

**KINO**  
INTERNATIONAL

PRESENTS

**HELL'S  
HIGHWAY**

THE TRUE STORY OF  
HIGHWAY SAFETY FILMS INC.

a film by **bret wood**

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## CREDITS

A Livin' Man Production

### **HELL'S HIGHWAY: THE TRUE STORY OF HIGHWAY SAFETY FILMS**

Directed by Bret Wood

Produced by Tommy Gibbons and Bret Wood

Director of Photography: Steve Anderson

Additional Photography: Jason Forrest, Zach Proctor, Dan Walsh

Written and Edited by Bret Wood

Narrated by Helena Reckitt

Music Supervision:  
Tim Barnes and Alan Licht

Post Production Facilities  
Cinepost – Atlanta, GA

Contributors:  
John P. Butler, Earle J. Deems, John R. Domer  
David Krug, Eric Krug, Rick Prelinger  
Mike Vraney, James Waller, Martin Yant

"Tone Poem for the Nikki Sixx Million"  
"Polarity"  
by Alan Licht

"Shadow Kingdom Suite"  
by Douglas Robinson

Film Clips Courtesy of:

Highway Safety Films Inc.  
Something Weird Video – [www.somethingweird.com](http://www.somethingweird.com)  
The Prelinger Archives – [www.prelinger.com](http://www.prelinger.com)



**ABOUT THE FILMMAKER**  
**– Director Bret Wood –**

Atlanta-based filmmaker Bret Wood has directed two feature-length documentaries: Kingdom of Shadows: The Rise of the Horror Film (1998) and Lon Chaney: Behind the Mask (1995).

He is the co-author (with Felicia Feaster) of Forbidden Fruit: The Golden Age of the Exploitation Film (Midnight Marquee Press, 2000) and his film-related writing has appeared in Sight and Sound, Film Comment, Positif and Video Watchdog, among other publications. Wood has edited two volumes of classic screenplays: Queen Kelly: The Complete Screenplay by Erich von Stroheim (Scarecrow Press, 2002) and Marihuana, Motherhood and Madness: Three Screenplays from the Exploitation Cinema of Dwain Esper (Scarecrow Press, 1998).

Wood is a producer and designer of DVDs, whose work includes the Kino on Video releases of The Erich von Stroheim Collection, D.W. Griffith Masterworks, German Horror Classics and Dementia.

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I N T E R N A T I O N A L

## INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR BRET WOOD

**Q: When were you first exposed to the shock-oriented driver's ed films?**

A: In high school, I learned about SIGNAL 30 and HIGHWAYS OF AGONY from older students who were taking driver's ed. The year I took driver education, the school stopped showing the shock-value films and replaced them with dull instructional films. This, of course, only fueled my curiosity, and I began to wonder if these films actually existed, or if I was being duped by my fellow students -- or if they were being duped by reenactments and ketchup-covered actors. About eight years later I found a copy of the fanzine THE LAST PROM, which verified that these films did, in fact, exist, and could be ordered through the mail. When I finally saw SIGNAL 30, WHEELS OF TRAGEDY and MECHANIZED DEATH I was repulsed -- but I was still curious. I now began to wonder who could have possibly made these films. I wanted to know THEIR story.

**Q: Why do you think these films have become so popular with cult audiences?**

A: I think a lot of it is nostalgia. You look at these films and you see an unvarnished view of middle America in the 1960s, when cops had crew cuts and women wore cat-eye glasses. Then you see this utterly tragic side of middle America, when people drove death-trap cars without seatbelts and that American dream is suddenly smeared across the four-lane highway. It's like these films offer a picture-perfect view of small-town life in Ohio, then punch a hole in the center of it. Some people collect metal lunchboxes to remember their childhood. Other people -- the cynical ones, I guess -- like to seek out more grim artifacts. It's related somehow to the recent fascination with carnival freak shows or Bettie Page bondage photos... chapters of American pop culture that were neglected for years because they were considered too tasteless and lacking in artistic merit... but which reveal what was REALLY happening in our culture - below the surface.

**Q: It would have been very easy to make something campy out of this material, since so many of the films are so dated and stodgy. Did you consciously avoid making that kind of film?**

A: The most difficult part of making HELL'S HIGHWAY was finding the right balance of entertainment and information. And finding the right tone. At the very beginning I cut a 10-minute segment just to test the waters. It was very serious, very somber and the few people I showed it to said it was very depressing. I didn't want to test the stamina of the audience. And I didn't want this to be a film just for gore-hounds. So I knew I had to lighten up the material somehow -- but I was determined not to trivialize the films or in any way make a joke out of them.

# **KINO**

I N T E R N A T I O N A L

## **INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR BRET WOOD** **-Continued-**

Sure, the acting during some of the reenactments is very stiff, but these were volunteers, genuinely committed to the cause of the Highway Safety Foundation. They don't deserve to be made fun of. The solution came when I interviewed Richard Prelinger, who is the leading authority on educational/industrial films, the guy who really put these films on the cultural radar. He helped open up HELL'S HIGHWAY to encompass lots of other films, and allowed me to use clips from films he archived. These films are generally more light-hearted in tone, and provide periodic relief from the Highway Safety Foundation films, which tend to be morbid and depressing (as was their intent). HELL'S HIGHWAY was no longer focused strictly on this one group of Ohio filmmakers, it blossomed out to cover the whole history of the driver's ed film.

### **Q: Was it ever disturbing for you to watch some of these films?**

A: After I'd seen them each a couple of times, they lost their emotional impact, because I was looking at them in terms of the documentary, trying to decide which clips to use, which pieces of audio might be effectively used. Toward the end of production, I had to show the film to other people for their opinion because I could no longer judge whether the footage was TOO upsetting or not upsetting enough. So there was a lot of last-minute cutting to moderate the degree of carnage that appears on screen. But there were moments when the films would take me by surprise. When we interviewed Earle Deems and John Domer, I drove up to Ohio (from Atlanta) with producer Tommy Gibbons and d.p. Steve Anderson. We probably got four hours sleep the night before, in order to arrive in time for the scheduled shoot. Before getting started, Earle popped in a videocassette of DRIVE AND SURVIVE for us to watch, a film I had never seen. It's one of the most explicit Highway Safety Films ever produced and -- sleep-deprived and anxious about the day's shoot -- it left me dizzy and queasy the rest of the day. I think Earle showed us that to watch our reactions... to see what our true feelings were about the Highway Safety Films... maybe what our true motive was in interviewing him. I guess we passed the test because we spent two days with him and Domer, hearing stories of the Highway Safety Foundation, looking at scrapbooks of photographs, clippings and documents.

### **Q: Was there one interview or piece of footage that really stuck in your mind and seemed to encapsulate the phenomenon of the Highway Safety Films for you?**

A: It's hard to say -- there are so many little moments that are either poignant or upsetting or somehow inspired. I guess the most profound image to me is a really brief shot of a highway patrolman just after the body he has helped removed from a wreck is being hauled away. It's the last image you see in HELL'S HIGHWAY.



## INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR BRET WOOD

-Continued-

He is standing there, exhausted, panting for breath, with a really ambiguous expression on his face. Nausea, despair, and hope that the victim will survive (although judging from the cop's expression, he won't).

**Q: Why do you think these guys made these movies in the first place? Was there some kind of morbid fascination involved?**

A: It's so hard to say, but I really doubt it. From what can be gathered today, the whole endeavor originated as a way for Richard Wayman (founder of the Highway Safety Foundation) to hang around with policemen. He enjoyed the company of cops - I think it gave him a sense of power and prestige to spend time at the police station, or accompany officers on patrol. It enabled a respectable accountant to sample a bit of excitement from the safety of a patrol car. And spending some time with John Butler (former chief of police of Mansfield, Ohio), I can understand why he enjoyed this. Butler is a no-nonsense man with a gift for storytelling and a refusal to censor himself. I wish I could have included more of his interview in the finished film. John Domer, who photographed many of the films, was a newspaper photographer by trade and looked upon the crash-scene photography as an assignment like any other.

As far as why they made movies -- they weren't filmmakers by trade. They did not aspire to make feature-length films. The 16mm camera was merely a tool by which they could convey this safety message most effectively. Whenever I asked the filmmakers about editing choices or the aesthetics of the films, I received little or no response. The films were strictly functional in design. This is not to say that the films don't have personality, or even a little wit and style. It comes through in the narration (most of which was written by a guy named Will Hane) and in the reenactment footage. I think some of the most fascinating films in our history were made by people who didn't consider themselves artists, and the Highway Safety Films are a great example.

**Q: Do you think these films really made people better drivers?**

A: I think so, to some degree. I know that they had a strong impact on me, especially in terms of wearing a seatbelt. It has been stated that the films had a strong short-term effect but were ineffectual in influencing long-term driving habits. But I say even if they scared some kids into driving safely for a month or so, during those accident-prone teenage years, I figure it was worth the effort.



## ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

Production of HELL'S HIGHWAY began in August 1999, when Atlanta filmmaker Bret Wood, producer Tommy Gibbons and director of photography Steve Anderson traveled to Mansfield, Ohio to film interviews with Earle Deems and John Domer, two of the few surviving people who made films for the Highway Safety Foundation. The original idea had been merely to document the story behind the shocking driver education films produced in cooperation with the Ohio State Highway Patrol in the 1950s and '60s. Films such as SIGNAL 30, WHEELS OF TRAGEDY and MECHANIZED DEATH had become cult items among film aficionados, but the story of their production remained cloaked in mystery.

It became obvious during this visit -- listening to the stories Deems and Domer told, viewing the scrapbooks of photographs and documents, viewing HSF productions that were rarely seen -- that a feature-length documentary would be required to tell the full story of the "death on the highway" driver's ed film phenomenon.

Wood approached two archivists of educational and industrial films, who represent very different approaches to such "ephemeral films": Richard Prelinger and Mike Vraney. Prelinger (who established the Prelinger Archives, acquired by the Library of Congress in August, 2002) and Vraney (founder of the cult video label Something Weird Video) both eagerly supported the project, consenting to videotaped interviews and providing a wide array of strange, memorable and unique driver's ed films from their collections.

The stranger-than-fiction story of the Highway Safety Foundation (HSF) became even more intriguing when Wood discovered the shocking exposés of the organization written by Martin Yant, who had been an investigative journalist in Mansfield in the 1970s. On June 24, 2000, in a hotel room in Columbus, Ohio, Yant expounded in great detail on the rumored misdeeds of the foundation, and it was clear that HELL'S HIGHWAY was becoming something more than an examination of the gruesome driver education film.

In the summer of 2000, John Butler, former chief of the Mansfield Police Department, agreed to be interviewed on film at his home in Punta Gorda, Florida. A gifted storyteller -- who was also the executive vice president of the HSF at the time of its demise -- Butler revealed many little-known details about the organization. He recounted meeting with Jimmy Hoffa in an effort to sell the HSF's trucking safety film (CARRIER OR KILLER), discussed the nationally-televised HSF telethon (hosted by Sammy Davis Jr.), explained the idea behind the HSF's controversial police training films, and spoke frankly about Yant's accusations.



### **ABOUT THE PRODUCTION (continued)**

Throughout the filmmaking process, it was important not to stray from the germinal idea of the driver's ed scare film. To offer a more diverse perspective, interviews were conducted with driver education instructor (and football coach) James Waller, and brothers David and Eric Krug, who had vivid memories of seeing HSF's most notorious film while in elementary school).

In the two years that followed, Wood sought out additional prints of HSF's legendary films, while gathering a collection of educational films from other companies, on diverse topics. In the end, HELL'S HIGHWAY does more than tell the story of the Highway Safety Foundation and its legendary films. It offers a wide survey of the educational film movement of the 1950s-'70s, and raises many important questions about the "scared straight" approach to education.

The most difficult part of editing the documentary was deciding the amount of graphic accident-scene footage that would be shown. Very few viewers could endure feature-length exposure to such films as HIGHWAYS OF AGONY, THE THIRD KILLER and DRIVE AND SURVIVE, yet it was integral to the project that the most brutal aspects of these films be revealed. The filmmakers hope and believe that HELL'S HIGHWAY captures the sensational shock value of the original films without trivializing the efforts of the HSF filmmakers or demeaning the lives that were lost in the making of these motion pictures.



## THE HIGHWAY SAFETY FOUNDATION: A CHRONOLOGY

**1954** The Highway Safety Foundation unofficially began when Cleveland, Ohio-based accountant Richard Wayman encountered a fatal accident during his business travels. Wayman, a photography enthusiast and outgoing police booster, assisted the investigating officer by taking color photographs of the scene (a motorcyclist was hit by a train). When the Mansfield Police Department expressed their gratitude for his voluntary service, Wayman continued to snap similar photos in the course of his travels back and forth across Ohio.

**1955** Wayman recruits an acquaintance of his, Phyllis Vaughn of Mansfield, Ohio, to join his campaign and begin taking photographs of crash sites. On November 16, a small newspaper article (unidentified clipping) documents Vaughn's new endeavor.

**1956** (May 27) The Cleveland Plain Dealer devotes the cover of its Sunday magazine to Phyllis Vaughn's accident photography crusade.

**1958** The color pictures taken by Vaughn and Wayman are assembled into a slide presentation, which is presented at the Richland County (Ohio) Fair, to school groups and at other public events. Each slideshow is accompanied by a lecture by an Ohio State Highway Patrolman. Vaughn enlists her sister, Dottie (Vaughn) Deems to participate in the snowballing project. John Domer, a news photographer for the Mansfield News Journal is also invited to join the endeavor.

**1959** Wayman and his loose-knit group begin shooting motion picture footage of the accident scenes. On October 16, 1959, Richard Wayman presents a 16mm print of SIGNAL 30 to the Ohio State Highway Patrol and Ohio Department of Highway Safety.

**1960** Wayman and Vaughn incorporate The Highway Safety Foundation, a non-profit organization. A separate body, Safety Enterprises, Inc. (Wayman, Vaughn and co.) supervises the production and sale of films. The foundation is sustained primarily through financial contributions of regional businesses.

**1961** MECHANIZED DEATH is released.

**1962** Two young girls are found dead in a creek in Mansfield, Ohio. The culprit, when apprehended, informs the police of sexual activity happening in the nearby public restroom. In June 1962, The Mansfield Police Department asks the Highway Safety Foundation for photographic assistance in conducting a sting operation in the bathroom, which they provide.

**1963** WHEELS OF TRAGEDY is released.



## THE HIGHWAY SAFETY FOUNDATION: A CHRONOLOGY (continued)

**1964** Inspired by its participation in the public restroom investigation, Safety Enterprises begins producing crime prevention/police training films. THE SHOPLIFTER is the first such film released. Two films based on the 1962 double-homicide and public sex investigations are also produced and released: THE CHILD MOLESTER and CAMERA SURVEILLANCE. Due to the nature of the crimes and investigations, the latter film is circulated only among law enforcement agencies. Other crime prevention films include A GREAT AND HONORABLE DUTY ("An Introduction to Police Service," 1965), PLANT PILFERAGE (ca. 1965) and THE PAPERHANGERS (about bad check-writing, 1966).

**1965** CARRIER OR KILLER, aimed at professional truck drivers, is released. A consultant for the HSF, John P. Butler, a police officer who would become Mansfield Police Chief in 1966, visits Jimmy Hoffa in Chicago in an effort to sell prints of the film to the Teamsters.

**1966** (April 15) Time magazine runs a photograph of Jimmy Hoffa, testifying before Congress on the subject of highway safety, holding a print of HSF's CARRIER OR KILLER.

**1966** The Highway Safety Foundation releases A MATTER OF JUDGEMENT, a film that focuses on laws, safety facts and good driving habits, without explicit crash-site footage. Dottie Vaughn Deems's husband, Earle J. Deems produces THE THIRD KILLER, which is their most ambitious film to date. Starring character actor Robert Simon, it employs an elaborate narrative in which a salesman of death named Rellik visits his three most productive accounts, heart disease, cancer and traffic accidents.

**1967** (October 1) Citizens of Mansfield, Ohio are invited to come participate in the production of a film by lying in a line on State Route 13, as a camera mounted on a platform floats above them. The footage was originally shot for the film RESEARCH FOR SAFETY but later effectively employed in HIGHWAYS OF AGONY. The film was produced by the newly-formed Edcom Productions which was established by Earle Deems to branch out into more varied educational and commercial films (hence the title).

**1969** HIGHWAYS OF AGONY, which borrows the title of the original slide presentation, is released.



## THE HIGHWAY SAFETY FOUNDATION: A CHRONOLOGY (continued)

**1970** John Domer, one of the first accident-site photographers, accepts a full-time desk position at the Mansfield News Journal and ceases to make films for the foundation. In addition to films shot in Ohio, Wayman begins receiving graphic footage from a member of the coroner's department in New Orleans.

**1972** The first Advanced Driver Training Course is opened in Mansfield, Ohio. A second school is announced for New York City (to open December 11, 1973), with plans for Palm Beach County, Florida and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

**1973** (February) Newspaper articles on driver safety, supposedly written by Sammy Davis, Jr., are circulated nationwide.

**1973** (May 27-28) Sammy Davis, Jr. hosts (with Monte Hall) the first annual, twenty-hour Highway Safety Foundation telethon. Guests included Muhammad Ali, Paul Anka, Jack Barry, Dr. Joyce Brothers, Ray Charles, Dick Clark, Roy Clark, Howard Cosell, Ossie Davis, Ruby Dee, Joe Franklin, Cliff Gorman, Richie Havens, Danny Kaye, Jerry Lewis, Hal Linden, Rich Little, Butterfly McQueen, Minnie Pearl, Boots Randolph, Tex Ritter, Phil Rizzuto, The Rockettes, Nipsy Russell, Sally Struthers, Mel Tillis, Ben Vereen, Lawrence Welk and many more. The total amount of pledges was \$1.2 million. Actual pledges received were \$525,000.

**1974** In the wake of the unsuccessful telethon, the Highway Safety Foundation continues to operate. However, in Winter 1974, it becomes clear that it does not have the funds to continue, and the idea of a second annual Sammy Davis, Jr. telethon is abandoned. Richard Wayman relocates to California, where he begins developing support programs for the California State Highway Patrol. In July 1974, the State Attorney General's office begins an investigation into the financial collapse of the foundation.

**1975** (August) The Attorney General concludes its investigation of the Highway Safety Foundation and declares that, in spite of some irregular financial incidents, there was no prosecutable wrongdoing.

**1977** Even though the Highway Safety Foundation had folded, Earle Deems continues making films under the banner of Highway Safety Films, Inc. DRIVE AND SURVIVE is released. THERE'S A MESSAGE IN EVERY BOTTLE, which is devoted to underaged drinking and driving is also released. The elaborate production features very little explicit accident footage.



## THE HIGHWAY SAFETY FOUNDATION: A CHRONOLOGY (continued)

**1978** (November 10-18) The Ohio Observer, a daily newspaper devotes a series of articles (written by Martin Yant) to the questionable business practices of the Highway Safety Foundation.

**1979** Highway Safety Films Inc. releases OPTIONS TO LIVE, in which a narrator encapsulates the history and philosophy of the Highway Safety Foundation, while showing clips from the various films.

**1980s** Earle Deems begins producing STRATEGIES OF SAFE DRIVING but abandons the project when his wife Dottie is diagnosed with a serious illness. He ceases to produce new films, although continues to sell prints and videotapes via mail. After Dottie dies, Earle retires from the business and donates all the driver safety films to the Ohio State Department of Public Safety/Ohio State Highway Patrol. Many of the classic films are available on videocassette free of charge (only to Ohio residents) at [www.state.oh.us/odps/newsletters/filmcatalog.htm](http://www.state.oh.us/odps/newsletters/filmcatalog.htm)

**1991** Aficionado Ralph Coon creates the zine The Last Prom, which brings about a resurgence of interest in explicit driver education films.

**1994** Martin Yant publishes Rotten to the Core: Crime, Sex and Corruption in Johnny Appleseed's Hometown, which summarizes his investigation into the Highway Safety Foundation.

**1999** Production begins on HELL'S HIGHWAY: THE TRUE STORY OF HIGHWAY SAFETY FILMS.

**2001** (June) Former Police Chief John Butler publishes a memoir of his years in Mansfield and his association with Richard Wayman, entitled The Best Suit in Town.

**2002** (August) The Ohio Department of Public Safety releases SIGNAL 30 PART II: TRAGEDY AND HOPE. Shot on videotape, the sequel continues the shock-effect technique of the original, though it surrounds the footage with disclaimers and digitally obscures the faces of the victims.



## LIST OF FILM CLIPS

### Films Produced by the Highway Safety Foundation

CARRIER OR KILLER (1965)  
THE CHILD MOLESTER (1964)  
A GREAT AND HONORABLE DUTY (1965)  
HIGHWAYS OF AGONY (1969)  
A MATTER OF JUDGEMENT  
MECHANIZED DEATH (1961)  
THE PAPERHANGERS (1966)  
THE SHOPLIFTER (1964)  
SIGNAL 30 (1959)  
SPECIAL DELIVERY (1964)  
THE THIRD KILLER (1966)  
WHEELS OF TRAGEDY (1963)

### Films Produced by Highway Safety Films, Inc.

DRIVE AND SURVIVE (1977)  
OPTIONS TO LIVE (1979)  
THERE'S A MESSAGE IN EVERY BOTTLE (1977)

### Selected Films Produced by other companies

AND THEN THERE WERE FOUR (1950)  
THE BOTTLE AND THE THROTTLE (ca. 1958)  
THE CAUTIOUS TWINS (1960)  
CHOOSING A CLASSROOM FILM (1963)  
THE DAVID HALL STORY (1963)  
DEATH ON THE HIGHWAY (1965)  
FILM RESEARCH AND LEARNING (1956)  
IS THIS LOVE? (1957)  
THE JOKER (1960)  
THE LAST DATE (1950)  
THE LAST PROM (1972)  
MANNERS IN SCHOOL (1958)  
MARIJUANA (1968)  
SAFETY ADVENTURES OUT OF DOORS (1959)  
A SAFETY BELT FOR SUSIE (1962)  
THE SNOB (1958)  
WE DRIVERS (1936)  
YOU CAN'T STOP ON A DIME (1954)