

# Elmer Strobel Phillips

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Elmer S. Phillips had a profound influence on visual communications as a profession and was often called the “father of visual aids” in agricultural colleges in the U.S. Land-Grant University System. He was affiliated with Cornell for most of his long lifetime. That affiliation began in 1928 as a freshman at the University, continued after his graduation in 1932, and lasted until his death at age 96. He climbed the “academic ladder” from Instructor (1935), to Assistant Professor (1941), to Associate Professor (1944), to Professor (1955) and Professor Emeritus (1968).

He was born and brought up in Brighton, New York, a son of George and Cora Phillips, and attended Elementary School #33 and East High School in Rochester. Known as “Flip” in those years because his young friends thought him to be flippant, the nickname lasted throughout his lifetime.

To help pay for his college education, “Flip” Phillips applied his photographic skills as a freelancer, making pictures for Cornell faculty members who needed them for their research and extension papers submitted for publication. In 1932, he graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree in Cornell’s College of Agriculture, and that year married Gladys “Pat” Douglas of Rochester. Because his part-time photographic work increased over the next two years, he approached the Dean of Agriculture with a proposal to establish an official full-time photography unit. Although sympathetic to the proposal, the Dean turned it down. However, Phillips was appointed as a Lecturer to teach oral and written expression courses and to broadcast the College’s Farm and Home Hour over the University radio station. Also, he was the “Voice of Schoellkopf Stadium” on a freelance basis for 28 years—the first person to “man the mike” at Cornell football games.

Even with that heavy workload, his photography interests continued. The Dean requested him to make a color motion picture to be financed by Ralston Purina Company. It would show the miracle of life developing in a chicken egg. The film, produced in cooperation with the Poultry Department and titled “Where Life Begins,” received national recognition. Widely used in commercial and educational circles, it was reviewed in a three-page color spread in *Life* magazine in the October 4, 1937 issue. Also, the Society of Motion Picture Engineers invited Phillips to present the film at its annual meeting that year in Washington, D.C. The invitation came because it was the first complete motion picture of a biological subject photographed with Kodachrome film. Phillips maintained close connections throughout most of his career with Eastman Kodak Company in Rochester. It provided him with

new types of color film before they were put on the market. However, of more value to him was the opportunity to become involved with pioneering experiments in photographic methods.

During World War II, motion pictures and slide sets were used by the College of Agriculture to aid efforts to increase food production and food preservation. In a three-year period during the early 1940s, approximately 30 motion pictures and 30,000 color slides were provided to County Extension Agents in New York State. An example of one of those motion pictures produced by Phillips in cooperation with the Pomology Department, showed farmers how to save labor in apple harvesting while maintaining quality of the product. It was the first farm labor film produced anywhere in full color. Professor Phillips also helped the Vegetable Crops Department produce the first live agricultural television program by a land-grant college. It was broadcast on March 24, 1943 over the General Electric Station in Schenectady, New York. (The topic: "Victory Gardens.") This initial venture into television ushered in a new era in communications for Cornell's Extension Service.

At the end of the war, a new joint Department of Extension Teaching and Information was established in 1945 for the College of Agriculture and the College of Home Economics. (The Department's name was later changed to Department of Communication Arts and the College of Home Economics to the College of Human Ecology.) Professor Phillips became head of the Visual Aids Service and it flourished under his leadership with additional staff, different audiences, and refined methods. Also, he taught visual communication courses for large numbers of Cornell students, conducted training schools for Extension personnel, and wrote several publications. Because television stations in the 1960s started to swing away from live public service presentations and put greater emphasis on filmed programs, he organized the Television Film Center to produce films for 29 TV stations and another unit to prepare scores of exhibits for educational purposes, including the New York State Fair in Syracuse and Farm and Home Week on the campus. Other exhibits were displayed abroad, including a large one for an international agricultural exhibition in Cairo, Egypt viewed by more than 800,000 persons from Near East and Middle East countries. Another told about Cornell's long-standing relationships with South American institutions and was shown in Brazil.

Professor Phillips served as a consultant for the Inter-American Institute of Agricultural Sciences in Turrialba, Costa Rica in 1956 and for the National Project in Agricultural Communications with headquarters in Michigan from 1957-59. During this period, he developed plans for visual workshops to train foreign nationals at the request of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Soon after “partially retiring” from Cornell in 1968, he was asked to direct the production of a 28-minute color motion picture showing the significance of agriculture in New York State. (Title: “Roots of Empire.”) It was sponsored by the College of Agriculture at Cornell, New York State Agricultural Resources Commission, Department of Agriculture and Markets, and Department of Commerce. The term “partially retiring” was an appropriate designation because he continued to maintain contacts with the University for several years on a less formal volunteer basis, accepting requests to be a guest lecturer in several courses and helping to solve visual communication technical problems.

His professional affiliations included these organizations: Photographic Association of America; Biological Photographic Society; American Association of Agricultural College Editors (Northeast Regional Director); American Wine Society (Editor of the Society’s *Journal*). He served in numerous leadership roles in the Ithaca community: chairman of the training committee for the Louis Agassiz Fuertes Council of Boy Scouts; a member of the Greater Ithaca Fact-Finding Board; chairman of the committee to draft the Town of Ithaca zoning ordinance; a member of the planning committee for a new Tompkins Community Hospital and a member of its Board of Managers. He was the longest continuous member of the City Club of Ithaca (58 years) and one of the architects of the breakaway from the national Exchange organization in the late 1950s as a protest against its restriction of blacks from membership. His hobbies ranged from fishing in streams and lakes of New York, Canada, and Costa Rica to woodworking, gardening and home winemaking.

In February 1996, the Phillips (“Flip” and “Pat”) moved to Kendal at Ithaca, a life-care retirement community near the Cornell campus. His wife predeceased him. Survivors include two sons and a daughter: Lawrence of London, England; John of Philadelphia, New York; Patricia Marion of Garden Valley, Idaho; and eleven grandchildren.

Professor Phillips will be long remembered as a man of many “firsts” and a highly creative and skilled communicator.

*Royal D. Colle, Ronald E. Ostman, William B. Ward*