The
Oral History Library
of
The Fashion Institute of Technology

Hollywood Still Photographer
FRANK POWOLNY
(with, companion)

Interviewed by
ROBERT L. GREENE
Q. We are fortunate enough to have the opportunity of interviewing Frank Powolny. Mr. Powolny was, for many, many years, the chief photographer at the Fox Studios here in Hollywood. I think one has to understand that he is now in frail health and in his advanced years. He doesn't talk about how old he is, but John (whose voice you will occasionally hear on the tape), his companion, has mentioned that he is about to be 90.

In trying to complete this cycle of the people who created the famous stills that have influenced our lives, it is necessary to recognize that Mr. Powolny, although in not as broad a sphere as George Hurrell, had a close relationship with some of the key figures in motion picture history; for instance, Loretta Young was totally devoted to him and some of the great pictures of her that we're all familiar with were taken by him.

But there are a whole series of people Janet Gaynor, the winner of the first Academy Award, refused to have anybody else photograph her except Mr. Powolny, because she felt that he had a complete understanding of exactly what should be done with her personality and her diminutive size. He made her feel like a tall, great lady, and that, of course, was a delight to her.

The man is totally charming and has, of course, all
of that glamor that you associate with people who come from that pre-Iron Curtain world of wit and wisdom and music and gaiety--Austria. You'll get to know him better as this tape progresses. I should warn you that at the beginning of the tape, because I think he was a little nervous about being exposed to somebody new in his life, he sounds a little remote, because we were cautious and didn't want to command him or order him or give him a feeling that he was in any way going to be judged. So that, in the beginning of the tape, the voice is a little weaker. But as he gets into it, he begins to sense that he's perfectly comfortable and his own personal star quality becomes apparent and the voice becomes stronger. It's kind of wonderful--the energy creating its own energy--and I just think we're terribly lucky to have this experience.

Frank (and I appreciate your asking me to call you Frank--I like that--you must call me Robert L.), as I understand it (and it isn't always true today), most of the photographers in the past, of the history of motion pictures, were people who came to it from the world of the arts and...Am I right? You were a sculptor?

A. Over in the old country I went to school and I studied sculpture. Sculpture. When I came to this country, when I was about 13 years old, 13 1/2, then...Well, I worked a little bit on a farm. You know, something to do. There were 10 of us, living. A large family. This is before the First World War....

Q. Oh, way back. Before the First...
A. Right. Then I went to...in Omaha...and got a job, including sculptoring.

Q. Was there a famous school of sculpture there or something?

A. Oh, no.

Q. You just got a job.

A. A job, as it is. So I...First I did the lettering of the monuments and all that, and then tombstones, and used to get flowers, and then later on I went on the...making (?). ... marble or granite. It takes weeks, or months. You can't do this overnight, and you can't spoil the stone, because it was... It was imported, you know. From Italy.

Then...Well, I had to quit my job because...On account of the marble dust in my lungs. So the doctor said if you want to live longer, just quit this job so I did. And by that time (?) ... I was...I decided well, I'd do something else, so I went to Cheyenne, Wyoming and I worked in the tunnel chiseling with an air hammer, and it weighed about 80 pounds. You worked long hours, it's not like today--eight hours--but I enjoyed it.

Q. Frank, you told me earlier, before we started the tape, that your father was a photographer. Was he a famous photographer? Were there any experiences that are etched in your own memory?

A. Well, when I was about seven or eight years old, I went with my father down there to the castle. And as my father was baldheaded, you're not supposed to...I mean, you know. He
took his hat off. And Franz Josef happened to see it and he goes and picks the hat up and puts it on my father's head so...You know...That sun was pretty strong. And that's...And then he gave me "50 keller." That's like 50¢....

Q. The Emperor did?
A. Yes. You know, I wish I had that today! I don't know what happened to it. I know I had it...

Q. But you were just a little boy at that point. You had no interest in photography and didn't identify with that at all?
A. No. No, not at that time. You know. Because, you know, when you're a kid, or a child, every day, every Saturday, every Sunday you work, and you say oh, there's no pleasure! There's no, you know...It was an early field in those days. See, we used plate glass. We didn't have any films. So, he gave me a box camera with plate glass and I had to develop my own film. I was about...Well...I'd say seven or eight years old. Because I used to develop my own plate glass and make my own prints. At the time it was like a toy. But I believed in art, then, see. I enjoyed art. Because it was more fascinating to...I wish I had kept it up...

Q. Kept what up?
A. Well, when you're photographing...I used to have the art...Painting and all that. But I was so busy...You know, you stay with it, every day, every day...

Q. So you went from Austria to this farm and all that activity. How did you get to California?
A. In the service.
Q. During the war.
A. During the war. I was in about a year and then the war was over. I decided to stay in the service, because everybody who was discharged right after the war was looking for work, so I stayed in longer. And then I left...From the service I went, I think, to Los Angeles, and I was looking for work.
Q. What kind of work?
A. Work as a scenic keeper...Scenic...in a studio...And instead of that I worked on the billboards. I worked for someone. I worked for this one man, a Dutchman, he did all their billboards. And I worked with him. In the meantime, when it was slow--when there was, like, bad weather--I would decide to look for another job, while I was still doing this. Because there was not much money. From there....Then I went to the studio and looked for a job there, and doing the scenic work there too. But they said, "But Frank, you're just a kid!" You know. That's what I looked like. "You're just a kid. Come on. You can't do this."

I went away, so I decided I'd work in the motion picture lab. Get a job and run a projection machine, because that's what I did in the service. So I said let's see if I can run a projection. So I did get a job as a projectionist. This is in 1920...1920...And then I worked in the lab there for about a year--I worked two years--and then this cameraman asked me if I wanted to assist on a picture. So I worked on a picture with Jackie Coogan. This is around '22. They didn't know what kind of work I did, because I was good at everything and knew what
to do, this and that. From there I was Assistant cameraman and all that. I worked as an assistant. And then I went with Norma Talmadge...No, Selznick. Selznick who made the...

Q. His brother. Myron Selznick.
A. Myron Selznick. We made a picture called "Seven Days to (?)"...or whatever...

Q. With "David Houston."
A. Do you remember him? No...What's his...The leading man...Anyway...

Q. Now, at this point, Frank, you're working as an assistant cameraman. Now, in going back over the history of the way photography developed in relationship to motion pictures, wasn't that position frequently used as the person who took photographs for other purposes?
A. Sometimes they'd say, "Frank, why don't you go ahead and shoot the picture?" Well, that's when I started in, on shooting stills, on the set. But then there was another still man there, too. And sometimes when he was so busy, he had to do something else, I helped him out too. I forgot the name of this...Sherman somebody...That's way back. Then another still man there used to be...Clark...

Q. Sherman Clark.
A. Sherman Clark. And another man by the name of...Not Sherman Clark. No. This goes way back...Oh, gosh. The name of Clark was another still man, at that time. They did the special work on...
Then, when I worked at Warner Brothers, Irene Rich...I worked with...Irene shot stills...

Q. Frank, before this, you were an assistant cameraman working, and occasionally you would be asked to shoot a still. When did you actually become assigned to shoot stills?
A. Oh, gosh...I'll have to do a lot of thinking...I started to shoot stills when...Gosh..."The Iron Horse."

Q. At Fox.
A. At Fox. That's when I started to shoot stills.

Q. This is 1923...
A. Yes, 1923. They wanted me to shoot stills, because they know that I've been shooting some stills and they saw my work, so then I decided to shoot stills. But, if they needed me to shoot extra motion picture camera, I did extra motion picture camera, besides the stills. But that was my assignment. But I was like a third camera. You see, in the early days, you had an extra camera...

Q. When I watch people shooting stills in today's world, whether it be in motion pictures or in the fashion world, one of course is amazed at the roll after roll after roll of film... It's not unusual to shoot 250-300 shots, just moving back and forth. And I found myself thinking that in the days that you started, the nature of the cameras and the fact that these were glass plates, the material I know, because I have seen those cameras and I once tried to lift one and it was impossible for me...It...They were so heavy and so cumbersome...It's apparent that, certainly, the number that you could shoot would be quite
limited. How many could you shoot?
A. A lot of people would shoot 12.
Q. Really.
A. Sometimes you had six. Then you had to process your own. Your own film. If you shot it, you processed it.
Q. Really.
A. Oh, yes. You used to develop it. You see, in those days you used to use "pyro-soup."
Q. "Pyro-soup"?
A. Yes...That's (?) ... Well, then, from...I started to shoot...I did "The Iron Horse." Then I went and shot other stills--"Silver Threads Among the Gold," and all that--and then ...I can't remember all those stills.
Q. I talked to cameramen who were assigned to films as the person who was photographing the film. And I got the feeling, Frank...I don't know, I could be wrong...But I got the feeling that in the hierarchy of...At least of the cameramen themselves ...They considered the still photographer as something less than desirable. It would seem to me, considering the quality of the work that you've done, it must have been something that you thoroughly enjoyed, that you treated as an art form and you behaved as an artist in relationship to it, and you're not concerned about whether it's the top of the line or the bottom of the line as far as the union is concerned.
Q. I enjoyed it. Because...They saw my work, they loved it, because I was good on composition, perspective--all that's
important, composition, you know...

Q. Now, at this point of your career, Frank, you're at Fox. Now, most of the studios had galleries. Did Fox have a gallery?
A. You made your own gallery. That's the way I did in the early days. Like, I did photograph Irene Rich and all that. I used to go up and open the stage door and use the white reflector and photograph the subject. No lights. I couldn't come in, for portraits. I had to use...This is on (?)...Irene Rich and all that, in the early days, photographing portraits. So, then...That's what I did later on. At Fox I did the same thing. When I wanted to get a portrait I'd get that on the side. But the daylight kind...It was daylight photography, you know, and it was the best. Because in those days, well, you had the "power speed" film, it was too blue. It didn't do so good on the set, though, because it kinda contrasted, you know. The make up was much lighter in those days. They had to put so much make up on because...And another thing. We had "kuperuk" lights. Have you heard about "kuperuk?"

Q. I'm ignorant about it.
A. That's like mercury light. It's like neon, but this is mercury, and that's a neon. It's a bluish color. Blue color. But, see, the film was censored to blue, but to the face they had to make up for it with the make up.

Anyway, I did my portrait work outside in the shaft reflected from the sky. Then later on I worked on, as I said F.W. "Mernow," and...Oh, yeah...I'm getting ahead. I worked
FRANK POWOLNY

on "Seventh Heaven."

Q. I get confused sometimes about the time elements; as to who went where, when and why. Was Max "Autry" at Fox when you were there?
A. "Autry" didn't come in until much later. He came in...I think he came in and did extra work on...Ah...either "Street Angels..." When "Street Angels" came in. Because I worked on "Seventh Heaven." I remember that.

Q. It's always fascinating to realize how corporate hierarchies change over the years, and different positions are taken by different people within the corporate structure. In the motion picture industry, when you were doing these stills.... When you went out, for instance, to do a portrait, who was it that had to okay it? Was it the publicity department? Was it the director? Was it the star? For instance, you mentioned "Seventh Heaven." Was it Janet Gaynor? Did she sit around and look at the stills and say, "That's okay."
A. "Zeget" had no..."Zeget" didn't have anything to do...the stars didn't have to do...Publicity had to do. They were the ones...They would tell me what to get. And you use your own judgment about what to get. That's your problem. And then the director was a good help, too. Especially Frank "Zegge." He always helped me. He directed the stills for me. That was a favorite for me, because sometimes I asked him what I want and he would do it for me, see. You know, you couldn't shoot in action, in those days.
Q. You couldn't when they were working?
A. No, you couldn't shoot action. The film wasn't fast enough.
Q. Right.
A. See, it was rare that the emulsion speed was greater than about eight. And, you know... I'll show you how slow that film was. With all those lights that was on a set, that you could shoot today at 1/500th of a second at f8, with the lights that was put in. Now, at that time, at f8, I was shooting one second. And I used to shoot like this, still... Open shot.
Q. Really.
A. Yeah. That's why it took... At f8, or between 11 and eight, one second exposure. That's how... The film was so slow. You announced, still...
Q. It's very interesting, Frank, to recognize that words that become part of a language, become part of our knowledge, very often are not in any way analyzed by us as to where they came from. I have always used the word "still." I have always associated it with those glossies that one would receive from publicity departments. They were "stills." It just didn't occur to me why they were called "stills" until you explained the nature of the situation. The same thing is true as to the function of lighting and... Tell me about all that.
A. Well... See, on the production set, it's a deep set. But you have to shoot the set that's lit. But for close ups, I
preferred my own.

Now the scene is over, and you have watched the action—what it was—then you have to fix the action, build the action. Sometimes you do on your own what you want to do on the side. There's a set here, they're working on another set. You take that set and light your own. But, in those days, we had light problems, you know. You only could use so many lights and you only could get one electrician. It isn't like today. See, in those days we used arc lights. That's all there was, arc lights. We didn't have the master lights like today. Everything was arc.

Q. Just going back for a moment to the nature of the word "still," as I get through everything you are saying, this is the picture that I get: You have actors on a set, and they're acting—They're moving, they're talking, they're reacting—and suddenly you find a scene that you want to take and you've selected that in your own mind. You discuss it, say, with Frank "Borzese," and he says, "Okay, that's a good one." Then what has to happen, because of the nature of the equipment, is that you have to say to those people, "Stand still," and the "stand still" gets translated to a shot, which is the still shot, translated to the word "stills," as applied to this particular photograph.

This is fascinating, and I must tell you, I just never translated it before in my mind. I just accepted the word. I understood what it meant, but...How wonderful, to suddenly get
the entire image of the way this works and the whole position of, "Actors please, stand still." I love it. Thank you.

Well, obviously the publicity department would know the limitations of the equipment and the camera, because the demands would be different then than they would be now. You know... How many shots would they expect? In other words, when they wanted you to do this particular assignment, what would they expect you to bring back? How many for instance?
A. You mean the stills on 8" X 10"? Well, I sometimes...
Well, you say eight, sometimes 12... Twelve shots or 12 or 16 shots.
Q. Was that pretty good?
A. Yes. When they go into a scene, a certain scene, they'd shoot that scene in a long shot--they'd move in close up and this and that and all that--but then they'd go into another sequence later on. But they would... This one scene takes all day. See, the close up here... And this and that... Before they changed into another scene, another sequence. And that's why I say in the early days I could get close ups of this and close ups of that and a long shot of that. But, I did direct... Sometimes I won't get any stills... Sometimes I won't get a still in that one day....
Q. Of course, it's one thing to simply be assigned to take the stills. It's another thing to develop talent and technique that produces the kind of art work that you eventually did produce. I always have the feeling that all of us, as human beings,
and as creative people, can track and trace those things that influence us. And those individuals and those particular talents that influence us. And, because none of us are just born with this enormous, marvelous ability to click a camera and come up with a great still. Who was it...Now be honest, Frank, who was it who was the greatest influence on you? Was it someone like "Mernow," because when I look at his movies and I look at your stills, I see a connection.

A. And I learned. And I learned a lot. Because here's the thing. One case that happened to me, first when I worked on the set of "Four Devils." Now, here's the thing...What he did...Here is a stool and a foot and a hand and all you see is feet. Now, there's two sons way in the distance. Two young youngsters, way in the distance. Now I have to get this sharp and this, but I had to show this big. The legs. To show the legs. On a stool. And those two boys way back there, peeling the potatoes. And I had to get this sharp and that sharp. On an 8" X 10" camera. Now, that's why I say I learned a lot about his composition. Well, I knew composition as it is, but I learned more, the way he had the feeling about the mood that he...So, I learned through him about distance...What's his name, the heavy man, he looks out the window, a close up, and I had to have that shadow of the circus...Here they are walking up the steps...And I had to carry all that. I didn't say that I can do it. I told that to Mr. "Mernow." I said, "No, I'll try. I'll try this, because this is something new that I never did this before, carrying
this before...Because you have to stop the camera down to f22 and then a long exposure. I had to...To get that carrying that shot, I had to say, "Still....Still....Still...Still." And then close it.

Q. Frank, of course when one looks at the finished work one always wonders who is responsible for what in relationship to this. Now you, as the still photographer, for instance, on say the "Four Devils," which was a very exciting circus picture... I have such an imprint in my head...I don't think I could have been any more than eight or nine years of age when I saw "The Four Devils," and I just simply remember them. I mean, I remember the pictures, and I remember the still shot, with the two heavier, bigger people and the two younger people in the background. So, obviously, that was a very effective experience for me. Now, F. W. Murnau, the director, had enormous impact on early Hollywood films, because he himself had a great interest in three dimensional relationship to form. In other words, like a person who is essentially a sculptor and an artist, he saw film as something that you would at all sides at all times. In other words, you should not...It was not a flat experience, it was a full-rounded, three dimensional experience in his mind. And that comes through in your stills as well. You don't get the distortion, for instance, that early pictures of people who were trying to take both...Somebody in the distance and somebody nearer to the camera, where the people nearer to the camera become these ogre giants and malformed, and the people behind become strange little midgets
and dots. So it's apparent that you learned a great deal from Mr. Mernau and his sense of composition, his understanding of what made all that work technically as well. But the challenges must have been enormous as to what you could do.

Now, my sense of this is, how much creative autonomy did you have on the sets? You look a little confused about the word "autonomy." Let me translate and put it another way for you.

Well, I mean, could you just get on the set and decide what it was you wanted to do and go ahead and do it, like any person that is given the opportunity to use their art form to capture a moment of magic, a moment of mystery, a moment of romance? Or did you have to take direction from the director or from the publicity department. And how much of the creative process was under your total command?

A. I had to produce...To tell the director what I want. He'd pose it for me.

Q. But you had to know...

A. ...what I want.

Q. Yes.

A. And he says, sometimes, "Well, Frank, let's forget this, we'll cover that later." Okay, fine. But I can't sit there in the back and wait on the scene, because he's not going to stop for you.

Q. When I think about current motion pictures, and I'm working in motion pictures myself, and obviously...I don't want
to get into any names because I don't want to get sued or any­
thing, but I have been assigned to films where people really
are unbelievably temperamental. And without a lot of justifica­
tion, in terms of their position or talent or their power. And
you recognize that some of that temperament, of course, is fear,
and that it's the strange sense that they're being challenged to
produce. And I find it particularly true of people who have come
from the world of the theatre to motion pictures. Because the
nature of the theatre acting experience is a continuous process.
The curtain goes up and you are in a given moment of time, and
you perform and time passes as the play is progressing. And no­
one is there to really stop it. Now, when people like that come
to motion pictures and have to, for instance, stop out of se­
quence...But not only that, have to repeat the same facial emo­
tion, the same verbal extension--movement of the lips, movement
of the eyes--for the mid-shot--medium shot--and then for the
close up...Until one learns how to do this for the motion picture,
it is a tremendous strain and I have seen people blow up, incapable
and unwilling to indicate that they, themselves, have limitations
as to their knowledge and their awareness and the use of their
talent, and they prefer to blame it on something else. They talk
about the temperature in the place, the noise that was made, some
poor script girl who just turned a page--whatever it may be. I
have seen some very bad behavior.

Which brings to mind that the kind of stardom that
we are familiar with doesn't really exist in today's world. Yet
there is this violent temperament. The real stardom was the world
that you're talking about, when stars had enormous salaries, enormous power, an enormous audience appeal. Tremendous. There aren't that many people who are bankable any longer. But the great ones that you photographed were. Was there a comparable level of temperament at that time? Can we assume that Irene Rich, that great lady of motion pictures, stamped her feet? Or the adorable piquant Janet Gaynor simply said, "I won't do it!" I'm curious."

A. It was much easier in those days than today. Today everything is hurry, hurry.

Q. It seems that an awful lot of your early photography, for the want of a better term, can be called "outdoor photography." When did Fox wake up and recognize that they ought to build a gallery for their photographes to use?

A. The gallery was built in 1927. But, it was just a small gallery.

Q. I saw a photograph of yours of Tom Mix, the famous cowboy star, and certainly one of my earliest heroes. I never found myself thinking about action shots and stills. You know, when you see Tom Mix rear up on his horse (was his horse called Tony?)...I seem to have that in my mind...Anyway, I do remember a shot where Tom, as the good guy, is, of course, wearing the white hat and the white outfit, and his wonderful horse rears, and they both have this almost sensual expression of exaltation, on the horse's face and on Tom's face! Was that difficult to achieve? How did you achieve those outdoor shots?
A. No, outside wasn't so bad. Because then we used what we used to call a super speed film, at that time, and that was a little faster. But, in shooting action...It was very difficult. There was one action that I had to do. It was put up and kind of difficult for me at that time...It was "Victory..." No..."Three Bad Men." They had a wagon on top a hill (?)... They used this panchromatic...First panchromatic film, and it was lit up and caught on fire, and that shot in daytime. It's supposed to (?)... right down to the church. Now, I didn't have that kind of film. So what I did, I sensitized panchromatic film.

Q. How?

A. Through mercury. Then I had to put it in storage, and I had to do this all at night, and we had the plates and we had the film, and we had four shots. No, six. Now, they had to be cooled off, in ice, so they won't evaporate on me, the mercury--vapor mercury. So now I had to put E-filter (that's orange filter)...These are all trials...Then I shot the fire coming down hill and it hit the church and then the cross was on fire too, and I processed it and it was all there. The fire and all that, shot in daytime. It was like night. It was like at night, because the blue sensor goes black. You know about filters or anything?

Q. You know, we talk about diaries and we talk about memory books. Our own private thoughts as memories. I'm always fascinated when I talk to photographers such as yourself, who have lived and photographed a whole period of original behavior,
original thinking, original force—the whole early motion picture world where everybody was just dealing with a new form—and all of you had to certainly function as mothers of invention and be enormously creative, I realize, as I get into this. But I'm also wondering if we can tap into your memories of those experiences that perhaps come up immediately to the surface of your mind because they were so unusual, because they were so horrible, or they were so joyful—whatever. But I think we all have that. I think we all have things that just won't go away, and constantly curl up in the sub-conscious. They're ready and waiting to pop into our minds. Tell me about some of those experiences, Frank.

A. In the early days, when I used to be assistant cameraman, I had an accident (?) ... George Archibald directed that. It was "East Lynn." That goes way back.

Q. Who was in "East Lynn?"

A. I can't remember....Well, we had a portable dark room to load up some films. To load and unload. And so, anyway, we had some trick shots. Trick shots. Or just crystal. So anyway, what happened to me...I was supposed to unload this film and reload and put fresh film in. What happened...I turned this magazine around, I hit the door, and here's the spool of film and I saw the ocean. The door opened. Daylight came on. All this film...So I closed it fast, and I thought I had fogged the whole...So I decided to go back with this film to the studio, have it processed, and I was a little bit worried that it was fogged all the way through, because it was a very
important scene. But it didn't. It just fogged on the edge.
So that's one accident I had.

Now, the other accident, later on, that's when I
went up to photograph the quintruplets. This is later on...
They sent me up there to photograph the quintruplets.
Q. To Canada.
A. Yes. Because I was an important man. To cover this.
And so they sent me up there and all that. Now, here we start
off on the trip, from here to Canada. I had all the film loaded.
I had four by fives, all numbered, and when we stopped in Chicago
we met the mayor and all this and that...The governor...In
Detroit the governor and so on...
Q. Who's we?
A. Oh...Well...On the way to the quintruplets....To
photograph. It was like Jean Hersholt and Rochelle Hudson.
And the nurse...I've forgot...And the crew and all that. So,
you know, this very important...We had a big (?).. And then
it was Chicago and Detroit and now to Toronto and I photographed
there. Then the following day I photographed Dr. Defoe, Jean
Hersholt...And...Fine...

So, I thought I had to process all this film. There
were about 52 negatives. And this publicity man by the name of
Frank "Perrett" said, "Better process the film," so I said
okay, fine, so okay I did. I processed the film. In a trailer.
Not in a tank, with a tray...I knew exactly what...When you
develop you know exactly what to do, how many (?) and all that.
Now the accident starts. I hung up all the films on a pipe line up there. Then I decided, well, I might as well (?) quick dry...

Q. Where were you, in a hotel room, or a trailer...?
A. Yeah, in a hotel place. So I went upstairs and the newspaper boys said, "Frank, have a drink," so I did. I had a few drinks. Then I decided, well, I'd go downstairs and see how my stuff looks. You know, all I saw was the base, no emulsion. On the trip from there to here, all the emulsion went on the floor. Peeled off.

Q. Frank, what was the atmosphere in the studios in terms of territorial rights. Certainly assignments were either desirable or less desirable or more desirable. Was there active competition as more and more people got into...As studios got larger and more and more films were put into production there certainly were more and more photographers assigned to do both stills as well as other things. Was it a highly competitive area?
A. I didn't have any competitive feeling. I didn't. If they can do better than I can, fine.

Q. Frank, realistically, in evaluating photographs of that particular period, done by those of you who were considered the masters, each one of you who had your own particular mark of distinction (George Hurrell's lighting, of course, is still talked about and still responded to), in your words, what was it that you contributed that would identify a Powolny portrait, for
instance?
A. You mean...My own set. Because I would make my own set there because it had the background for it, this and that, so I don't have to have a plain background on the set. It was like the stairway that you can lean over, you know? Or, another thing I used to do in the gallery...I used to take the furniture and I used to throw it over on the side and lean on it. Because it's all in the heads. Large heads. And that's what I did. Or even if they had plants like this, I could go do something about...Like, on the set, where there's wild oats and all that...I did that with Janet Gaynor. And she came in leaning like that, with all that...Just fall into it, and the wild oats and all that stuff...And I shot portraits like that..

Q. I know it's sometimes difficult to zero in, when you're talking about an artist's work, to zero in to the key force. But try to think for a moment, Frank: What is most important factor? What is the thing that one has to have at one's command, that one has to know, to achieve the kinds of portraits in photography that make them worthwhile, going back to, holding onto, reproducing, collecting?
A. Well, I don't know. It's an art. You have to know art. You have to hink, and think ahead all the time. And don't let the stars get confused.

(End of Side 1)
When I say, "Let's do this," and all of a sudden they say, "Well, what are we gonna do next?" You can't do that with the stars. Just go right at it. Even if you have to gamble. Just to get the shots. Don't let the stars guess you. They'll say, "You know, that's it, I'm gettin tired." They seem to have a feeling that you know. But if you stop, then you're in a bad way, that you don't know anything about...

Q. We keep hearing stories about stars that refuse to cooperate and would make announcements like, "I can give you five minutes," or, "I'm off to the beach today and I have no intention of doing that." What was the usual pattern? How long would a session take, for instance?

A. Sometimes...Like Loretta Young, I would have two or three days of it. Just changing clothes...Going to color...One time later on, when we did color...One day was color and the following day is all black and white. Sometimes she...We didn't hurry. We just took our time and did it right. Because you know, to her...She knew lighting. She knew exactly where I put the light. She was good at that. She knew my lighting. What to do and all that, the feeling of it. It's just like painting. That's what you do with the lights. You have to work with it and all that. Cross light it, and this and that. Sometimes you can't photograph...So, I saw images. Image stands out.

Q. When one goes to museums and looks at the galleries there, around the world, to see the work of the masters, you begin to realize, of course, that often they earned their living
by painting beautiful women. Or at least painting them as beautiful women, idealizing them. The difference with the Hollywood photographer is that because of the nature of the motion picture industry, there were scores of beautiful women who were there. That was their initial quality; that what attracted audiences to them was that they were truly beautiful. And someone like yourself, being exposed to that many different women, how was it possible to come up with fresh ideas. Because, going back to the museums, I recognize that there are patterns that are repeated and repeated and repeated in terms of posture, where the hand is held, whether there's a child in the picture, whether there's a flower or whether there is a still life as well on the table. But there are patterns that you can see repeated. And I suppose for someone like yourself, you'd have to ... knowing the sense the stars have of their own individuality... you'd have to constantly search for something different.

A. Well, I always liked to do something different, yes. That's true. You know, it's like lighting it and posing it and all that. But, as I say, a star's a star, but you can't change their...And when you've shot so many of them...You know...But (?) . fingerprints. You can't duplicate the same thing.I don't care how you do it, you can never do it.

Q. Frank, I know that as you grew in your own position and had a close relationship to photographing stars, particularly individuals that you became particularly associated with, there was, inevitably, impact that went both ways. I'm sure that you
affected them and they affected you. Because in my notes from Loretta Young, about her relationship to you, she said, when I asked her what happened when she became so important as a star that she could select the photographer on the movie, just as she could a certain costume designer and so forth (she also could demand who it was who was going to be responsible for photographing the stills that would be went out all over the world to establish the mood of this particular film), and she said, well, it wasn't only that she had that power, everybody had that power who had reached stardom. At MGM, where there were so many stars (more stars than in heaven, as the logo went), that every star would just choose one and she was commenting that she did about three pictures at MGM, and she supposed, though she didn't have a clear memory as to who it was who did the photography, she assumed it was Clarence "Vole," who, of course, was the person assigned there. But she did say, and this is interesting, in terms of her relationship to you, that the only person that she remembered was Frank Powolny, and she said, "He's the person I consciously remember spending time with," and she also claims that she took you out of that candid stuff (as she called it) and put you into the portrait gallery. And when I raised the question, "Did you do that because you liked the cands that he took?" She very emphatically said, "No! Because I liked him!" And she went on to say, Frank, that you wanted a chance and you were very sensitive, and that you didn't barge in. Isn't that interesting that she picked that up. And she also was a little,
almost negative in one sense, because she said, "I really didn't think he was going to make it. But, as far as I was concerned, I thought, 'Well, it's only one afternoon, so what big waste?'" That she announced to the publicity department that she was going to do some portraits and sit for Frank Powolny in the gallery. And, of course, what else would they say? They said, "Fine, go ahead." But, I gathered from what she told me the truth was that she...She was responding to the fact that you were persistent; that you may not have barged in, but you certainly had the tenacity to ask her, time after time after time, as to when this might happen; that you would like...That it would be an honor, that you would like very much to have the experience; that her beauty was such that you wanted to be challenged by it and capture it on film." And I suppose eventually...Because I remember you said earlier, off tape, when we were having our tea, that she kept saying things like, "Oh, one of these days we'll do it, Frank. One of these days." And then the day came when she showed you her Hurrell portraits. And, of course, Hurrell had this enormous talent to make all these women look exquisite, but she said, "That's what I really look like." And...But after she did sit for you that particular day in the gallery, she didn't think much about it. But about a week later, when you brought the stills to her home and she took a look at them, she was overwhelmed. Because, in her own words, they were simply marvelous. He was really a good cameraman; that he had never really had the opportunity. Somehow, people
would just shout out, "Okay, Frank. Here it is. Shoot it. Get it now, right now." But, (quotes Young), "When I went to the gallery with him, and he had the light on..." Because whoever was the main photographer there at the time, was off for the day, was off someplace..."But I knew, after I saw the stills that he took that day, that he knew a great deal about lighting. But also, it was interesting, he placed me in positions, with settings, that I had never been placed in before. And that I found myself drawing upon my own sense of who I was and what I wished to project on the camera. Because, for instance, I was sitting sideways on a chair, a chair that you would not sit sideways on normally, but somehow or other it gave me a sense of almost intimate intrigue with whomever it was I was talking to. But you wouldn't ever sit in an awkward position on a chair, unless you were aroused in some way to use that position to get closer to somebody. And that would necessarily not be anybody you had just met. It would have to be an intimate situation. And those pictures turned out to be just absolutely sensational. I treasure them. So that whenever I went outside the studio, and went to Fox, I demanded that Frank Powolny take my pictures. And I was never, in the entire history of our relationship, never disappointed. Which is about "the finest thing that I can say about any photographer."

Now that, Frank, brings to mind that out of this intimacy that you got to, because it is the sense...I suppose in the true sense of the word, a good photographer wants to know
something about his subject before he starts snapping any person. He wants to know who is that person? What are they made of? What are their interests? What do they care about? And, also, what is the nature of the character that they're playing?

So I would make the assumption that behind the scenes there is more work that you have to do to achieve this kind of talent that appears in these photographs, to cause someone as sophisticated about her pictures as Loretta...You know...She brought...By your own statement previously, that she knew a great deal about lighting and could certainly direct herself...I guess all the great stars did...Or at least the ones that took their roles very seriously, in terms of protecting what it was that they had, their particular beauty, their particular good points. And, of course, sometimes it wrapped itself around by superstition and had nothing to do with what was real, but with whatever mishugas was in their heads--what would work or not work.

But, what I'm asking, Frank, is, did the intimacy help?

A. Well, here's the thing...It's not like a model. A model, you can have her all day and what to do and this thing. Now, when you're working on...It's like, Betty Grable...You know, you can't shoot, shoot, shoot, the same thing...Sometimes I would shoot two or three shots of one pose. I'd change the pose. Or sometimes one shot and I'd change the pose. You have to change...It wasn't like today where with the Lica camera you can shoot and do this and this and so this and all that. No, I couldn't do that. Not on 8" X 10". It takes time. Then
I had to change the background too. Yes. It takes time. You know. You have to create the background and the pose and the mood of the person. Yes.

Q. I know that you worked with Constance Bennett. Now, to me, Constance Bennett was the essence of sophistication and the true...The first really demonstrator of real style. But that also creates...comes from a very strong individual personality. Bennett, the daughter of Richard Bennett, the famous actor, married Phil Plant, a multi-millionaire scion of a social family and very young. And somehow or other, her life was a spoiled life. She was the darling of whatever world she was involved in. Rumor has it that she was very difficult, and that you had some difficulties with her. Are you ready to talk about that Frank?

A. Well, she says, "Oh, don't bother me with it now, get it later." Well, this later business I never got, so I just forgot her. I didn't say...I just shot other people's stills. And then she started with, "Where are the stills?" And I told her, you know, that she said not to keep bothering her. So, I forgot. On the production, I...Well, if the director says, "Get the stills," then fine. Then she's in it. But sometimes I want her alone. And she says, "Oh, don't bother me with it." Well, then I just forget it. Until she feels it and the stills come on the set and she says, "Where am I?" and well, "You said, don't bother me." Then she gets furious. That's the only thing I had trouble...
Q. It's interesting that you talk about Constance Bennett that way. But that's so typical of spoiled people. They respond to their feelings of the moment, and they never see the whole picture; never think things through entirely. It never occurred to her that the fact that she said, "Don't bother me," was her way of dismissing your relationship to her. And yet, by the same token, the same quality of the spoiled makes the assumption that, "Of course he would take my pictures. Of course they would be there." Also, there is the lack of memory of that experience. And I think it's one of the things that people who work with creative artists on any level, I don't care whether it's motion pictures or... I had dealings with Picasso, and it was exactly the same kind of thing, where you're dismissed, but at the same time they want you to do whatever it was that you came to do. "Where is the story?" You know. And I think it is somewhat in the nature of that kind of person, whose mind is challenged and sometimes trapped by its own facility. The fact that there are so many directions that the mind is taking that for the moment, the direction that you wish to take is not compatible with where their mind is going. And yet, at the same time, one part of that mind recognizes that what you're asking for is a necessary step and it has to be done to achieve the next step. So that there is a stage of confusion, and often you can be punished for it and often it becomes very, very difficult to do.

And that brings up, I suppose, the choices that we
have in our work, when we deal with people. We have a choice of either dealing with men or women. Did you prefer working with men, or women, for that matter?

A. I enjoyed...Well, you can create with the women more than you can with the men. Men you can be reckless.

Q. You can?

A. Yes.

Q. How do you mean?

A. Well, you can see...(?) ... You can't say to a girl pose like this... With a pipe or... See, in their character, what they play, that's it. You know what I mean. Now, if they're in regular clothes and all that, you're limited, yes. All it is is to change their clothes. Now, on the women, you have to create the posing and do this and all that. Almost making a film, almost making a story up. See, now, another thing about stills... When the picture's over, we call it "poster art." You know. From the picture... The stories that you have... You get the synopses of the stories, the layout of the stories, and then you shoot the heads, the portraits, and then double, and do this and that, that's... You do all that, but you have to shoot fast. You work fast. It's all white background. You don't create shadows and this and that. Forget that. That's what they call "poster art."

Now, sometimes you can shoot 200 stills...

Q. Frank, you shouldn't hold back at this point in your life? Who were your favorites?

A. Loretta Young. You can do anything with her. She
enjoys photography work. And Gene Tierney. And Jeanne Crain.

Q. They weren't all easy.
A. No, they weren't all easy. Some are problems, yes. Some are problems. Some are... If they know you, they are so relaxed, they'll do anything with you. But, when you get a strange person, they don't know you. Then there's a little problem. You have to figure it out, the way I want it and... You know... So she's more relaxed. Then the next time she's more relaxed with me. She knows what to do... Well, some girls are not that relaxed. Sometimes she'll say, "Well, what do you want me to do?" Right off the bat.

Q. Like who, for instance?
A. Well, I don't know, that's way back. Oh... They were just there temporarily. But, that's one case like that. Like the little French girl... She says, "I don't feel good." What are you gonna do? She walks off the set. I'm not going to stop her. I'll get her later on. She pulled a... One time she came on the set, in the gallery, late. I had another subject I was photographing. She said, "What's all this?" I said... She said, "I'm ready." She was supposed to be on the set at 10:00, in the gallery at 10:00, and she shows up at 4:00. Then she wants... I looked at... When I looked at the watch, about what time she came, she was made at me, because I looked at the watch. So she says, "Are you going to refuse to photograph me?" I said, "Wait until I get through with her." She said, "I have no time." So she just packed up and went out. So what are you
gonan do? So I called up the office, before she could call them. I was protected. Of course, she showed up late...And other things that were involved in it. That was one case...

Q. It's interesting Frank that you, earlier, described that the thing that signified the essential difference between your work and other photographers' work, or your signature, were the settings that you created, and the unexpected uses of furniture, for instance, and drapery. But there's also a sense, in the history of Hollywood photography, that you contributed a great deal to intricate lighting and patterns that had not been used before, and you had your own rules that you did. Isn't that right?

A. I did. For shadow, set lighting and all that. But I never had a light coming up...This was...The light had to be like if you took a brush and painted it on, you know? With cameras. It was the same way with the light. I was very careful where the light came in, and the cost and the back light, and not to be flat. The background had to be in the mood. Just as well as her, see.

Well, the background has a lot to do with it too, you know.

Q. Yes, yes. These are the things that you can play with.

A. So it won't be stale, on the picture, so you have to work with the background. But I was always ahead. Like in color... When the color came out, I was the first man in motion pictures to use colors.
Q. When was that?
A. Way back on "Under Two Flags."
Q. Thirty-five, '36....
A. Thirty-six. No...In 1934 I was shooting color. "Dufane " color. I was the first one in the motion picture industry, shooting color.
Q. Really.
A. Yes.
Q. Who were you shooting the color for? For magazines?
A. For the studio.
Q. For the studio. What were they using it for?
A. I don't know. I mean, for the magazines, I guess. I shot Shirley Temple when she was a little girl. I shot (?) and that goes way back.
Q. It's fascinating, as one gets into the whole history of this developing art form called motion pictures, one recognizes that the still photography, for instance, got bolder and bolder, because the movies themselves got bolder and bolder. Cecil B. deMille, in the very early days, understood that if you had two handmaidens holding an ermine robe and Gloria Swanson ostensibly nude behind it, stepping into a sumptuous bathtub, you created a moment of erotica and excitement for the audience that married lots of mixed emotions. I mean, it was sybaritic and luxurious and extravagant, at the same time daringly sexual and sensational. It was inevitable, as we all know, that when these freedoms get out of hand, the public, in some form, begins to rebel, and out
of the pressure of those well meaning forces that censor our lives, the Johnson office was established. And this must have complicated things for photographers like yourself enormously in terms of your ability to take shots that might be close to nudity. I remember a shot of Carole Lombard which was really practically naked, and...Which was just sent out as a regular still. It wasn't a secret experience, or something one sold as, how do you say it, a guilty postcard. And, Frank, when you think about it, what was the...Was there a difference between what the studio photographer did and what anybody else did? How did it affect you? What was it all about?

A. An outside photographer shooting was okay, see, but as long as you were on a production, everything had to be okayed.

Q. You know, I suppose someday somebody's going to do a book on all those hidden anecdotes, hidden experiences, that are whispered about, and that first sort of permeate the society of the in-groups and eventually become part of folklore. And, you know, there's folklore stories about Paulette Goddard, about Jean Harlow, and certainly a part of that folklore is the famous photograph of Carmen Miranda jumping up and down without (perhaps you've forgotten) her underclothes. You want to tell me about that one?

A. I...This was on Saturday...August...Either the 11th or 12th, 1940...I've forgotten...'41. And...So...I asked Caesar, "By the way, let's get Carmen over here, I want to leave for my
vacation. he said all right....He said, "I'll get her." So, anyway, she couldn't do that. And then after lunch I couldn't get the shots until later on, when she was relaxing in the dressing room. And Caesar came in and said, "Come on, Frank is waitin for you so he can get on his vacation." She said, "All right, fine." But, she forgot....

Q. To put on her underslip....

A. So she went on the set, and I had a background with palms and all this, and she was doin a dance number. So, anyway, there was my speed graphic with a flash--(?) flash--The first time for this brand new graphic I had. I had a brand new camera. I was proud of having a brand new camera, up to date, you know. I had my flash and there were people out there watching, standing there. Nobody saw anything. I didn't either. I was watching it for the faces, so it didn't block, you know, with the flash. I took a shot at 400 percent. Then when I did get the shots I went on my vacation. When I came back two weeks later, fellows came up to me and said, "Frank, by the way, do you have a picture of Carmen Miranda?" I said, "What are you talking about? Why don't you go up to the office?" I didn't know anything about this. "Why don't you go up to the office and get it." So then I find out that I shot Carmen Miranda without her pants.

Q. And this appeared in the scene?

A. See, how that came out is somebody in the still lab stole the prints, and he made two prints of it and showed it to
a friend of his and the friend of his went to a third party, and the third party made the negatives and all that. Then the second one, the one who had the original, didn't know anything about what had happened. By that time, that man was doing "The Houses of Prince..."

Q. So he could blow it up.

A. Sure. So the studio destroyed the negative. Destroyed it right then, when they saw the thing, they saw the print, they destroyed it. They laughed about it, but they didn't know what happened on the other end of it. Yeah. So that's when that came about.

Well, anyway, she sued me.

Q. She sued you.

A. Oh, yeah. She lost. She dropped the case.

Q. Frank, this is a question I suppose I really like to ask all the people that I interview in their particular field. In the field of photography, Hollywood photography, what do you think set you apart? What distinguished you from all the other people?

A. I had a different style of lighting. I never did like to light flat. That was my idea, never to light flat. At that time. Now they do, because you don't retouch the negatives. But at that time I was more careful of lighting. A certain way. I had a certain style of lighting. Everybody had a certain style. I was very careful about the eyes, the nose and the chin. See. That's one of the problems. Now, sometimes a girl has....is
slightly crosseyed, so you correct that. You photograph lighting. Or, if the person has a crooked mouth...nose...you correct that, by lighting. Or...Well...It's one thing I never say to a person, "Which side is good or fair?" Or favored. I never said that. Never. Once when you say that you're sunk. Because once you say that's the favored side, they say,"Well, Frank said that's the favored side," by the time you get through that, what's the scene all about? You know, you have to play with the camera just as well as...Because the camera...They know that.... Sometimes the camera will know, will favor that side, and I say well that's good that the camera favors that side, but I can't do that. I'll play it the way I see it.

Q. As I mentioned at the very beginning of this experience, you are a man of very advanced years, and some of this took place over a series of days in which you agreed to see me. The thing that I feel, of course, is that you get a certain amount on the actual-tape, talking, but because we had to stop for these trips to the bathroom and various experiences of that nature, but he continued to talk. So I've asked John to sit with me, and I thought we could go over some of the things that came out of the material, that we couldn't catch on the tape itself. So that...Didn't you feel that...One of the things that I felt so strongly, when you realize that you're talking about somebody who was in this field from the very, very beginning...

A. Oh, yes...Yes...

Q. ...and I had such a great sense that it was new to
everybody.
A. Yes, the art itself was. And one of the things
that strikes me, not only from my proximity to Mr. Powolny,
but also just in finding out about other photographers in
the studios at the beginning, is that they created the art
that we are now studying. It sprang like Venus out of Zeus's
head, fully grown. I mean, they were... Mr. Powolny was schooled
in sculpture. Hurrell...
Q. Was landscape.
A. ...was landscape. Willinger was also in painting. So
many of them came from different fields of the fine arts and
put their interpretation of the fine arts into this new medium,
and they created a whole new art form based on their experiences.
But what we have today are people who look on photography as one
of the fine arts. And so, base their interpretation of photog-
raphy on somebody else's interpretation of, so it's a third
hand art almost.

Personally, I see that going on with acting, film
acting and film direction. Just as the still photographers tried
to achieve a three dimensional depth in their stills, the film
directors, Mernau in particular, as you pointed out, got that
feeling of surrounds, of depth. And then, you see, in the '50s,
the late '40s and '50s, television came along and virtually put
the blank fourth wall back in. It was back to theatrical setup.
Even though you had three cameras, there still was the audience
out watching so that you couldn't get that depth. It was all
very blank. And I think possibly now, in the '80s, are we getting beyond that shallowness and back into something extraordinary again. The art form is just now resurging. And that's why it's fascinating to see the resurgence in the interest in early Hollywood photography, because they do go hand in hand, moving photographs as well as still photographs.

Q. Well, of course, I...I think we said this before, somewhere, but I do feel very strongly that the still photography that dominated the world and created images of not only the individual stars but the worlds in which they were photographed, in other words, the roles that they were playing. Our concept of the Arab was based upon Rudolf Valentino in "The Sheik." Our concept of the spy was Mata Hari. I mean, all of these things as interpreted by Hollywood. Never had there been such an experience of one art form dominating the thinking and the patterns of people all over the world. I mean, it was incredible to realize that Charles Chaplin, for instance, was known and identified by remote African tribes, who imitated his walk and his movement.

A. Oh, yes. Well, you can even take that a further step. The one that always hits me is religious iconography. As a collective (I think even for the world but certainly in the United States), our image of Jesus Christ is that of what Cecil B. deMille gave us. And yet, Cecil B. deMille based his on Gustave Durer's drawings and other Italians, who based their paintings on their contemporaries, which were either from the Danish,
blonde, blue-eyed Jesus to the very effete, quiet-spoken... And not anywhere near the semitic, bushy, burly men that Jesus probably was. So, we have not only the films, but also the films basing on somebody else's....

Q. It's... I am always amazed and overwhelmed by the power and the impact of all of that photography. So it's been... We'll continue to pursue these men, whoever we can get.

A. Oh, do. And particularly, if I may, just one point about Mr. Powolny (and I know he didn't mention it), toward the end of your interview with him he was talking about the right side of somebody's face, where the camera favored one side, but the photographer didn't. I don't know why he didn't talk about it, but he... There was one very funny thing with the most famous of the actresses in that regard, Claudette Colbert, who refused to be photographed on the wrong side of her face.

He was doing some still photography on the set with her, and did one of his famous, "Still... Still... Still;" and she stopped in the middle of the still-still-still, and she said, "No," and he said, "You must hold still! You must hold still!" and she said, "It's not the right side of my face," and he said, "I'm doing a full length with the whole scene, I don't care about which side of your face..." And, as he pointed out to her, just... Even though she went to great lengths in setups, to make sure that she was photographed on the right side, quite often, in passing through a room, she would... It would go from one side to... And nobody noticed. And only because
she was aware of the face that it was "still-still-still" and people would have a chance to study it, and they apparently had quite a blowup on it and went head to head, and once it was over....And, you know...He's very sly this way. He never said who acquiesced to whom, but they did become good friends, as she did with all her photographers. In fact, I think, right up until the end, he was still visiting her in the Barbados.

Q. Well, of course, he's a charming old man. And that charm obviously manifested itself all the way back in the early days with Loretta Young. So that your dealing with, I think, the recognition, also, that the people who have to deal that intimately with the instrument of the kind of talent that motion pictures register, and that instrument often is the physiogamy. I mean, that instrument is the body--the face, the profile, the eyes, the smile--whatever it may be. The photographer becomes the guardian of that, and in the minds of all performers is Father Time, and the ruthless fact that it will eventually destroy that look.

A. I think one of the key words too is the one that you said, charm, particularly with these photographers. We have to remember that in the '20s, and even in the late teens, when all of this was getting started, so many of these photographers including, particularly, Mr. Powolny, were young, foreign, dashing young men with an accent. And it came at a time when the country was ready to be swept up by Rudolf Valentino or Greta
Garbo, or anybody who was a bit different, who was foreign, who had mystique.

Q. Well, I think also, because we forget that this country has always considered itself inferior to the Mother Country, to the Old Country. People are always talking about the manners, the values, the taste. This country has been harshly Anglophiled, to the point where, certainly on the East Coast... You find less of that out here in Los Angeles... There's much more of an international impact on the society here and on the forces here. Which explains, of course, that the Austrians and the Germans--von Sternberg and all that crowd--but they all brought with them the sense that they drew upon a culture which had far more established forces. Even the existence of the movie palaces, which were really bastardized versions of the Vatican, the castles, the chalets... Anyway, thank you very much, John.

A. Thank you.

Q. It was wonderful to have this experience with Mr. Powolny, and this adds a significant thing. And on behalf of the Fashion Institute of Technology and the Resource Center, we really are very grateful.

A. Thank you.
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