

# INTERNATIONAL DOCUMENTARY

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## DISTINGUISHED DOCUMENTARY ACHIEVEMENT AWARDS 2000



2000 IDA Career Achievement Award  
Honoree Charles Guggenheim

PLUS:



*Career Achievement Award*

## CHARLES GUGGENHEIM

### STORYTELLER OF THE HUMAN CONDITION

By Bob Fisher

Charles Guggenheim joins an elite assemblage of IDA Career Achievement Award winners that include Walter Cronkite, Bill Moyers, Ted Turner, Sheila Nevins, Albert Maysles, Frederick Wiseman and Henry Hampton. Guggenheim has earned 12 Oscar® nominations from his peers; only Walt Disney earned as many. Guggenheim took top honors for *Nine From Little Rock* (1964), *Robert F. Kennedy Remembered* (1968), *The Johnstown Flood* (1989) and *A Time for Justice* (1991), an incisive chronicle of the civil rights movement.

There are no obvious boundaries around his interests or his approach to storytelling. Guggenheim has compiled more than 80 credits, including several feature films, during a career that is stretching into its sixth decade. While he has frequently focused on politics and the human condition, his body of work is eclectic.

Guggenheim was honored by the American Institute of Architects in 1987 for producing and directing several films on design and construction: *A Place to Be*, focusing on the National Art Gallery; *Monument of a Dream*, detailing the St. Louis Arch; and *Building of Liberty*, spotlighting the Statue of Liberty. He has received a George Foster Peabody Award in recognition of his notable contributions to television. Eight of his films are seen by millions of people annually at venues ranging from the visitor center on Ellis Island to the respective presidential libraries of Harry S. Truman, John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson.

There were no obvious clues in Guggenheim's childhood to suggest that he was destined to become an extraordinary filmmaker. Born and raised in Cincinnati, where both his grandfather and father sold furniture, his early childhood was marked by a learning deficiency. He was dyslexic, but that affliction wasn't known at the time. He learned how to glean information by "reading" pictures in weekly editions of *Life Magazine* and by "really listening" to what people said.

Guggenheim says he wasn't a very good student in high school. He recalls being happiest while working during summers on farms and ranches. After graduation, Guggenheim spent a year at Colorado A&M studying agriculture. His education was interrupted by a three-year stint as an infantryman during World War II.



Charles Guggenheim and cinematographer Erich Roland on location at the National Archives in Washington, DC, filming the *Bill of Rights for The First Freedom*, shown daily at the Newseum in Rosslyn, Virginia.

Guggenheim continued his education at the University of Iowa, where he studied rhetorical criticism and contemporary European history. After graduation, he moved to New York City, where he sought a job in radio. He became a gofer for Herb Shriner, a humorist who had his own show on CBS. That job led to work with a producer who had several hit game programs, including *Stop the Music* and *The Quiz Kids*. Guggenheim's first job as a producer-director was

on a new TV show featuring marionettes.

"They gave me the job because they had very little money and I was working for next to nothing," he says. "I didn't know anything about film, so I began to learn the business from the top down. I went to lunch with a cameraman and he explained how you make films. I was intrigued with how you could shape stories by cutting film and adding music and other sound; that moved me on some deep psychological level. It was totally different from live television."

The TV industry was just beginning to invent itself, and Guggenheim, at age 25, was on the ground floor with seemingly unlimited possibilities. He accepted a position at a new public broadcasting station in Iowa, where he produced experimental programs under an educational grant from the Ford Foundation. The programs were live broadcasts focusing on local issues. That job led to a chance to help open a public broadcasting station in St. Louis.

Guggenheim had ambitious ideas for producing original film programs, but the job proved to be short-lived. He was planning to return to New York, when he was asked to produce a documentary supporting a local bond initiative. He accepted with the provision that the work be completed within three to four weeks.

Maybe it was fate or serendipity, but it was a seminal decision. The film was simultaneously programmed on all three local stations, and it was widely credited with motivating a large turnout of supporters on voting day. By 1957, Guggenheim was regularly producing films for George Stevens, Jr., at the United States Information Agency. He decided to move to Washington,

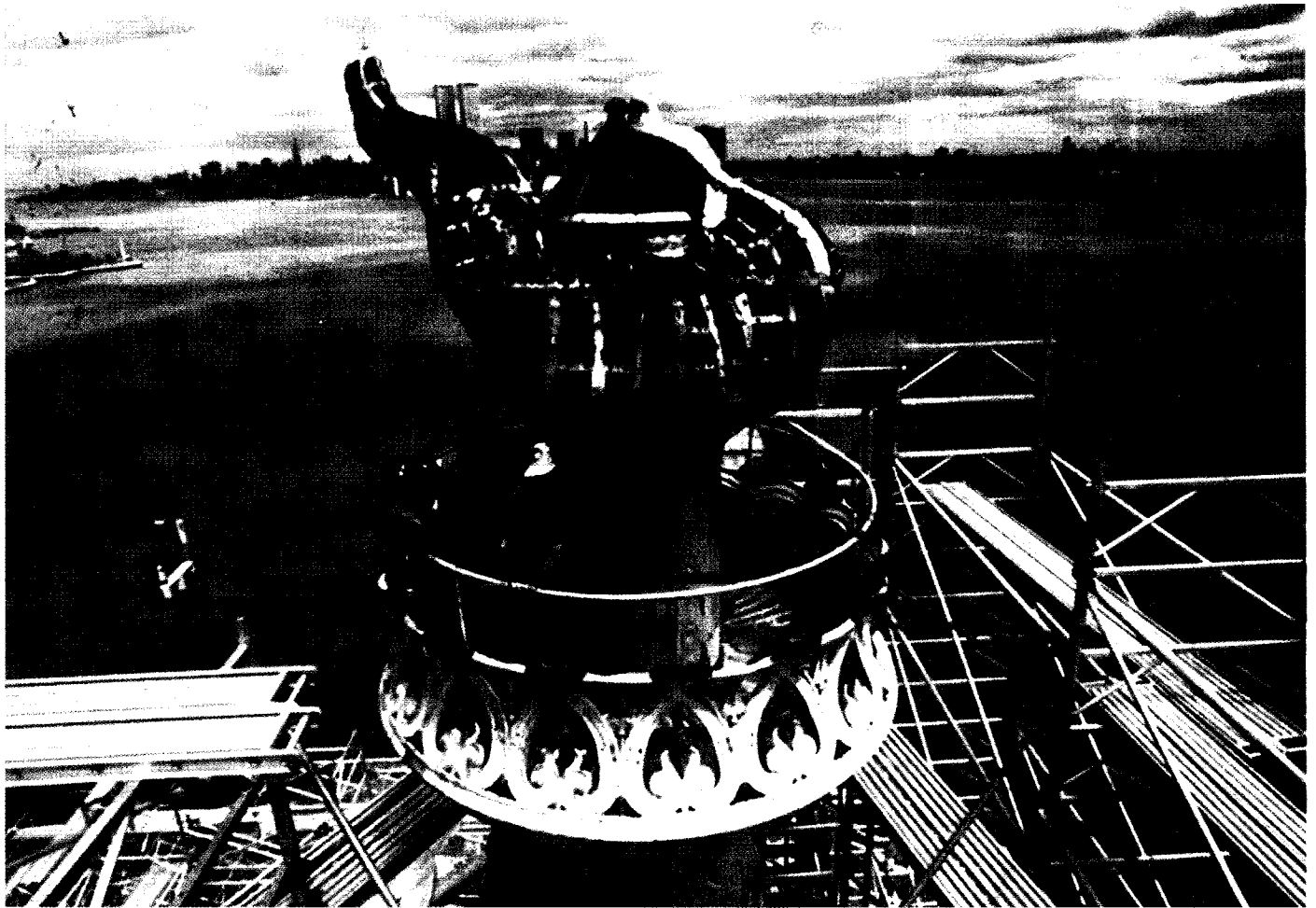


Photo: Roy Lustig; The Washington Post

Guggenheim and crew shooting from the torch in *The Making of Liberty*, a film chronicling the restoration and history of the Statue of Liberty.

DC, and has subsequently called the nation's capital home for the last 43 years. Before moving to Washington, Guggenheim raised the money to produce and direct his first feature film, *The Great St. Louis Bank Robbery*, which featured Steve McQueen in one of his first appearances on a cinema screen. Guggenheim has several feature film credits and more than a few political commercials; however, he has mainly concentrated on the non-fiction arena, "because that's what feels right to me." He likens his work to literature in the sense that they are both methods for storytelling.

"That's the similarity," he says. "Unless you are telling a story that is compelling and reveals the human condition, it is very difficult to communicate effectively."

At this stage of his career, Guggenheim is approached regularly by young filmmakers who are seeking the secret of success. Many want the glamour, others are curious and some are serious. He tries to identify with the latter. His main advice is that it requires different disciplines to make successful films—writing, directing, producing, editing and other specialties. Some people have more than one of those talents and others don't. He cautions that it is essential to know who you are and what you can do.

"It isn't always that easy to discover where your true talent lies," he says. "Sometimes you have to learn from experience what feels right. I tell them once you know what you want to do, ask yourself if you want it badly enough to make the sacrifices

and suffer the disappointments."

One of his more memorable experiences and larger surprises was the making of *The Johnstown Flood*. He accepted that project with considerable trepidation.

"I drove to Johnstown on a bleak winter day, thinking I had made a terrible mistake," he recalls. "I was thinking, 'We'll never be able to pull this off. Why did I say yes?' It turned out to be one of the best films I've made. The message is that some of the best films you make are often someone else's ideas."

Guggenheim professes his optimism about the future of the documentary form. He understands that it is still a struggle finding funding and having your stories seen, but he points out that historically there have never been as many opportunities, with the proliferation of channels for distribution or more sources of funding. He also lauds the creative freedom that comes with advances in digital editing technology, and points to the deep pool of talented young filmmakers, noting that there were no schools for nurturing the next generation when he began his career.

There are still battles to fight and wars to win. "You put your heart and soul into telling a story, and someone decides they are going to use some terrible digital projector that someone has sold them on, and your work is compromised beyond your control," he says. "I don't think it is there yet. There is a difference in how people perceive the story."

Guggenheim isn't just talking. That's not his way. He has

## CAREER ACHIEVEMENT AWARD - CONTINUED:

put his own resources on the line, sponsoring shoot-outs so people can see and feel the difference in visual sub-text.

Don't label him a Luddite. Guggenheim was quick to embrace digital editing, noting that he might not be making films today if that technology hadn't opened interesting new avenues to explore. He has an open mind about new technology but believes, like Marshall McLuhan did some 40 years ago, that the medium is part of the message.

Asked what would he mandate or change if he were the czar of the motion picture and television industries for a day, Guggenheim says without hesitation, "You can't mandate talent, so I think I would concentrate on giving the public an opportunity to turn on their TV sets at least once a night and see interesting stories about our past and the thousands of people who did—or are doing—important things today. Too many documentaries today are made in a style that reveals very little. They show

an event and then someone talking about it. That sounds like what I was doing in Iowa nearly 50 years ago. It doesn't begin to explore the potential of the documentary. We often fail to explore the human relationships that are so necessary to understanding events.

"If I were czar, I would like to give the people who are committed to telling those stories a chance to tell them," he continues. "It would be a great gift to give to them and also to our country. I believe good films, both fiction and documentaries, have a purpose. They teach us who we are, and that's a lesson worth fighting for."

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*Bob Fisher has been writing about cinematography and other industry issues for over 25 years.*

## CHARLES GUGGENHEIM

*Filmography*

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|--|---|
| <i>The First Freedom</i> (1999)                      | <i>High Schools</i> (1983)                          |
| <i>The Art of Norton Simon</i> (1999)                | <i>The Klan: A Legacy of Hate in America</i> (1982) |
| <i>A Place in the Land</i> (1998)                    | <i>John F. Kennedy 1917-1963</i> (1979)             |
| <i>Truman</i> (1997)                                 | <i>A Place to Be</i> (1979)                         |
| <i>The Shadow of Hate</i> (1995)                     | <i>The Eye of Jefferson</i> (1977)                  |
| <i>D-Day Remembered</i> (1994)                       | <i>From King to Congress</i> (1974)                 |
| <i>Clear Pictures</i> (1994)                         | <i>Becky: The Value of Life</i> (1972)              |
| <i>A Life: The Story of Lady Bird Johnson</i> (1992) | <i>Who Should Survive?</i> (1971)                   |
| <i>A Time for Justice</i> (1991)                     | <i>Robert Kennedy Remembered</i> (1968)             |
| <i>LBJ: A Remembrance</i> (1990)                     | <i>Time of the West</i> (1966)                      |
| <i>Island of Hope, Island of Tears</i> (1989)        | <i>Monument to the Dream</i> (1966)                 |
| <i>Journey to America</i> (1989)                     | <i>Nine from Little Rock</i> (1964)                 |
| <i>The Johnstown Flood</i> (1989)                    | <i>The Great St. Louis Bank Robbery</i> (1959)      |
| <i>The Making of Liberty</i> (1986)                  | <i>A City Decides</i> (1956)                        |
| <i>Yorktown</i> (1983)                               |   |

## CAREER ACHIEVEMENT AWARDS

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|------|------------------------------|------|-----------------------|
| 1985 | <i>Pare Lorentz</i>          | 1993 | <i>Robert Drew</i>    |
| 1986 | <i>Fred W. Friendly</i>      | 1994 | <i>Albert Maysles</i> |
| 1987 | <i>Richard Leacock</i>       | 1995 | <i>Marcel Ophuls</i>  |
| 1988 | <i>David L. Wolper</i>       | 1996 | <i>Ted Turner</i>     |
| 1989 | <i>Jacques Yves Cousteau</i> | 1997 | <i>Henry Hampton</i>  |
| 1990 | <i>Frederick Wiseman</i>     | 1998 | <i>Sheila Nevins</i>  |
| 1991 | <i>Bill Moyers</i>           | 1999 | <i>Michael Apted</i>  |
| 1992 | <i>Walter Cronkite</i>       |      |                       |