



Sid N. Laverents Oral History

The following interview was conducted in the home of Sidney & Charlotte Laverents in Bonita, California on March 29, 2006. Sid was interviewed by UCLA film preservationist Ross Lipman, with coordination by Amy Sloper and audio & video recording by Michelle Weis, both students in UCLA's Moving Image Archive Studies Program at the time of the interview.



Sid Laverents, a retired Convair engineer, has long been a legend in the amateur film community, but remained virtually unknown to the larger filmgoing public until his film *Multiple SIDosis* (1970) was chosen for the National Film Registry in 2000.



With a background in vaudeville, a stint as a one-man-band, and a career in rocket science, Sid started his amateur film hobby in the 1950s - when he was well into his 50s himself - and continued to make films until his death at the age of 100 in 2009. Made largely in obscurity - and often starring himself, his wife, and his friends - Sid shared his films with his cohorts in the San Diego Amateur Movie Club until it disbanded in the early 2000s. Not only are his films charming, funny, and sweet, but they are also technically precise marvels of amateur filmmaking, made largely in a time without computers or digital effects. The films and papers of Sid Laverents reside at the UCLA Film & Television Archive in Los Angeles, CA,

where preservation work has already been done on four of his 16mm titles.

For more information on the life and work of Sid Laverents view the following links:

- [2004 New York Times profile on Sid](#)
- [Filmography in Rocktober](#)
- [New York Times obituary](#)
- [Los Angeles Times obituary](#)

The Small Gauge and Amateur Film Committee and all of those who are admirers of Sid Laverents and his films are very appreciative of the work of Ross Lipman, Amy Sloper, and Michelle Weis. Thanks to the UCLA Film and Television Archive and the UCLA Moving Image Archive Studies program. In fondest memorial to Sid Laverents.

Transcript of the interviews follow.



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RT: 58:00

Recorded in Bonita, California, March 29, 2006

Ross Lipman, film preservationist at the UCLA Film & Television Archive interviews Sidney N. Laverents, renowned amateur filmmaker. Coordinated by Amy Sloper and recorded by Michelle Weis.

Ross Lipman: So we're here in Bonita, California and I'm Ross Lipman from the UCLA Film and Television Archive and we're going to be having an interview with Sid Laverents, the legendary filmmaker. Today is March 29, 2006.

Sid, first I really just wanted to thank you for being willing to do this.

Sid Laverents: Well thanks Ross, I just hope it works out. As you realize, I'm 97 years old, and I'm just getting on almost to 98, so my memory kind of gets fouled up every once in a while so you'll have to excuse me for that. How was the trip down?

RL: It was remarkably smooth considering the pouring rain storm. I was a little concerned but then we zipped down at night and it was remarkably smooth.

Alright well why don't we get started. The first question I wanted to ask you was if you have any early memories of just watching movies. Particularly amateur film, if you remember any 16mm film around your house, but anything really.

SL: Amateur films came later, but do you mean do I remember the beginning of film?

RL: I meant if you remember the beginning of 16mm, which came in in the early 1920s.

SL: Well my folks had had their 50th anniversary, and we were going back for it, and I thought I'd like to have a camera, so I bought a Bolex 16mm camera, they had just come out not too long ago, this was back in, let's see, must've been about '56 or something like that. Anyway I took the camera back and I also took a tape recorder. Well the camera worked fine but I forgot to push the button on the tape recorder. So I had some silent pictures at least. That got me started, and I thought this is kind of nice. So I brought the camera home and I said well what'll I shoot? There were some snails in the backyard and I thought that'd be a good subject. I'd seen some good microphotos of animals and stuff, so anyway my first picture was snails.

RL: That was even before *It Sudses and Sudses*?

SL: Oh yes. That was the first one. Well it took me almost 3 years to watch the things and take close ups and such. Anyway that was the way I got started. And then of course I had this idea for the Sudses picture. That was quite a hairy deal too! I took that whole shot in the bathroom of all the sudses, and when it came back turns out I had the wrong filter on there and had to do it all over again!

RL: Oh the whole sequence with all the suds flying everywhere?

SL: Yeah. I had to clean the whole bathroom of course and the wife didn't like that idea but anyway I finally got it how I wanted. And that was the beginning and..

RL: Were a lot of your friends shooting 16mm film at the time?

SL: No, well some were. I don't really remember too much there. Of course I did have a couple of friends that were shooting, and they eventually introduced me to the movie club. Back in 1949 there was a guy named, oh what was his name, Scott Watson was his name. He had a few friends who were shooting movies, so he got permission from the Balboa Park people. They had at that time, not too long after they'd had that big deal in the park, I forget what it was, anyway they had built several little houses around there –

RL: Was this the World's Fair Exhibition or something like this?

SL: Yes, that was it. World's Fair. Anyway he got one of these little houses that they had built there, just little places that were supposed to indicate the company where they came from, the kind of buildings and all that. So they gave us one of them to start with. And later, I joined the club about 1959, that was ten years after they'd started, and it wasn't long before they kicked us out of that and put us in the old fire house. The fire house had a big place for the trucks of course, and that we used as an auditorium.

RL: Can you tell us what a typical meeting was like at that time, when you first joined?

SL: Well, it was a real nice deal. We would take 2 meetings a week, not a week, a month, and my first meeting would be at the house there, and we would show, everybody would show their films that had any, and then the second meeting would be a business meeting, supposedly, and it would be at folk's houses. And they usually served a little meal and made a kind of a friendly thing out of it. So I got some awfully good friends, they were out of that. Sure did hate to see that go. Finally had to give up on it about a year ago.

RL: Going back to the screenings for a moment. Would you say that when you first started out people were showing a mixture of 8mm and 16mm?

SL: I don't think there was much 8mm at the time. Mostly 16mm, 8mm came later. And then that caused a big hubbub because when we had the little programs, well not

programs, but we'd have little contests, and they were all judging 8mm against 16mm and it caused some problems.

RL: What kind of problems?

SL: Well 16mm always showed up as a better picture than 8mm did. And then so they worked that out.

RL: Were there quarrels?

SL: No, just hard feelings.

RL: The 8mm filmmakers felt that they were discriminated against?

SL: They took off and formed an 8mm club.

RL: Super 8?

SL: Well super 8 hadn't come in yet either. And then super 8 came in of course and that was included in the 8mm of course. I had an awful lot of good friends and I met some very nice people. Most of them are all dead now, but –

RL: Anyone in particular you care to tell us about?

SL: Well, there's one of my very best friends, oh what's his name honey?

Sid's Wife: Vick Brown?

SL: Yes, Vick Brown.

RL: His name turns up in the credits of a lot of your films.

SL: Yes. He was, he died about a year ago I think it was.

RL: I think there was a memorial on the club's website.

SL: Yeah.

RL: Was he very active as a filmmaker himself?

SL: Oh yes. He made some real cute stuff.

RL: Comedies?

SL: Comedies, some of them. Oh he made several different very good films. There were all sorts of good things. He made one on growing tomatoes I remember. And he

made one on making a lariad (?) rope. From the beginning, he had a couple cowboy friends who knew how to do it. He made a great picture on how to do that.

RL: A how-to film?

SL: Yes.

RL: What other kinds of films were shown at the screenings?

SL: Oh multiple kinds. Anything somebody shot. Of course, I told you my frist film, the first actual film was SNAILS, but of course I had a couple of travelogues before that. Most of them were shooting travelogues. I did that too, I shot a lot of travelogues. Not the kind of thing people want to see usually, except someone who has been on the trip with you. So it didn't have a very good use. Distributing at least. Then I started sending my films to different contests all around the world. So I've got ...

Charlotte Laverents: Trophies?

SL: Say again?

CL: Trophies.

SL: Trophies, thank you. You can see how my mind works.

RL: For the competitions you entered, I guess back then there was a fair amount of dialogue between the San Diego club and other clubs around the country and even internationally, am I right?

SL: That's right. And they would have international, Photographic Society of America, and of course several other outfits would have contests for all of America.

RL: And they would have different categories? I believe you won for best humorous film.

SL: They didn't do categories, it was just the best film, that was it.

RL: I thought SUDSES won for best humorous film in some competition? I could be remembering wrong.

SL: Well, I guess they did. In some cases they made kind of categories like that. But usually they were all in the same contest.

RL: This might be a hard one, but do you know by any chance how many entries they might get for one of those national...?

SL: Oh yes. They would get sometimes 50, 60, 100. We ran the contest here one year and I think we had about 100 entries.

RL: And you would show one evening's worth of films, maybe 10 films for the evening?

SL: Yes, we would show the winners. That was a big deal. Then along came video. That was really what ended most of the movie clubs. It was a big change, they didn't know how to do it, they didn't know how to edit, they didn't know this, that, and they'd sometimes get a camera but they would know how to, it wasn't like the cut and snip editing, you know. It was entirely different. That kind of brought things down in the movie clubs. Many of them gave up quite soon. We were one of the last ones to be around. I understand there's still one up in LA that's quite active.

RL: It's quite interesting that video would have had such an influence, because if you think of the idea of an amateur movie maker, you'd think that that would continue on with video, because that creates more access for an amateur.

SL: Well, that's fine, but then they were all used to editing. The editing was the problem. You don't edit a video like you do a, snip where you want, you know, with film. It got real, you'd have to have all sorts of special equipment and really work at it. Of course I got into it quite a lot. And then, to make it worse, it came that they were editing on computers. And this was more complicated so more dropped out. And then of course this meant that we were not getting new members much anymore, so the next thing you know the club was a club of old people. The old people started dying, and it kept getting to the point where they couldn't come to the meeting, and they just gradually gave up.

RL: It seems like maybe it's a generational issue in some ways.

SL: I find that very interesting, that there's so much interest now in film. I get all sorts of queries from film schools and things that are doing real fine. And there's a great interest in making films with the young people now. I'm surprised that they don't have more clubs than they did for young people that are thinking about getting into movies. Anyway there's a lot of interest now I know.

RL: Well now everybody edits on Final Cut or Premiere or other home software, so the idea of amateur filmmaking, amateur filmmakers, are probably more common than ever, but I don't know if people would call themselves amateur in the same way. Would you say that the idea of amateur maybe changed?

SL: How do you mean that?

RL: Well I'm thinking just based on what you said about the transition from 16mm to 8mm, the quality was a little lower. With 16mm you have a little more room for technical control and things in the laboratory. And each step along the way there's a little less technical expertise that's involved, but a different kind of knowledge in using the

computer or the software, and maybe you have some thoughts on that? Was the change from 8mm to super8mm different from the change from film to video?

SL: Mainly it took different equipment of course. The film, you had to have a special camera and all that, but, then of course film started losing out, then Kodak started...the last films I developed costs \$62 a roll plus \$62 for processing. So now Kodak's entirely out of the filmmaking.

RL: You mean, well they're not entirely out.

SL: As far as I know, I saw the other day that you can't buy film from Kodak.

RL: Well you can but they did actually just discontinue 16mm Kodachrome just a few weeks ago. Kodachrome was the classic amateur stock.

SL: That was a shame because it was a beautiful film. I used Kodachrome a lot, but some of my stuff I did the way the big boys did, I used their kind of film. The ones I did with that kind of film, I can't think of the name of it –

RL: Are you thinking of color negative?

SL: Color negative, but it was ... anyway all these films were made on that started to lose their color, and that was when I got thinking I've got to put these on video or there won't be anything. So I did a study on how to do that and I made some special equipment. The problem is the timing is different, and so but I worked over a couple of projectors to where they would put out the proper number of blinks on the screen. And then I mastered all my stuff. In the meantime people found out I could do it so I started doing it for other people too.

RL: Did you replace the shutters or buy projectors that had the –

SL: I just made new shutters and I had to buy synchronous motors which would stay at the same speed all the time to drive the projector so it would always run at exactly 60 frames per second.

RL: Did you machine your own parts? Or did you hire people to machine the parts.

SL: I've got tools out there, most of that stuff I did myself.

RL: Speaking of your innovations, that was not your first innovation. You were designing your own equipment from the beginning.

SL: Yes. I guess because of my background I was able to do quite a lot of things like that, that perhaps most people wouldn't have. If I couldn't find something to buy to do what I wanted I just made it.

RL: A lot of the innovations that you designed to make your films are similar to things that were also done professionally. In some cases did you get the idea from the magazines or did you usually create the idea yourself and then someone else independently would have the same idea somewhere else in the country?

SL: I can't think of any special thing, but I've always had kind of an inventive mind I guess.

RL: Well for example the synchronization method that you used with the silver foil on the tape recorder to run the camera and the – for lip-synching, you would have a foil cuing mechanism where you would put a piece of foil on the ¼" tape, I believe? Am I right?

SL: That was just a start mark. What you're thinking now of perhaps on MULTIPLE SIDOSIS?

RL: Yes.

SL: Well my wife bought me a projector – the Roberts Recorder, and about that time Les Paul and his wife Mary were quite popular. They had found out that they could make a combination on a tape, that he could play his guitar, and play the tape back and play another brand of something else that would fit along with that and end up with a thing that sounded like a guitar orchestra.

RL: Multi-track recording.

SL: He was going around the theaters and making quite a deal, and I thought, he does that, why can't I do that with pictures along with it? So that's what I actually did, was to work out a way to make the pictures. First I made the soundtrack on tape, I did back and forth between the two signals, the two tracks on the tape. I'd get this one perfect and then I'd add another one, listen to that, and at the same time record another track with it. I did that up to 12 times on this tape. I was amazed that it worked. So then I got the soundtrack, and then it was a matter of just one at a time, all these holes –

RL: A board.

SL: Yes, a board. I'd shoot one at a time and close the others off.

RL: That's the mattes for shooting the different images within the frame of MULTIPLE SIDOSIS.

SL: I had no idea this would be such a popular film. It won a lot of awards.

RL: Coming back to the technique of making it though, to make the soundtrack that required all your musical expertise, which was astounding. But you were using pretty much the multi-track recording that had been invented by others, whereas what I was

curious about was you then took the multi-track recording and needed to play it back as a guide for yourself while you were filming the images.

SL: I just mimed the things at the time.

RL: But to develop the queuing technique to keep it all synchronous, I think that was a fair amount of your own design, am I right?

SL: Yes, I don't remember all the ins and outs, but in the first place I did have a recorder that had synchronous motor drive, which made it always the same speed. And I built a synchronous motor drive for the camera so they would go together. If you could start them together they'd stay together. That was the secret of the thing I guess.

RL: And that was – do you know others who were trying to do similar techniques at the time?

SL: No, I didn't.

RL: For a lot of your films including MULTIPLE SIDOSIS your wife Adelaide helped. Can we talk a little bit about how she helped you and what her role was?

SL: Well she of course was a Polio victim and couldn't walk very well. I don't know, she was just that kind, just like my present wife Charlotte. She helps me tremendously with all sorts of things I want to do. But I can't think, well, of course Adelaide ended up in a lot of the pictures. The introduction of MULTIPLE SIDOSIS for instance. But anyway she was a big help just like my present wife.

RL: They always seem to be portrayed as almost just so used to all your craziness that it's just another part of the day.

SL: I guess you hit the nail on the head.

RL: Were there many women members of the movie club?

SL: Yes, there were quite a few. One of the women who was a member and was present at one of the last meetings was here just yesterday. She and Charlotte went out to lunch together.

RL: What's her name?

SL: Mary Ellen Ecklund.

RL: I think I might have met some of them at one of your shows in Los Angeles at the American Cinematheque. A number of people came up. There was definitely a mixture of men and women.

SL: Some show up, some club up there is still in operation, I don't know which one it is.

CL: Is it LA8? Los Angeles 8mm?

SL: Perhaps, I don't know.

RL: Changing topic a minute, we've talked about how video affected the amateur film clubs. I have another question for you which goes to another part of your life in a way. Did the success of film, or the success of sound film, did that have an affect on your career as a vaudeville performer? The movies.

SL: My career as a vaudeville performer was years ago. And of course I worked at ConvAir and I was telling them about my one man band and they said why don't you put it together, we're having a doing coming up here. So I thought maybe I'll do that, and got my stuff out of the attic and fixed the drumheads and broken strings and stuff and put it on for them, and they got a big kick out of it. Of course I had to do a lot of practicing, and I thought I better put this on film so I can save it, because I don't want to go through this again. So that's how come ONE MAN BAND was made.

RL: But when you were traveling I guess a lot of vaudeville performers, the vaudeville era essentially ended with sound film. I was wondering if you had any experience with that. If not for movies would you have gone into vaudeville earlier, or more successfully?

SL: My wife at that time and I had an act together and we were going around the country in my crazy little car –

RL: You designed the car? You did something to it?

SL: I bought it and it was all modified it. Me and some of my boy friends came over and each had a can of paint and we each painted something so it was a real thing to see. Anyway it ended up it was a very good advertising device. We'd come into town and if I had been able to book the show in the theater, we'd play the theater. If not, we'd go on the street and pass the hat. So we traveled all over the south that way and were on our way to New York to try to get a good booking. Well we got to New York state but not to New York City because sound films came in and all they had to do was put the name "sound" up on screen and then of course when they finally got it to synchronize with talking that was wonderful.

RL: Do you know what year that was that you went to New York?

SL: Let's see. This brain of mine doesn't – you know how you get old. I think it was about '29. At least that was the year of the depression, which made it all the better. So I did everything, I washed dishes, sold filler brushes and what have you to make a living for a while.

RL: If not for sound film, was your vaudeville career going well enough that you think you would have continued for a while?

SL: I think we would have made the big time, yeah.

RL: It was an amazing act. And curious enough, although film put you out of business then, it saved you later, because now we have your act on film.

SL: Yeah, I guess so!

RL: Actually, you weren't there that night, but we did at show (at UCLA) of the Vitaphone shorts, which of course is exactly the preservation of the lost vaudeville era, and we showed your films as part of a Vitaphone evening. They all loved it, it was in many ways the highlight of the evening.

SL: Yeah, do you remember the show I put on here, the kind of a flop show. When the ONE MAN BAND show came on when that gal in the audience said 'hahaha' and was laughing, laughing. She had everybody going.

RL: Which show was this, in San Diego?

SL: Yes.

RL: I came to a show, but I don't remember it being a flop!

SL: That thing flopped because we had a guy who had promised the guy who ran the show that he would interview me and get some advertising but he didn't do it. So that kind of messed it up.

RL: I think the filmmaker always has a different experience, because I had quite a pleasant evening but I think for you it was different.

Can you talk a little bit about, continuing this theme, you've done so many things in your life – brush salesman, vaudeville performer, sign painter, in the Army, an engineer. Can you talk a little bit about, looking back on everything, what role filmmaking has played in your life. Now we're talking mainly about filmmaking in this interview, but I wonder what your own perspective as to what the role of film in your life is.

SL: Well it certainly has been something that kept me very very happy in my older age at least. It was just something I did myself and it was successful. Whereas now I can't do all those things, so I'm doing more or less writing now. I just finished a third book, by the way, sent it off to try to get it published.

RL: What's the topic of the new one?

SL: Oh it's called Multiple – ha, Mozelle is the name of it. It's a young girl who gets – it's actually inspired by a thing that happened back in 1996 I think it was. They took this gal out to the desert, anyway she was raped by this guy out in the desert, she was tied down, and she begged him to cut her loose before he left her, because he was going to leave her on the sand to die. He said sure, I'll cut you loose, so he took his axe and cut off both her hands. And it's more or less her story, because then he finds out she didn't die and keeps trying to kill her. It's kind of a gruesome story, but anyway it's based on a true story.

RL: That's a very different type of material than anything you've dealt with in all of your previous years. Can you talk about what made you want to handle that kind of a project?

SL: Well I don't know what had made me do a lot of things. But anyway it was a subject that intrigued me and I have no idea if the public will go for it or not but anyway that's what I wrote about.

RL: When you look back at all of the films that you've made, I'm sure you love all of them like a parent always loves all of his children, or her children, but do you have any that you feel were of more personal importance to you? A stronger effect on your life?

SL: Well, no. Unless...MULTIPLE SIDOSIS. It's had quite an effect on my life. I'd kind of like to talk about that a little bit. And Melinda Stone, she's the gal that started this all. I've got a lot to thank her for. Melinda Stone was working on a Ph.D. in movie-making. She joined our club more or less to find out how we went so I got to know her pretty well. She came over here one day and I ended up giving her all my films on tape. She was interested. Then some way she got invited to this group of people that pick the 25 –

RL: I think she made a recommendation to one of the members of the selection committee of the Library of Congress National Film Registry.

SL: She said why don't you put in an amateur film. They said they'd been thinking about it and she pulled out MULTIPLE SIDOSIS and showed it to them I guess. So that started the ball rolling and I mean it rolled and rolled and it's tapered off now of course, but it sure was a change in my life.

RL: Can you talk about that change?

SL: It's no big change, but it's given me a sense of – well it made me famous overnight for something I had no idea would ever do that. It's one of those things that started rolling and just kept getting bigger and bigger. And all sorts of free publicity like the book here, that's supposed to be me all over the cover.

RL: That's Jake Austen's ROCKTOBER 'zine, and those are all different images of Sid. I think it's a wraparound.

SL: Both covers. And about half the book. He bought everything I had and he ran it all. He's got everything in there, books and all my films. They're all written about. And of course that gets around. I guess they call that a 'zine, don't they? It must have quite a circulation because I sold an awful lot of, I had a lot of –

RL: He also had a little record that came with this issue.

SL: A little CD. He sure went to a lot of trouble on that.

RL: You always in some senses had a lot of recognition because you won all these contests, and my understanding is that you were somewhat of a legend in the field of amateur filmmaking already.

SL: Well, yes, I guess I was. And of course I sent my films all over the world. I won prizes in South Africa, Australia, I even got a nice thing from Japan. Charlotte had it translated and it says it's thanking me from the Prime Minister of Japan. So that was after MULTIPLE SIDOSIS. You didn't really have to worry about the speech!

RL: So when you were making the films you were having quite a bit of success, but did you ever picture it going on to the success you have now? Is the success now different? What did you picture happening?

SL: I've lost so many of my friends who made pictures, I'm not up to date on what's going on, I don't know if there's a similar – they still are running some of those contests. What used to be the Photographic Society of America, they have a bunch that are making about once a year program and contest. There are a couple of others too, the Ten Best of the West, that's still going. But I don't know, as I say, I've kind of lost track of what is going on now.

RL: Did you ever have any ambitions to make more commercial work?

SL: I did make a couple of commercial films. One of the guys that was in one of the movie clubs, he worked for this boat company that was building boats here, I can't think of the name of it. He had a job there and they wanted to make a film on the making of their boats so he and I, with his influence there, and my knowledge of filmmaking, we came up with a story of building one of those big boats. They used it, they sent it back to Washington – fuzzy in the brain, sorry! They used to introduce all new employees with it.

RL: And you also made industrial films.

SL: I made a thing for a friend of mine called – anyway they had a combination tool, can't think of what they called it now – I made a commercial for them. That's about the only thing I ever did. Well I did make the picture also on the environmental –

RL: Oh right, it's not listed on your filmography. Environmental Enclosures, is that it?

SL: Yeah.

RL: I guess you never chose to make it full time, though?

SL: Oh no, probably if I'd have gotten started earlier I might have thought about it, but I had a good job. It was mostly just a hobby.

RL: Well it worked out well in a way because it saved all your best energies for making all the films that you truly loved!

You've worked in so many different forms of filmmaking from documentary to comedy, trick films, industrial films. This may seem a strange question but can you think of anything that influenced you? It seems you just did everything. What might your influences have been?

SL: I just thought of things that would make a good movie and shot them!

RL: Perfect! The only other thing I wanted to do was have Charlotte come into the frame.

CL: I tried to stay out of it! Once in a while I have to step in with a memory but usually I stay out of the picture because I am not the person you came for.

RL: Well you know him pretty well. So this is Charlotte, Sid's wife, and I wanted to ask you what it's like living with an amateur genius!

SL: Oh god!

CL: Well can I take the fifth?! As you probably realize, there are people with very high IQs that like Albert Einstein, I've often wondered how Mrs. Einstein reacted to his genius, because it is definitely different. That's all I can say, you deal with a different type of mind with people constantly inquiring and being inquisitive of how does this work and how does that work and most of the time I do not have an answer to his questions. So that's about all I can say.

SL: By the way, she's really in a bad situation right now because I can't do anything, so she works day and night for me and trying to keep things going, and I'm very appreciative.

RL: Well, we're glad to have both of you!

CL: Well thank you so much for coming to our house and I hope before you leave that you will join us in eating a little bit of the cake you were so nice to bring!

RL: I think we can help with that!

[LAUGHTER!]

THE END