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Ken Croley

Carol Littleton's "Second Career"

When Fulbright scholar Carol Littleton, a master's degree in French literature in hand, opted for a movie industry career, she was advised that, at 29, she was "too old" to make her mark in films.

In 1970, despite the discouraging words, she began working her way through a raft of entry-level jobs — helping in an office, cleaning toilets, sweeping floors. In 1983, Littleton emerged with an Academy Award

By
SHIRLEY DODSON COBB

nomination for her work as film editor of the 1982 blockbuster "E.T., the Extra-Terrestrial."

A slight smile and a hint of humor color her words as the University of Oklahoma graduate admits that the nomination provided her a "moment of sweet revenge." In little more than 10 years, the intense, talented and

unassuming film editor has virtually conquered her craft and gained the respect of industry contemporaries.

Casually settling herself on an oversized couch in the almost austere living room of her Hollywood Hills home, she recalls those initial years. In a candid, down-to-earth style, she traces the erratic route from her Miami, Oklahoma, country home to the white, '20s-style bungalow she shares with cinematographer husband, John Bailey.

Although born in Oklahoma City, Littleton moved to Miami at the age of three. "I lived in the country until I went to college . . . and I was in college 'forever,'" she quips, recalling the years spent in pursuit of higher education.

From 1960-69, the Littleton name was inscribed on the rolls of institutions here and abroad: Cotney College in Missouri; the University of Oklahoma; the University of Mexico; the University of California, Los Angeles; Weisbaden, West Germany; and Paris, France. She emerged from academia with an OU B.A. in 1965 and a M.A. in 1970. While completing her thesis in France, via the Fulbright, she observed the "peak of the social revolution" and was immersed in that country's new-wave cinema.

"I loved going to the movies," the slender, 41-year-old film editor confesses. She recalls contemporaries then studying film. "We were kids . . . all interested in movies . . . None of us ever thought we'd do what we dreamed about."

Eventually, it was Bailey and his involvement in the film industry that ignited Littleton's interest. The pair — Bailey, a 6'4" Los Angeles scholarship student, and the blue-eyed, auburn-haired Oklahoman — met while studying abroad in the early '60s. It was "like at first sight," Littleton says, "but that was it . . . We corresponded." The friendship developed. "When I finally moved to Los Angeles, it was because John asked me."

Romance was not the only interest developing. "The more I was around him and his friends, the more I realized I could do this too — and without going to school," she says. Her original plans to teach school had proved disillusioning, and her next job with an advertising agency did not fill her career development criteria. So, the aspiring film editor sought her place among creative and technical teams "making movies."

As an observer at first, "I did a bunch of crazy jobs," she says of her scrub-and-broom beginning. Advancing to other tasks, she was allowed to reclaim film (taking large reels of tape with footage to be salvaged and spliced together) and to do sound

transfer (reproducing sound from one medium to another). Once, cutting 16-millimeter negatives, she looked closely at the images and discovered she was in the "porno trade." "A short-lived job," she laughs.

In 1972, after she and Bailey were married, Littleton got her first break. Bailey was signed to shoot a film, and Littleton approached the director, a friend, to ask for the post of editorial assistant.

"He asked, 'What do you know? . . . Can you sync dailies?'" she recalls, explaining that the assignment called for marking the picture slates, marking the sound slates and cutting each to match. "I'd never done anything. But I'm not easily intimidated — or maybe ignorance is bliss . . ."

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"I went out and bought a book and followed the directions. There I was one day, with a stack of dailies . . . It wasn't very much — two rolls of film. Now, I laugh about it," she says of that first assignment. With splicer and synchronizer — "that I'd never even touched before" — and *The Technique of the 35-Millimeter Cutting Room*, Littleton began. "I remember sitting in the theater, looking at the dailies, and I was praying I'd gotten it right."

That first, low-budget horror film gave Littleton the title of film "assistant." "I went back to the places where I'd been doing sound transfer and was given a job syncing dailies," she recalls. Various odd jobs gradually broadened her experience.

From 1974-76, Littleton worked cutting commercials, a "fringe business in the industry," she notes. "By then, I had a meal ticket with commercials, so I started working nights and weekends cutting anything I could in the way of dramatic film."

Littleton began to sharpen her focus; she centered her energies on editing film. "I was never interested in an administrative job. I really wanted to *make* movies — physically — to hold them and cut them — to do the work," she says. "There's something marvelous about working with your hands."

"I've always been interested in literature," she explains, "and storytelling is the most fascinating part (of film making). Well, editing has it all, touching the film, working on it, working with sound, the story, the picture, the images. Film editors have more power over a film than is ever recognized. There's an arsenal of very small, minute decisions that affect a film. Eventually all those add up."

Once Littleton's first feature-length film was completed, her confidence level went up accordingly. "It made me really believe that I could do films of substance that could make a difference in people's lives and that would make a difference in my life."

Making a difference seems to be a family trait, Littleton concedes. "I come from a long line of very determined ladies." Her mother, Mildred Littleton, after rearing three daughters, Betty, Carol and Charlene, returned to school to garner the credentials, then taught fourth graders until she retired. Older sister Betty, a Stephens College vice president, recently took a leave of absence to enter law school at 55 years of age.

"The world is changing," Littleton reasons. "It's not unusual for people to go through two or three careers in a lifetime. I'm probably going to live to be 100, so why not have two or three interesting careers . . . I was a student long enough to call it a career."

As a foundation for her "second" career, Littleton found commercials a fertile training ground. "It was during the 'golden age' of commercials. I learned and used all the tricks that editors can use — dissolve, stop-motion, opticals, animation — I got to follow in quick succession the whole routine, from dailies to finished product. When I started cutting low-budget (movie) films, I did everything — the music, special effects, dialogue, picture cutting," she says. "I was even my own assistant." (Continued)

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Littleton's hand adjusts the machine to view a scene from "The Big Chill" in one of the lonely, tedious, exacting sessions that go into the editing process.

"Legacy," her first full-length film, was followed by "The Hazing," then "The Mafu Cage," a production directed by Karen Arthur. "From there, I went to a 'Movie of the Week' titled 'Battered,'" Littleton says. The film depicted the battered wife syndrome.

"In 1979, I did 'French Postcards,' my first real industry picture." The movie, set in France, took Littleton abroad again. "It was marvelous. Since I had been a student abroad, it

don't jet to various filming sites. "The Big Chill" provided a rare opportunity for the husband and wife team to work together "on location" in South Carolina.

That film, which Littleton terms a "dramatic comedy" focused on a gathering of seven friends from the '60s era, was the second film edited by Littleton for writer-director Lawrence Kasdan. The first, "Body Heat," chronicles a steamy love affair and is

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was like déjà vu for me." As the only American on the crew — her two assistants were French — she immersed herself in the culture and her work. "I was inside the cutting room, so I didn't get to see that much, but it was fun to be in that environment."

Although usually based in Los Angeles, Littleton and Bailey currently maintain an apartment in New York City. "We're a bi-coastal couple," she explains. But while a cinematographer's career requires frequent travel, film editors generally

a tribute to film noir updated to the '80s. Both called upon the film editor's ability to deftly heighten the films' intensely creative presentations.

Describing "Body Heat" as "a thriller, a study of sexual obsession and a stylistic interpretation of contemporary Angst," Littleton remembers sitting in the dark room, cutting the film. "I cooled it off bit," she quips, recalling the erotic scenes. "You should have seen what was left on the floor."

As film editor, Littleton describes her work "in support of the director" as "an instrument" to craft the visions he conceives. The job is demanding; with the director immersed in the immediate concerns of daily shooting, initial selections fall upon the film editor. Assembling a rough cut, Littleton essentially puts the scenes together in tight form. Intense collaboration between editor and director come after that first cut, as the two work together to pare the film down to a manageable time frame and structure.

In dubbing in sound, the film editor works closely with both sound editor and sound effects editor. Music is scored by a music editor, and when the major components are complete, a unified version of the film emerges. "The editing process is sort of a Zen occupation, tedious and exacting. You are alone with the material over a long period of time," she says. Twelve-hour days can become the norm.

While Littleton may be alone in the cutting room, she has marvelous companions on film. "E.T." captured the hearts of millions of fans, and Littleton helped to bring the capricious creature to life.

The movie was rejected by numerous movie industry chiefs. "Columbia said, in all their wisdom, that it was a stupid film, and nobody would go see it," she recalls. "One wonders how innovative films get made; usually it's a fluke. Then, when somebody gets a good idea, and it makes a popular movie, you see a bunch of carbon copies appear."

Lauding "E.T." director Stephen Spielberg's creative style, Littleton says, "He's a very passionate man. He loves life, and he loves what he's doing." While other directors seek box-office guarantees, Spielberg "doesn't manipulate" the medium. "He doesn't say, 'I'm going to make a movie that people are going to like.' He makes a movie that he likes," she muses. "I think it's that level of commitment and conviction that makes good movies."

Working with Spielberg proved a memorable feat. The director had seen her work in "Body Heat," and when the film editor he initially ap-

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"Body Heat," the erotic thriller with William Hurt and Kathleen Turner, was even steamier before it received the Littleton treatment in the cutting room.

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ABOVE: Oklahoma native Mary Kay Place and William Hurt are shown in a scene from "The Big Chill," a dramatic comedy which was the second film Littleton edited for Lawrence Kasdan.

AT LEFT: Littleton's work with friend "E.T.," shown here being served his first Earth-style banquet, won the film editor an Oscar nomination in 1983.

proached was unavailable, Littleton got the job. "E.T. was a story about relationships," she says, adding that her work in "Body Heat" carried the same "relationship" composition, albeit with a different theme.

"But I'd never done an action picture, and I'd never done a special effects picture. I told Stephen, 'I don't know if I can do it,'" she says. "He said not to worry about it; he'd done it . . . and he hired me."

Littleton recalls Spielberg's comment when he viewed her initial ef-

Speilberg doesn't seek box-office guarantees; he doesn't manipulate the medium. "He doesn't say, 'I'm going to make a movie that people are going to like.' He makes a movie that he likes."

fort in editing the hospital scene in "E.T.": "Carol, that's great, but the movie is not starring the doctors." The editor and her assistants "rolled up sleeves, and started in again."

Her work on "E.T." moved Littleton into Oscar contention, an honor in keeping with the Bailey/Littleton achievement record. As a cinematographer, Bailey has to his credit such films as "Ordinary People," "Without a Trace," and "American Gigolo." Littleton's current project carries the working title "The Texas

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With the glittering lights of the glamour capital of the world as a background, Carol Littleton and one of the family cats stand on the porch of the Hollywood Hills home they share with Carol's cinematographer husband, John Bailey.

Picture," starring Sally Fields and directed by Robert Benton of "Kramer vs. Kramer" fame.

"John and I talk shop all the time," Littleton admits. Although career demands bring frequent separations, the marriage works. "We made up new rules, I guess." Bailey, whom his wife describes as "a gregarious person who thrives on working with a lot of people," and Littleton, who characterizes herself as "one who likes the solitude of being by myself . . . figuring out problems," seem to blend the best of both personalities into a pleasing partnership.

The couple entertain "at informal dinners for a few friends," including industry contemporaries, writers and journalists. The circle is augmented by other talented individuals, she explains. "In our business, you're always making new acquaintances. It's continually changing, new combinations of people."

Other companions in the family entourage include several cats. While on location for "The Big Chill," the two came across a starving, abandoned kitten and took the waif home.

"The vet didn't think he'd pull through. I took him with me every day to the cutting room," she says, and the habit continued when the trio returned to the West Coast.

"The cat has a great deal of respect for the equipment; we have disciplined him," she insists, but she confesses that respect was heightened when the cat jumped up on the flat-top console of the KEM Universal Editing System, perhaps to view Littleton at work. "He got his tail caught in the sprocket. Now he has a lot of respect for that machine. He hasn't jumped on it since."

Watching Littleton at work is a fascinating study. Enscourced in a small editing room, an array of machinery at her fingertips, she seems to have found a snug sanctuary. But the system she supervises is far from simple. "When I finish cutting a picture," she explains, "I become more or less an administrator. Different editors are brought in who specialize in their own areas — AVR, music, sound effects, dialogue. It's a real team effort."

In an adjacent room, she points out an antiquated Moviola, the industry

workhorse dating from the era of "Gone With the Wind." Contemplating the modern editing machine at her command, Littleton remarks, "It's just a matter of time until this is outdated, and we'll be doing our work on video tape."

Littleton is in her element in the editing room, poring tirelessly over the endless reels of film, just as she once pored over volumes of French literature in OU's Bizzell Memorial Library. It is still a matter of selection, retaining only the best.

She recalls the professors who guided her intellect: "Dr. Willis Bowen, a wonderful researcher, an inspirational teacher; Dr. Seymour Feiler, the most influential of all, an 18th century literature lecturer who brought the period to life," and a raft of other friends.

"I learned a lot of valuable skills at OU," she says, "The most important was how to read . . . one reason I really like editing is that it's all about storytelling." What she learned from books, Littleton now applies creatively to film, sharing her talents in a medium thousands view. 