Greetings from Your President

When I joined the board in 2013, under John Dockery’s enthusiastic and capable leadership, I asked what I thought was a pretty simple question, “What is PHSNE?” I had ample experience of PHSNE as the sponsor of Photographica—what I believe is the largest and perhaps the only two-day show and sale of photo gear and images left in the country—but I didn’t quite have a handle on the idea of what a photographic historical society is. Are we a group that somehow fosters the study of history and uses photography to do so? Are we a group mainly concerned with the techniques and material goods of the craft, in keeping and showing off the good stuff from decades past? Are we a camera club that stresses traditional ways and equipment? Does being a photographic historical society differ from being a photo group? Is there an emphasis on the idea of society in that name? If so, how does it affect what we do?

I have yet to get a convincing answer to my question, but I believe that is because there is no single answer. We are all of those things and perhaps much more that I have yet to understand. And yes, there is an emphasis on society, because we operate as a collective in many ways. In a society, roles and tasks are shared and defined again and again as needs and times change. In a society, members help define the goals, and perhaps, more importantly, the character of the group over time. We have by-laws, regular gatherings, and publications, but most of all we have each other. Our knowledge, our enthusiasm, our passions define the society. Collectively, we are our own best asset.

In the next year, I hope to tap that asset to make sure that we share what we know with other groups: university photo history programs, historical societies all over New England, and young photographers trying to understand where what they do fits into the historical arc of the craft. To that end, I ask all members to think about how they might be able to share what it is they know. Can you write for us? Connect us with a group that might benefit from that connection? Give us a lead on how we can bridge the gap between the mature understanding of veteran collectors and the enthusiasms of younger photographers? Tell us how you want to define who we are. Talk to me. Join in in any way you can. Without you, we’re just a show and a newsletter. Society is an important part of our name.

So…41 years. Maybe not as dramatic as “40 Years!” or “Anniversary Issue!” but, after the party, we have to get back to regular everyday life and focus on the future. For PHSNE, of course, that means continuing to examine the past and helping others do so through the lens of photographic history. It is with pride that we present this 2014 issue of The Journal to further that goal.

Richard (Whitey) Morange
PHSNE President
“Technology has allowed the curious to find their communities.”
— Ron Cowie

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Submission Guidelines for The Journal

We welcome all pitches and inquiries for future issues. Send your ideas and questions to journal@phsne.org. We’d love to hear from you.

Images: All digital images should be high resolution, saved in TIFF format, not JPEG. Each image file should be at least an 8 mb TIFF file, or the equivalent of 8 x 10 inches at 300 dpi.

Traditional film-based images should be a sharp color or black and white print, on matte finish paper. The print should be at least 4 x 5 inches and no larger than 8 x 10. 35 mm slides cannot be accepted.

Text: Please submit all documents in a digital file. Microsoft Word, 12-point type is preferred. Please use upper and lower case format, not all caps.

Additional guidelines can be found at phsne.org/archive/TheJournal/JournalSubmissionGuidelines

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Front cover photo: Park Ries with camera on set at Universal Studios in 1915 (detail). See complete photo on page 21. Photo courtesy of Marc Wanamaker of Bison Archives. Back cover photos, clockwise from top left: Photo from the collection of Paul Rheingold; Camera from the collection of John Wojtowicz; Park Ries, Universal Studios Camera Department, March 15, 1915; “Where There Is No Boat, I Will Put a Boat” by Ron Cowie, 8 x 10 platinum print from his 2008 Leaving Babylon series.
THE RIES BROTHERS
and Their Place in Hollywood History

by Robert Peters
Branching into the tripod manufacturing business was a logical step for the Ries brothers—being involved in filmmaking, they knew what made a suitable tripod. Park, Paul, and Irving had the necessary skills to design and manufacture, and their profile in early Hollywood gave them the connections to market the product. Ries tripods have always been crafted one at a time from wood, which provided an important edge in the marketplace. Westerns were extremely popular at the time the tripods were introduced, and tripods made of wood were much more comfortable to handle than metal in the hot desert locations often selected for filming. Ries tripods are still built according to these specifications today.

The early Tri-Lok tripod patented by Paul and Park Ries had metal fittings that came into contact with the crown (also called the top plate) and prevented the legs from collapsing during use. This feature in itself was a breakthrough. Park further improved the tripod in 1950 by developing and adding the current version of the patented Tri-Lok braces, which lock solidly into place. Often a tripod’s unbraced center post introduces camera vibration, but Ries tripods have never had a center post, which makes them more stable. This stability is one reason that, even today, Ries tripods are often specifically called for in testing of electronic equipment.

During the Second World War, wood was not a strategic material, while aluminum was in demand for aircraft and other military uses, so Ries continued production uninterrupted during World War II, although most of the company’s production was for use by the armed forces. Ries products have always been made in America, and from the company’s beginning, Ries has always been known by professional photographers for outstanding customer service. These tripods also appeal to serious art photographers because the wood used in the tripods’ manufacture has a natural “warmth” and beauty that inorganic materials simply lack. A scuffed Ries tripod can easily be retouched if the owner wishes to keep his or her tripod looking like new.

I initially undertook writing this article simply to reconstruct the history of the Ries tripod, which is still manufactured in Bremerton, Washington, by Ries Productions and remains a preferred instrument for photographers worldwide. However, in the process I uncovered the story of the Ries brothers themselves and how their work in the early days of the film industry influenced the development of the Ries tripod. Unfortunately, while the tripod lives on, the Ries brothers have been largely overlooked by history. The following timeline provides a look at the brothers’ contributions to the development of the film industry in early Hollywood, as well as the evolution of their iconic tripod.
The 1870 census lists the boys’ (Irving, Ray, Park, Paul, and Frank) father as “Peter Leonard” Ries (pronounced Reese). In other records he is listed as “Leonard Peter.” Caroline Yeager Ries, his wife, was the family matriarch.

1890 Irving Guy Ries born, Akron, Ohio (d. 1963)
1894 Raymond Chester Ries born, Akron, Ohio (d. 1977)
1897 Park Joseph Ries born, Akron, Ohio (d. 1949)
1899 Leonard Paul (known as Paul) Ries born, Akron, Ohio (d. 1957)
1907 Frank Albert Ries born, Akron, Ohio (d. 1947)

Peter Leonard Ries, the boys’ father, ran a print shop in Akron, Ohio, with his brother, Wallace Ries, at least as early as 1900. They also sold cameras and photographic equipment. Little is recorded of the Ries family during this period, but Peter’s involvement in this business is probably how all five of his sons developed their early interest and experience in photography.

1910 Irving, age twenty, worked for a year and a half with the Industrial Film Company of Chicago (IFC) at about this time. Historian Anthony Slide called IFC the first company to specialize in films for educational use, commercial advertising, and historical recording. IFC was formed in December 1909 by Carl Laemmle, Watterson R. Rothacker, and R. H. Cochrane. Laemmle sold his stock and left to concentrate on the Universal Film Manufacturing Company in New York City in 1913. In mid-1916, IFC was reorganized to become the Rothacker Film Manufacturing Company, also located in Chicago.

At this time, Chicago was still the world’s production center for films. However, the city’s harsh weather was less than ideal for filming. According to Rothacker, filmmakers did not generally take California seriously at this time. Eventually, however, Rothacker moved to Hollywood and in 1921 joined with Joseph Aller to form Rothacker-Aller Laboratories, which specialized in commercial film processing.
1911 Sixteen-year-old Ray was listed in the Akron directory as a motion picture operator running projectors in movie theaters. He had been an operator from age thirteen.

In early 1911, Phil Rosen, Frank Kugler, and Lewis W. Physioc founded The Cinema Camera Club in New York City. The same year, Charles Rosher and Harry H. Harris founded The Static Club in Los Angeles. The two clubs were united to become the American Society of Cinematographers (ASC) when Rosher and Rosen moved to Los Angeles later in 1911. The charter was issued in California in January 1912. Ray and Irving Ries were listed among the founding members.

The film industry was moving west to California, first to Long Beach, then to Hollywood by 1915. Universal Film Manufacturing, founded in New York, also moved west to Hollywood and in 1915 became Universal Studios. Universal would become a profound influence on the Ries family’s fortunes in more ways than one.

1912 In March, Irving left for a six-month trip to Mexico to make a film about the Mexican Civil War (1910–1920) for Feature Film Company of Chicago. A Trip Thru Barbarous Mexico (also known as Barbarous Mexico) premiered in 1913. The film captured the fighting and destruction in Mexico City. At the same time it was a travelogue showing traditional Mexican tourist attractions— including a bullfight (filmed and edited for reduced violent content), General Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna’s grave, the floating gardens of Xochimilco, and many species of exotic birds. The film toured various theaters around the United States, and screenings were accompanied by live piano music.

1913 Peter Leonard Ries died of prostate cancer in Akron. Caroline Ries (1866–1954), matriarch of the Ries family, gathered her sons and possessions and moved to Hollywood. It is likely the move was encouraged by Irving, whose film career was beginning to develop. Peter’s brother Wallace remained in Akron for a time to continue operating the print shop, but he later moved to Compton and then Watts in Los Angeles to open a new print shop.

According to the story handed down from the former to the current owners of Ries Tripods, Universal Studios acquired the home Caroline bought in Los Angeles shortly after she moved there. The property eventually became part of Universal’s new studio lot, but the family was allowed to remain in their home for a short time after Universal acquired it.

1915 Universal Studios was built on a converted 230-acre farm and would become known as Universal City. The studio opened to the public in March. Around this time, Caroline and her sons moved to 1314 Beechwood Drive in Hollywood. The family’s new home was in a mixed-use building that served as a hub for Caroline Ries and her sons for the rest of her life. In addition to living quarters, the building housed the Ries family’s business ventures. For a time Caroline even operated a saloon in the building. The property was located in a commercial district, and some of the early Ries tripods contain the Beechwood address in their castings.
Early in 1915, twenty-five-year-old Irving was selected for an assignment with a level of responsibility well beyond his years, filming *On the Firing Line with the Germans*. Irving applied in March for a passport to go to Germany, England, and Belgium to film a newsreel with Wilbur H. Durborough, a field photographer for the Newspaper Enterprise Association of Chicago (NEA), documenting World War I battlefields for the American market. NEA distributed news articles to 125 newspapers in the western United States. However, NEA would pay salaries only for still photography and no other expenses, so Durborough approached another group of backers to pay for the filming of motion pictures. Durborough selected Ries to accompany him, because Ries, who was of German descent, was fluent in German and had previous experience in Mexico filming motion pictures on location. Although in 1915 America had not yet entered the war, other reporters had gone to Europe to report on the fighting there, so this assignment would not have been particularly unusual.

The resulting film, *On the Firing Line with the Germans*, was produced in conjunction with Oswald F. Schuette, a journalist based in Berlin as
Sometime in the early summer of 1915, a forgery of Irving Ries’ passport was presented to the American Consul General in England, and the man presenting it, who claimed to be Irving G. Ries, was detained. At this time the real Irving Ries was believed to be in Germany with Durborough, but because of the confusion, no one was sure if he was really there or not. The United States Department of Justice Bureau of Investigation, forerunner of the FBI, made a search for a man named Hutchinson, who was supposed to have obtained the passport for the imposter. There was no Hutchinson at the address he had listed, and none of the neighbors had heard of any such person. At this time, investigators weren’t sure if the man arrested was the real Irving Ries or the imposter, or whether or not the real Ries had been in cahoots with him. In fact the confusion the spy caused was so great that most accounts still say today that the spy had been an American cinematographer—and nearly all refer to him as Irving Ries.

On October 27, 1915, the counterfeit Irving G. Ries, who had been convicted and imprisoned in the Tower of London, was executed as a German spy by a firing squad made up of Scots Guards. The spy released his name only to his attorney, and his name is still not generally known today. However, the name he revealed to his attorney was Carl Paul Julius Hensel, age 55. Before his execution, Hensel shook hands with members of the firing squad and told them, “You are only doing your duty, as I have done mine.”

Hensel didn’t release his real name at the time because he didn’t want to embarrass his family in Europe or compromise his associates in the United States. Hensel is buried in the East London Cemetery, and the name on his grave marker is still incorrectly inscribed as Irving G. Ries.

This incident was one of several similar cases involving forged passports and German spying activities cited by the United States government before the United States joined the war.

![Figure 8, left. The “counterfeit” Irving Ries, Carl Paul Julius Hensel. Figure 9, right. The real Irving G. Ries. Both photos from Bob Peters’ collection.](image)

![Figure 10. Oswald F. Schuette, Berlin-based World War I correspondent for the Chicago Daily News.](image)
on November 2, 1915, and in Chicago on December 6, 1915. Durborough personally presented and narrated the showings. The net profits from the Chicago presentation were donated to the American Red Cross for “use in war-stricken countries without discrimination.”

1915–1916 While his brother was abroad, Park Ries took a job working for Universal Studios as a cameraman.

Park’s silent films for Universal Pictures include the following (year of release is provided in parentheses where known): The Adventures of Uncle Jeremiah, The Artist’s Model, Damp Fools, Country Love, Frivolous Fritzie, Her Wedding Night (1915), His Lost Thirty, Lack of Virtue Is its Own Reward, Nothing Ever Happens Right (1915), The Ore Mystery, Trixters Hearts and Clubs (1917), Sister Mariana, The Somnambulist (1915), and many others.

1917 Irving moved to Santa Monica, California and, according to his obituary, lived there for the rest of his life.

1918–1919 Park worked for a year with Fox Films, which became Twentieth Century Fox in 1935. For Fox he filmed Oh, What a Knight (1919), Money Talks (1919), and The Merry Jailbirds (1919).

1920 Irving filmed the first movie in which Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy appeared together, Lucky Dog (1921). This silent film was a chance encounter for Laurel and Hardy, and they did not function as the comedy team they would become in subsequent movies. In fact, it would be several years before they would appear together again. Irving’s interest in special effects, although they were primitive by today’s standards, was evident in various scenes in the film, which was shelved until its 1921 release date. Irving filmed numerous other early Laurel and Hardy movies, including He Laughs Last (1920), Dames and Dentists (1920), The Decorator (1920), The Backyard (1920), Mud and Sand (1922), The Pest (1922), The Handy Man (1923), and When Knights Were Cold (1923).

1919–1920 Park worked for a year with Vitagraph, where he filmed serials featuring Antonio Moreno. He also photographed the serials The Invisible Hand (1920) and The Veiled Mystery (1920). Serials, also known as cliff-hangers, are not common in theaters today, but until the mid-1950s they were shown as a chapter per week, usually at Saturday matinees. The format was designed to hook young movie goers so they’d come back each week to see the “next thrilling chapter” in addition to the main feature.

1920–1922 For Hamilton Comedies, Park filmed For Land’s Sake (1921), The Vagrant (1921), Free and Easy (1921), The Rainmaker (1922), Spooks (1922), Poor
Boy (1922), The Speeder (1922), The Educator (1922), No Luck (1923), and Extra, Extra (1923).

Park, Paul, and Ray all resigned from their jobs at various studios on May 1 to open a photography business and camera store at 6035 Hollywood Boulevard.

Irving filmed Too Much Business and Ladder Jinx for Vitagraph, both released in 1922.

1923 Park, Ray, and Paul’s business, Ries Brothers Photographers, was located at 6035 Hollywood Blvd (today only a parking lot remains), operating a full-service camera store and renting a variety of equipment, including commercial “slow motion cameras with operators.” Ries Brothers was a major outlet for Mitchell and Akely movie cameras, as well as Graflex cameras. The cost of a Mitchell Camera in today’s dollars was about $350,000. Also in 1923, Park applied for membership in the American Society of Cinematographers.

1924 Land values in Hollywood were increasing, which encouraged Park, Irving, Ray, and Paul to form Ries Brothers Building and Investment Corporation. The enterprise was founded primarily to build apartment buildings. Park was listed as president, Irving as vice president, Ray as secretary, and Paul as treasurer. Frank’s name was absent from the corporation’s records, probably because he was only seventeen at the time. Offices were located at 6035 Hollywood Boulevard, the same address as Ries Brothers Photographers. Plans called for construction of a headquarters building. Little else is known of this corporation, but Park, Paul, and Ray constructed the Ries Building two years later at 1152 North Western Avenue in Hollywood. This headquarters may have been the building originally envisioned by this corporation.

In July, American Cinematographer recognized Park Ries as one of “Twelve Aces in the Cinematographic Profession.” The magazine went on to say, “Park has made the legend ‘photographed by Park Ries’ a stand-by during his long and efficient association in the filming of motion pictures from the earliest days.”

Also in 1924, Irving filmed Fast and Fearless and Biff Bang Buddy, both Westerns, for Approved Pictures.

Figure 13. An article from American Cinematographer showing the opening of the original Ries building in 1926. The original site included a retail store, portrait studio and space to lease to other film industry professionals.

Figure 14. Enlarged detail of photograph in above article from American Cinematographer showing the opening of the original Ries building in 1926.
1925 Metro Goldwyn Mayer (MGM) was founded. A few years later, Irving and Ray joined MGM and would work there for most of the remainder of their careers. At this time, however, Irving was busy filming *Gold and Grit* (1925) for Approved Pictures.

1926 On May 1 Park, Paul, and Ray opened their new retail camera store and photographic headquarters at 1152 North Western Avenue in Hollywood. Park managed the construction. Reporters at the time described the brothers’ grand opening as “one of the most brilliant openings in Hollywood in recent times.”

According to *American Cinematographer*, the master of ceremonies for the opening was Herbert Rawlinson, a popular star of the day who made films until his death in 1953 and has a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. Many other film stars of the day also appeared. There were vaudeville acts and music provided by a group of well-known studio musicians. Thousands stopped by that evening to congratulate the Ries Brothers. Lighting experts and other friends of the Ries brothers from various studios were on hand for the benefit of the numerous newsreel photographers present. Sid Grauman of Grauman’s Chinese Theater also attended.

Figure 15. Cameraman Ray Ries at far right on set with the cast of a silent western. Photo courtesy of Brian McGilvray.
One guest performer that most would recognize today was “Pal the Wonder Dog.” Pal attended the opening with his owner, Harry Lucenay. Pal is best known as the first “Pete the Pup” in the Our Gang (also known as The Little Rascals) short films, but he appeared in many other silent comedies as well. Max Factor, then an established Hollywood makeup artist, added a circle of paint around Pal’s eye for an Our Gang film, and it became the dog’s trademark thereafter.

1924–1928 In this period Ray Ries worked as cinematographer on thirty-three silent Westerns and three silent dramas. Among his best were On The Go (1925), Reckless Courage (1925), Twisted Triggers (1926), Saddle Cyclone (1926), Ramblin’ Galoot (1926), Man of Action (1926), Bonanza Buckaroo (1926), Pals in Peril (1927), Ride ‘em High (1927), and Valley of Hunted Men (1928).

According to American Cinematographer, the Ries brothers were pioneers in the rental camera business, selling and renting high-speed cameras, commercial 35mm movie cameras—including Mitchell, Leica, RolleiFlex—and “other fine cameras.” A laboratory was built on their premises for processing amateur and professional still and movie film.

1925–1930 Frank Ries, youngest of the brothers, worked as an employee for Park, Paul, and Ray at the Ries Brothers Photographers Western Avenue location. Frank’s status as an employee, rather than a partner, may relate to the age difference, or it may have been a sign of a developing alienation from the other Ries brothers. If his status was the result of alienation, it may have been related to some of Frank’s less acceptable activities, which came to light in later years.

1928 Irving Ries began his career at MGM. Irving is credited with starting the special effects section at MGM, as well as coining the term “special effects.”

While Irving Ries did not invent the zoom lens (the first zoom lens used in filming a movie was used in 1927 in Wings), he did develop and use a zoom lens in filming The Trail of ’98 for MGM in 1928. The Trail of ’98 was a silent drama featuring Harry Carey. The film was originally released by MGM using a short-lived widescreen process called “Fanthom Screen.”

1929 Ray Ries and Ernest Laszlo filmed King of the Kongo (1929) for Mascot Films. This was the first film serial with any element of sound. A second all silent version was released for theaters not yet equipped for sound. The film involved a search for lost relatives, ivory smugglers, and lost treasure hidden in the jungle. It also included an early performance by Boris Karloff.

King of the Kongo was a transitional movie in which the sound was recorded on discs, not directly on the film. Legend has it that producer and studio owner Nat Levine carried the sound discs in his lap from Los Angeles to New York City by train and airplane to ensure they’d arrive safely at the lab for processing. These original discs could not have been repaired or replaced if lost or damaged.

The transition from silent movie to talkie was not a sudden, clean leap. According to the Internet Movie Database, “as each chapter of the ‘part talking’ version [of King of the Kongo] began, it looked like a typical silent film with title cards. It was accompanied by synchronized sound effects and music recorded on large sound discs similar to [vinyl] record albums. In the middle of each chapter there are several segments where the title cards stop and a full dialog sequence commences. After a few minutes the dialog on the audio stopped and the title cards resumed—again accompanied by just music and [sound] effects. This was one of several techniques used in the late 1920’s for making films that were not fully a talkie and not fully a silent [movie] either. The ‘sound on disc’ system quickly fell out of favor [and was succeeded by] ‘sound on film,’ which provided better synchronization of [audio and] video.”

King of the Kongo was released two years after the first part-talking/part-silent film, The Jazz Singer (1927), had been released, and a year after the first all-talking film, Lights of New York (1928). In this period of transition, larger serial-producing studios like Pathé and Universal were reluctant to change from silent to sound production, although Universal released its own part-talking serial, Tarzan the Tiger, later in 1928. Smaller studios could not afford to make the change, so many of them failed.

Columbia Pictures released a 1952 remake, King of the Congo (note the more common spelling of Congo)
starring Buster Crabbe. Although complete sets of the ten-chapter film reels the 1923 of *King of the Kongo* still exist, the complete audio does not. In 2011, collector and historian Eric Grayson, owner of a 16mm silent print, restored the sound to several parts of the film, using discs from Ron Hutchinson’s Vitaphone Project. These reels are parts of chapters five and six. Some of the restored talking scenes can, at the time of this article, be viewed on YouTube. In 2012, a Kickstarter campaign helped fund a successful restoration of chapter five. Currently another Kickstarter campaign is underway to fund restoration of chapter ten.

Also in 1929, Irving Ries provided special effects for *The Mysterious Island*, an MGM film adaptation of Jules Verne’s novel of the same name published in 1874, a sequel to *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, published in 1870. However, thematically the sequel is quite different from Verne’s earlier book. The film was released as a Technicolor feature film with talking sequences, sound effects, and synchronized music—ten years ahead of *The Wizard of Oz*.

Incidentally, Technicolor Corporation was founded in 1915. The *tech* in Technicolor was derived from the company’s association with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Film historians had long believed that no color copies of *The Mysterious Island* had survived—until late 2013, when Deborah Stoiber, in charge of the nitrate film

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Figure 16. The Ries brothers were avid golfers. Here, Irving accepts a golf trophy donated by Marion Davies, actress and William Randolph Hearst’s constant companion, for the annual 1928 ASC golf tournament. Irving credited his famous swing to cranking the handle of a movie camera. Photo courtesy of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Margaret Herrick Library.
collection at the George Eastman House film archive, visited the Czech National Film Archive in Prague to present a restored film from the museum’s own collection—Cecil B. DeMille’s 1923 Technicolor version of The Ten Commandments—and to examine the sole existing color copy of The Mysterious Island belonging to the Czech archive. According to Stoiber, “After the First World War, American movies flooded European cinemas, including those in the newly established Czechoslovakia… Many of them were eventually acquired by the Czech National Film Archive.”

Film experts at the George Eastman House now hope that in cooperation with the Czech archive, they will be able to restore the color print of The Mysterious Island and eventually show it to audiences around the world.

1930 Early in 1930, Park, Paul, and Ray Ries relocated from 1152 North Western Avenue to what reporters described as a “commodious” new store at 1540 Cahuenga Boulevard. Among other activities, the business sold amateur as well as professional photographic supplies; processed and printed film; and sold and rented Mitchell, Akeley, and other professional 35mm movie cameras to commercial movie studios. In June the brothers celebrated their first year as Kodak representatives for professional and amateur photo products.

1931 Park, Paul, and Ray branched into selling and renting 16mm movie equipment from their store.

1931–1945 Frank operated what he advertised as a “portrait studio” in Hollywood at 1605 North Cahuenga Boulevard in Los Angeles, a block from the new store at 1540 Cahuenga owned by Park, Paul, and Ray. The new studio was actually where Frank filmed stag movies.

1932 Frank was arrested by United States Postal Service inspectors for sending obscene materials through the mail. His cache of pornographic films and photos went undiscovered, so he escaped with a sentence of only ninety days. Before opening his own studio, Frank had been employed by Park, Paul, and Ray at the store the three had opened in 1926 at 1152 North Western Avenue, but Frank’s illicit activities may have been a factor in his departure from the business.

1932 MGM released Tarzan the Ape Man (1932). For this film, Irving was busy developing ingenious split-screen effects introducing wild animals and the cast into the same shot. Irving’s innovations included moving split-screen mattes of rampaging rhinos or lions, which followed hot on the heels of the actor—or occasionally Cheetah the chimp.

1933–1934 Paul provided still photographs for the following films: Laughing at Life, also known as The Gringo (Mascot Pictures, 1933), The Lost Squadron (RKO, 1932), The Lost Jungle, starring legendary animal trainer Clyde Beatty (Mascot Pictures 1934), Found Alive, a “jungle melodrama” also known as Crawling Death (1933).

1934 Irving provided the special photographic effects for Tarzan and His Mate (1934), a sequel to MGM’s Tarzan

1936 The Ries wood tripod was offered commercially for the first time. Some of the late Ries patent drawings were co-signed by Irving Ries. The name Paul Ries and 1314 Beechwood appear in some of the early castings but are omitted in later versions.

Noted fine art photographer Edward Weston became one of the early buyers of a Paul Ries tripod. Weston had applied for a Guggenheim grant, and on March 22, 1937, he received notification that he had been awarded $2,000. At the time, this was a significant amount of money, and the first such grant ever given to a photographer. Over the next twelve months he made seventeen trips, primarily photographing California landscapes. He produced 1,260 negatives during his travels, using a large-format view camera and a Ries tripod. The grant was renewed in 1938, and in 1939 the Automobile Club of Southern California published Seeing California with Edward Weston under the imprint of its magazine Westways.

On May 8, Paul and Park Ries applied for a patent for an improved design for the Ries tripod. One of the objectives of the design stated in the application was to prevent the legs from spreading uncontrollably, thus preventing collapse of the tripod. The patent was issued March 11, 1941, under patent no. 2,234,357 (figure 20).


In 1940, Richard Stoddart organized the Stoddart Aircraft Radio Company, which designed and manufactured radio receivers and transmitters for aircraft during World War II—these were principally for aircraft being ferried to the British. In 1938, Stoddart served as a radio operator on the five-man crew that accompanied Howard Hughes on his record-breaking flight around the world in a two-engine Lockheed Loadstar. According to Hughes, “It was the best long-range radio communication system ever designed for an airplane … up to that
The use of wood in Ries tripods was significant because wood tripods support more camera weight per pound of tripod than aluminum or even carbon fiber, according to Ries Development, the company that builds the tripods today in Bremerton, Washington. Wood tripods also dampen vibration, whereas aluminum transmits it to the camera. Vibration can be caused by wind, passing vehicles, human movement, or the internal mechanics of the camera itself. The effect of vibration is more noticeable at shutter speeds less than 1/15 of a second. Such slow shutter speeds are often used to achieve maximum depth of field.

Wooden tripods do not corrode when their legs are placed in a stream or salt water. Today’s wooden tripods are treated with synthetic sealants, so they need only be wiped off with a dry cloth after immersion in water to continue an assignment. Hands don’t stick to word tripods in cold climates, nor do wood tripods blister hands in desert heat. Wood is also environmentally friendly. The hard rock maple trees used for Ries tripods are replaced with subsequent plantings, and their production consumes less energy and generates less waste than other materials. Well-crafted wood tripods are also aesthetically pleasing to use and admire.

1945

Frank Ries was again arrested, this time for contributing to the delinquency of a minor—one of his models. Frank was sentenced to one year in prison. Investigators found 100 pornographic prints in his home, but not his cache of 16mm films, so once again, the actual nature and extent of his operation was not discovered. Whether true or not, local papers stated that Frank had given the names of the other twenty people arrested in the same bust to the prosecutor.

After his release, Frank’s former business contacts considered him a pariah. He attempted to rebuild his business, but his associates thought his approaches were efforts to entrap them. Thus, his film market dried up. While California generally may be considered a healthful
climate, Frank left the state after his release, convinced that
remaining in California might not be healthy for him.

Meanwhile Irving Ries was hard at work on Anchors
Aweigh (1945), starring Frank Sinatra, Kathryn Grayson,
and Gene Kelly. Irving provided special effects, including
a live-action Gene Kelly dancing with Jerry the cartoon
mouse. According to one source, Walt Disney saw this
scene and exclaimed, “WOW!”

1946 Ansel Adams was shown photographing the
Yosemite area with a platform set up on the roof of his
Pontiac “woody” station wagon with his camera mounted
on a Ries tripod. The photo was taken by his friend, Cedric
Wright (figure 22).

1947 Frank Ries and his wife Barbara committed
suicide in Chicago in September. Frank sent a ten-page
confession and suicide note to the Los Angeles Times. In
the letter he admitted the portrait studio had been a front
and that he probably had produced fifty percent of the
stag films made in the United States up until his arrest.
He admitted to having made $50,000 per year but said he
had spent the money on women and alcohol as fast as he
made it. Frank died as a dishwasher with eleven cents in
his pocket and an unpaid hotel bill. His body was returned
to Los Angeles for burial.

1949 Park passed away at age 52 of a heart attack.
Several obituaries described him as a “Burbank
photographic equipment manufacturer” and “owner and inventor of the Ries Tri-Lock Tripod.”

Irving provided special effects for MGM’s *The Barclays of Broadway* (1949). His most notable scene in that film was “Shoes with Wings On,” in which Fred Astaire performs the number alone. It utilized green screen technology and had Astaire, playing a cobbler, dancing with many pairs of dancing shoes.

Ray was elected founding vice president of the International Association of Photography (IAP).

**1950s** An ongoing point of confusion emerged in the 1950s. There were two Irvings in the film industry in the 1940s and 1950s: Irving Reis (1906–1953), who filmed the D-Day landings in France and directed *The Bachelor and the Bobby Sooner* (RKO 1947), and other well-known films. Whereas Irving G. Ries (1890–1963) worked for MGM in special effects. More than one classic movie website states that they were the same person. They were not. Adding to the confusion is the fact that the Ries brothers sometimes spelled their name “Reis” to simplify pronunciation.

**1952** Irving Ries provided special effects for MGM’s *Singin’ in the Rain* (1952). Among the movie’s stars were Gene Kelly, Donald O’Connor, Debbie Reynolds, and Cyd Charisse. The film is about the transition from silent films to sound—similar to the transition made by the Ries brothers themselves. The film has been judged by numerous critics as the “best musical of all time and one of the best comedies.” The film also is considered the high point of Gene Kelly’s career.

**1954** Caroline Ries died in August at age eighty-seven. According to her obituary, she had lived in the Los Angeles area for forty-four years. The obituary also states that at the time of her death, Irving was living in Pacific Palisades, Paul in Culver City, and Ray in Hollywood. In addition to her three remaining sons, Caroline was survived by Paul’s daughter, Miriam; Ray’s stepson; and Irving’s stepdaughter, June.

**1956** MGM released *Forbidden Planet* (1956) starring Walter Pigeon, Leslie Nielsen, and Anne Francis. This film was the *Star Wars* (1977) of its day. It made prior science fiction movies and men in rubber monster suits look amateurish. It was the first science fiction movie set away from planet Earth. Until this time, science fiction movies were either about irradiated giant bugs or lizards—or aliens invading Earth. This movie also introduced Robbie the Robot, a supporting character that appeared in other films and TV shows during the next few decades, including episodes of *The Thin Man*, *Columbo*, *The Addams Family*, and *Lost in Space*. 

Figure 22. Ansel Adams using a Ries tripod in the field. Photo courtesy of the estate of photographer Cedric Wright.

Figure 23. Ries family matriarch, Caroline Ries, with 1949 Ford convertible. Photo courtesy of Brian McGilvray.

Figure 24. Irving Ries portrait. Photo courtesy of Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Margaret Herrick Library.
Irving and two coworkers, A. Arnold Gillespie and Wesley C. Miller, were nominated for an Academy Award for the special effects in *Forbidden Planet*; however, the film lost to Paramount’s *The Ten Commandments* (1956). This was the only award for which *Forbidden Planet* was nominated. Today, though, the film is still regarded as a classic and has been re-released.

Since the soundtrack was not created by live musicians, the American Federation of Musicians objected to its being called music. The electronic tonalities, as they were referred to in the film credits, were also far ahead of anything at the time. But since the musicians’ union protested its being referred to in the credits as music, the soundtrack was ineligible for an Academy Award for music.

1957 In October Paul died of a bleeding ulcer. His obituary in the *Los Angeles Times*, dated October 16, 1957, described him as a “tool and die manufacturer.”

1959 United States Patent 2,882,001 for a tripod pan head was issued to inventors Irving Ries and Paul Ries, two years after Paul’s death.

1963 Irving Ries died in April 1963. His obituary in the *Los Angeles Times* described his career as “35 years with MGM, 30 years as head of special effects.” Ray Ries, Irving’s wife June, and a stepdaughter survived Irving.

1977 The last living Ries brother, Ray, died in August at age 83. Ray left a legacy of noteworthy accomplishments, providing special effects at MGM for several iconic scenes in high-profile films. These projects included the crumbling earthquake scene in *San Francisco* (1936); the locust scene in *The Good Earth* (1937); several scenes in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939); the burning of Atlanta in *Gone with the Wind* (1939); the painting scene in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1945); the scene with dancing on the ceiling in *An American in Paris* (1951); and many scenes in *Ben Hur* (1959).

In 1932, a columnist for the newsletter published by the local chapter of the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE), the union that most cinematographers belonged to, wrote, “The Ries Brothers are more brothers than any other brothers in the local.”

That observation probably is not broad enough. Their brotherly relationship lasted throughout their lives and is a kind not often seen today.

Ray and Irving each worked on more than 500 films in their respective careers. Park was also a successful cinematographer, machinist, and inventor. Frank took a somewhat different path, but society’s standards have changed so much since 1945 that Frank’s activities today might rate little more than a raised eyebrow. Of course, the tripod that Park and Paul designed and built has evolved, but it lives on today as a lasting legacy of the Ries brothers’ place in early Hollywood.
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Figure 26. Stoddart radio antennae mounted on Ries tripods produced for Stoddart.
Robert (Bob) Peters has always been interested in history. Before his retirement from the Washington State Department of Transportation, he wrote numerous articles for the department’s magazine, The Interchange, and initiated many roadside interpretive and historic preservation projects. After retirement, he researched the history of the German ship Tacoma, which assisted the German pocket battleship Graf Spee after the battle of the River Platte, early in World War II. That article traced the history of the ship from construction to its end in a South American scrapyard and was published in Columbia, the quarterly publication of the Washington State Historical Society. More recently, he served on the Pierce County (Washington) Landmarks and Historic Preservation Commission.

Peters became seriously interested in photography and collecting vintage and classic cameras around 1975. He has explored and photographed numerous gold-mining era ghost towns in Washington, Oregon, Idaho, and California–often with his sons and several of his vintage cameras. Some of his photos have been selected for exhibition in the Photo Salon of the Washington State Fair.

Several years ago, Peters acquired a vintage Ries Tripod and visited the Ries factory in Bremerton, Washington to acquire a few restoration parts. His visit with the owners sparked his interest in the history and development of the classic tripod. Neither the owners nor even the descendants of the Ries family knew the extent of the brothers’ influence in early Hollywood or of their fascinating careers.

Peters hopes that anyone who might be able to add to the story or simply would like to comment feel free to contact him at b.c.peters@comcast.net, and he invites readers to visit the Ries Tripod website at www.riestripod.com.

Figure 27. View of camera and post production buildings at Universal Studios, 1915. Photo by Park Ries.
“Photographs open doors into the past, but they also allow a look into the future.”

— Photographer Sally Mann