future. Moreover, they will become the basis for future efforts of the Center, especially a long-contemplated documentary on Warren's life and work. In any case, this generous contribution will do much to preserve the vital heritage of twentieth-century America's greatest person of letters—Robert Penn Warren.