

Former Local Filmmaker Gives Visionary His Due

By Terry Morris, Staff Writer

Updated 9:10 PM Saturday,
October 16, 2010

Peter Cooper could have used a campaign supporter like Janet P. Gardner in 1876, when he was convinced to run for president of the United States as the candidate of the Greenback Party.

It probably wouldn't have helped, though. He was 85 — then, as now, the oldest candidate to run for the office.

That's far from his claim to fame, a fact Gardner is helping to disseminate with her latest film, "Mechanic to Millionaire: The Peter Cooper Story."

It's being aired on PBS stations around the country, including WPTD-TV Channel 16 in Dayton at 9 p.m. Tuesday and Wednesday, Oct. 19 and 20; 2 p.m. Friday, Oct. 22; and 9 a.m. Saturday, Oct. 23.

Gardner, who grew up in Oakwood, went on to attend the now highly selective, but still tuition-free school Cooper established in New York — Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art.

Radically so for in 1859, it welcomed women, people of color and those of all faiths.

After making his fortune in glue, he developed flavored gelatin, built the country's first steam locomotive, became one of the country's largest ironmasters, pioneered the I-beam in construction, and helped fund the Transatlantic Cable.

Producer-director Gardner, who heads the Gardner Documentary Group, has made several previous films, starting in 1991 with "The United Nations: It's More Than You Think."

Several others have dealt with the wars of Southeast Asia. "The Last Ghost of War" (2007) depicted the effects of Agent Orange on its Vietnamese victims.

Her next project is about a man in Lowell, Mass., who was conscripted at age 7 in his native Cambodia to fight for the Khmer Rouge, lost his family, was sent to an orphanage in Thailand after the fighting and was eventually adopted by an American family.

It took some doing for Peter Cooper to pull her away from her main area of interest.

She began work on "Mechanic to Millionaire" six years ago because she and a few others who had discussed it were surprised that Cooper (1791-1883) had never been given the same kind of attention as Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller.

"His contributions to American society were just as important," she said of the inventor, industrialist, philanthropist and educational visionary.

Her film may revive interest in Cooper, whose statue on Cooper Square in New York faces the Bowery, a former skid-row district that is newly fashionable.

"It bothered me that there had never been a major or even a minor film on him," said Gardner, who lives in New Jersey.

She didn't want to rely on her own hunch that making one would be a good idea.

She ran it past close friend and author Marion Meade, who has written biographies of luminaries, including Woody Allen, Dorothy Parker, Buster Keaton and Eleanor of Aquitaine.

Meade gave it a thumbs up.

So have several others who have seen it in early screenings.

The film has been recognized as a "We the People Project" by the National Endowment for the Humanities and has won a Cine Golden Eagle Award.

For more information, go to www.petercooperstory.com
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