

Richard Arthur Sidwell - 20 October 1920 -1 August 1990

Was born in Ohio USA at 6.40pm in the Peoples Hospital, in the City of Akron, County of Summit.

Akron was regarded by many as the original "Hicksville". It was also the home town of the spinster played by Katherine Hepburn in Lean's Summer Madness.

In actuality Akron was a highly prosperous city, whose main industry was rubber manufacture (Firestone, Goodrich, Goodyear, etc.), producing more than a quarter of the total tyre product.

His father, Arthur, and mother, Ethel, were both born in Nelson, then a small Lancashire cotton town. Apprenticed as a weaver at the age of 12, Arthur wasn't content with his lot and took a part-time job in the local theatre to save up for his £10 fare to Boston. Before emigrating, he proposed, on a walking holiday in the Lake District, to Ethel Kershaw. She had to wait until after the end of the Great War for it to be safe enough to cross the Atlantic so that they could marry in Akron.

Like his father Richard really enjoyed the US and the Mid-West weather. He had happy memories of playing in the thick winter snow. Less happy were memories of learning to swim in the freshwater lakes around Akron. He had such a high specific gravity that he sank like a stone!

His mother was unhappy because she adored the sea and Akron was almost 1000 miles from the Atlantic. A memorable holiday was spent on a trip to the seaside. They had an open tourer automobile resembling those in Chicago gangster films, and he had the whole of the back seat to play on as they drove across New England to Maine. A great bonus for him was his father reading Treasure Island to him each night. He remembered too the car ferry from New York State to Vermont and finally jumping in the Atlantic rollers at Orchard, Maine.

Another memory was of the excitement of Halloween, with pumpkin masks with lighted candles and the drumming sound made by notched cotton reels spinning on elastic against window panes.

Yet another was of the ice box in their kitchen, with one compartment for food and one for ice, from which it slowly melted away into a drain in the basement. The iceman called every day, and his mother put a notice in the window of the porch to let him know how much they wanted. He found it exciting to watch the man split the ice into blocks of 25, 50, 75 or 100lbs and carry them on his shoulder, held in place with an ice pick.

Though an only child (which he deeply regretted) he had plenty of friends, and they used to play on the vacant plot of land between their house and the one next door. Favourite toys which he remembered were a kit for building a log cabin and a jigsaw of 48 pieces, one for each state.

No sooner had he arrived on the scene than his mother wanted to show him off to grandparents, aunts and uncles, so as soon as he had recovered from whooping cough and other childish ills, back they all went to Nelson. The trip was a great success.

A second trip was therefore planned within three years, this time without his father. His mother paid for this trip herself out of earnings from singing. His memory of her voice was of a Kathleen Ferrier quality. She used to sing for various different congregations, mainly the Christian Science church. She also sang on the radio from Cleveland and he remembered being allowed to stay up and listen through their cat's whisker radio.

Richard was not at all sure however that he really enjoyed this second trip. He preferred the weather to be hot or cold, not dank and gloomy! However he provided the family with some amusement exchanging an American accent for a Lancastrian one in the space of three months.

He was eight and a half when he returned, with his mother, to England for the third and final time. He had vivid memories of the journey. His father drove them to Cleveland to catch the night train to Montreal. He remembered lying on the top bunk and pulling aside the curtain to see the deserted station in the middle of the night at the Canadian frontier at Buffalo. They embarked on the 'Laurentic' sailing down the St. Lawrence River for 4 days and 8 days open sea to Liverpool. He and his mother both distinguished themselves. He was the sole passenger in Tourist Class to appear for all meals every day, and his mother sang in the concert on the last night. On arrival at Liverpool he suffered a traumatic experience. On disembarkation he was carrying a model aeroplane which he had made from a kit. It was no ordinary plane. It was a scale model of "The Spirit of St. Louis" in which Col. Lindburgh flew the Atlantic solo. Sadly he became separated from it in the Liverpool docks, so his arrival was blighted by the loss. From Liverpool they went by train and bus to his grandmother's house at No. 61 Napier Street, Nelson.

Living at his grandma's he underwent considerable culture shock. He had been accustomed to central heating and storm doors and windows. At his grandma's the lavatory was outside, down ten steps at the back of the house, with a wooden seat which she scrubbed frequently and vigorously. The lighting was by gas, and the only heating came from the iron grate in the kitchen, as did the baking and the hot water in a small tank. There was a sink with cold water only in the scullery. The front room was rarely opened, and its fire was lit once only each year - on Xmas Day.

He spent something like a year there and two sounds dominated these early memories. The knocker-up who tapped on his aunt's bedroom window with a long cane to call her to work, and then the crescendo of the clattering clogs.

Whilst waiting there for his father to salvage as much as possible from the wreckage of the 1929 Wall Street Crash, winter approached and his mother began to suffer badly from her chronic bronchitis. However she was lucky enough to renew a friendship with an artist called Hugh Grestey, who had 'emigrated' to St. Ives. His mother, Mrs. Grestey,

also had a house there and could offer them accommodation for the winter, so they spent a very happy winter in Cornwall. This meant another change of school for Richard. He had found the change from Cahooga Falls to Nelson surprising enough, but this next school was quite startling. There were only three classes, all held side by side in the same large room, heated by one large coal stove and situated within sight of the sea. The climate lived up to its reputation for being mild and sunny. They enjoyed many weekend walks and Richard's favourite was along the railway embankment since the trains didn't run on a Sunday. He had memories of yellow being the predominant colour: spiky gorse and dainty primroses all successfully avoiding the infrequent trains during the week. On the rare occasions that rain kept them indoors, he used to perch on the window seat which overlooked the main street of the town, and watched the world go by, played with his Meccano, or read his "Boys Own" comic.

Towards the end of the winter they had news from his father that he had completed winding up his affairs, and would soon be returning from Akron. Richard was very pleased to see him again, in spite of it meaning another change of school - the first of several within the next few years. In spite of the Depression his Dad found employment with a company called British Moulded Hose, whose factory was in Watford. They moved into furnish accommodation, but unfortunately his mother fell ill again and had to go into Ware Sanitorium in the mistaken notion that she had "consumption" (tuberculosis) and Richard was cared for by his father. Not a happy time for the family with Richard hating his first school and having to change from it, and his father suffering financial difficulties.

A substantial change in their fortunes occurred in 1932. The firm for whom Arthur was working was taken over by the company he had worked for in Akron and who were setting up the manufacture of boots and shoes. Thus he was immediately offered a good post in Burton-on-Trent. So for the last time Richard and his mother were destined to keep each other company, whilst Arthur arranged accommodation and they all waited for the results of Richard's scholarship exam to Watford Grammar. He managed to scrape through, and was able to transfer to Burton-on-Trent Grammar, so at last they were together with Arthur in a good job, and Richard in a good school. He commented that, apart from the menace of the rise of Fascism, these were the happiest days of his life.

During the latter part of his schooldays he struck up a close friendship with the Head Boy, Eric Sudale, who subsequently went to Oxford and became the youngest HMI (Her Majesty's Inspector of Schools) in the country. Eric encouraged his interest in music, both classics and jazz. But Richard's abiding passion in the arts was the cinema and he began to spend more and more time watching films. There were four cinemas in Burton and sixteen in Derby, a cycle ride away. Most exciting was the discovery of French films, the first being Mayerling.

Though clever at school, he failed to win sufficient scholarships to take him to Oxbridge, so in 1939 he won a place in the Executive Grade of the Civil Service.

(Note: This where his writing ends, so the next part will be much more sketchy, ..based on my rather poor memory of things he told me)

His posting was to the Ministry of Social Security in Sheffield where he worked as an Inspector in a vast housing estate in a poor area. His job entailed visiting claimants and snooping around, peering to see what shoes were under the bed, to see if they were co-habiting. A strange occupation for a 19 year old boy! All I know of his life there was that he had a piano and a musical girlfriend. and that they enjoyed leisure time walking in the surrounding countryside.

RICHARD ARTHUR SIDWELL contd.

(Note: With regard to his wartime experiences, I am afraid I have no dates - I'm just going on recollections of bits and pieces he told me. For his time in the film industry, I probably could find more details. At the moment I can't lay hands on his curriculum vitae, but I know it exists.)

When he resigned from the Civil Service in 1941, he got his call-up papers, and refused military service. He failed his first tribunal and as a consequence was sent to Wormwood Scrubs where I think he spent about six months, including Christmas. Conditions were harsh but he met some interesting people amongst his fellow pacifists. He was released following his appeal tribunal where he this time won his case. He was very touched by the backing he received from his father, who, with his mother, was not supportive of his pacifism. (I think this was mainly on account of seeing the terrible treatment received by Whalley and others during the First World War.)

He joined a horticultural community at Apsley Guise in Buckinghamshire and worked in glasshouses looking after tomatoes, where he contracted rheumatic fever and had to give up working on the land.

He did various jobs in London, including working as a porter at Charing Cross Hospital, for a publisher, and for the Save the Children Fund, who he was hoping would send him to Greece as an ambulance driver. Unfortunately for him he proved himself too useful as an accountant in their London Office! (I found it hard to share his enthusiasm for meticulous book-keeping and was amazed to find someone who actually enjoyed completing his own tax returns!)

At this time he must have been living at Youth House in Campden Town, whose residents were for the most part, idealist left-wing pacifists - many of them Jewish refugees. He played an important part in the running of this community and organised its musical activities. It must have been there that he met an attractive, previously-married, Czech lady, Liselotte Wiesmeyer, and married her at Hampstead Registry Office on 8th December 1945, I gather in order to give her British nationality. It was thus probably mainly a marriage of convenience.

It was through an acquaintance that he finally managed to gain an introduction into the film industry. The only way then was through whom you knew. His first job was as an assistant cameraman on a documentary film about Canals. It was an extremely useful

entree which gained him his all-important ACT (Union) membership. However, he did not enjoy having to hump around the very heavy cement equipment that it entailed!

His entry into the cutting rooms was as second assistant editor on Olivier's Hamlet! He always said that, from the point of view of the quality and prestige of films he worked on, it was downhill from there on! This was a very exciting time for him; he was bowled over by Vivien Leigh, and attended the party to celebrate Larry's knighthood.

During the following years he worked in the cutting rooms of all the major studios - Elstree, Riverside, Pinewood and Shepperton - the latter being his favourite. At first it was as assistant, till he worked his way up to Sound Editor, for which he earned a high reputation for his skills. He particularly enjoyed cutting to music. His ambition was to edit feature films and in the main he only achieved this through filmed series for TV, such as the Robin Hood films. He also worked on the drama which went out on the opening night of commercial television.

It was as editor on a film series that gave him the opportunity of a year in Bermuda. This was called "Sea Hawk". (This was not long after we'd met and he asked me to go with him, but I thought it unwise as we were both still involved with other people at the time. He had though split up from a long relationship with Trudi Lowengard, having lived with her and her daughter Barbara (who wanted to be a ballet dancer) at Cricklewood.) His Bermuda existence sounded idyllic. His cutting room was on an island in Hamilton Harbour, reached by boat every day. Christmas was a beach picnic, and he was able to do some water skiing and scuba diving until he cut his leg badly on some coral. I think he found cultural opportunities non-existent and the social life stultifying, drinking with the same sets of people. He made a lot of money though and afterwards was able to visit the States, including his godparents in La Jolla, Hollywood, and New York where he visited a different theatre every day!

On his return to England he was pleased to be reunited with his pride and joy, his MGA sports car, which had to be laid up soon after its purchase. He also made another very important acquisition: his first flat - in Marylebone, above the Angus Steak House in Blandford Street. (Prior to this he had been living in rented accommodation, first in Bayswater then in a shared house with friends in Abingdon Villas, just down the road from my flat in Lexham Gardens (It was through his giving me a lift while we were both working at Pinewood that we properly got to know one another).

Workwise it was then mainly editing documentaries for such companies as British Transport Films and the Shell Film Unit, both of whom were turning out some interesting stuff.

Then another breakthrough came - into directing - albeit only of filmed sequences in TV drama. He worked for quite a long while on what was then a very popular detective series called "No Hiding Place". A lot of his time was taken in looking for locations, when such things as good loo's and good restaurants had to rank high in his priorities! Once he got press publicity for notorious reasons, wading in the sea with the equipment, when the unit got cut off by the tide whilst filming near Beachy Head! Another TV job he enjoyed was the film sequences for the Somerset Maugham series. Other interesting

assignments came through working for This Week (current affairs) For instance he filmed an interview with Willy Brandt against the backdrop of the Berlin Wall. On another occasion a disillusioning experience was an interview with Arthur Koestler - not a pleasant human being. Since Associated Rediffusion often didn't have the need of a film director, he was allowed to cut his teeth on live TV with such things as childrens programmes. A programme he particularly enjoyed was a series on film Close Up. When this ended and it became apparent that they could only offer him more of the same, he decided it was time to move on.

Breaking into mainstream directing, however, proved very difficult. Unfortunately it was a financially difficult time for us too. Already with one adopted child and with another suddenly and unexpectedly offered, it became imperative for us to move out of our small flat. We found a wreck of a house in Pimlico and employed architect friends whose work we admired to do an exciting conversion - all whilst I was stuck at home with two babies and he was unemployed and with no prospect of job security.

I realise that I should backtrack a little here where our private life was concerned as I've got him with two kids, buying a house, without even mentioning our marriage!

Well we finally 'got it together' on New Year's Eve 1958/9 and got engaged and started living together soon after. We planned to get married that summer and booked our honeymoon - a Grand Tour of Italy - but unfortunately the wedding wasn't to be. Extricating himself from his previous maniage turned out to be a lengthy and complicated business and his Final Decree didn't come through until August 1960 when we were finally able to marry. We didn't let it stop us having a great pre-honeymoon touring Italy in the MG though! Our actual wedding was a quiet registry office affair with just close friends and family present, but we made up for that with a large and memorable evening party at the flat. Everyone remembers our bath being filled with ice and bottles of champagne. As Richard was in the middle of a series at the time, we just had a short honeymoon in the Yorkshire Dales.

Very important to us both was starting a family and the lack of success in this direction was all that spoiled our happiness. We tried absolutely everything, and when the injections that R was having gave him a horrible allergy we felt it was time to call a halt and follow the path of adoption. This was no easy option as the adoption societies didn't find us suitable - too old, divorced, working in the film industry. We were particularly incensed by the attitude of the Church of England Society who turned us down because we weren't prepared to tell lies about going to church on Sunday, yet were prepared to consider us for a black child! Luckily we had the help of the gynaecologist who was treating us and another one (a quite famous lady) introduced by a friend, and it was through a colleague of hers that we were offered Amanda (who I visited every day in hospital from her birth) and subsequently eleven months later, Jonathan, who we also took home at two weeks old.

After that important diversion, back to Richard's career He did manage to get a few directing jobs in commercials and documentaries. Of these the one of which he was most proud was a film called "Jessie" for the Spastics Society. We even set up a production company of our own, Pimlico Films, with me as a director, but although we

had a lot of projects, none came to fruition. Eventually, in order to make a living, he decided he would have to go back to film editing. What he did was to set up his own editing service with cutting rooms in the premises of a friend with a sound recording studio in Redan Place, next door to Whitelys department store in Bayswater. There his most constant employer was the BBC. He established a special relationship with several producers in their Further Education Department. This led to some interesting work, notably on language series such as "Greek Language and People" and "Russian Language and People". For the latter he had to teach himself the Cyrillic alphabet. There was another series called "Whatever Happened to Britain?" and various sociological subjects. He also did some Horizons (scientific series), one of which won a prize at a film festival, of which he had a share. This came in very handy for us for some new hi fi equipment! He specially enjoyed Arts programmes, such as the one on Bernard Haitink and the Concertabuwaw Orchestra.

Sadly, owing to cut-backs at the Beeb, this sort of work started to dry up. Then, after a longish period of inactivity, a final change of direction offered itself. For a long time he had been interested in the possibility of teaching film, and just such an opportunity presented itself. He got to hear that the London International Film School was looking for a Head of Film Editing and he applied and got the job. I was very proud of the fact that he managed to do this at an age when most would be enjoying retirement. It was a devastating blow when they didn't renew his contract, but with hindsight the reason was only too apparent. He must have already been in the early stages of his dementia and wasn't fully functioning. Following this what I took to be depression at being out of work was also part of his illness. This was not to become fully apparent until that disastrous holiday when he had a complete mental and physical collapse in Soviet Central Asia, ending up in a sanatorium in Samarkand.