

# Denny Clairmont Interview



Denny Clairmont at the Sci-Tech Awards (Technical Oscars), Feb 2016.

## **JON FAUER: When was the first time you set eyes on an Angénieux lens?**

**DENNY CLAIRMONT:** The first Angénieux zoom lens I saw belonged to my father Leonard Clairmont. He used them on his Kodak Cine Special. These Angénieux zoom lenses had a built-in finder and a prism to enable reflex viewing. He also had some earlier Bolex cameras, and he used the Angénieux lenses on them as well. Then, around 1957, he shot a movie in Europe for Jack Webb, who had just bought an Arriflex 2A camera (the movement was different from the 2B) and an Angénieux 35-140mm zoom. Dad fell in love with the camera and talked Jack Webb into giving him the camera as part of his pay. Until then, he had been using Mitchell Standards for MOS. Dad wrote a great article for International Photographer called "I Will Take The ARRI" and on the cover there was photo of him holding the Arriflex under a palm tree in the South Seas.

The 35-140 mm was the first Angénieux 35mm format zoom. It came with a front wide-angle attachment that made it a 17.5-70 mm zoom. Then he bought a 2x extender from Birns and Sawyer that made it a 70-280 mm zoom. So, this one lens was his universal lens. It was a normal zoom, a wide-angle zoom, and a tele zoom. All focal lengths from 17 to 280 mm. He used it a lot.

I started working at Birns and Sawyer in 1965. We had a lot of 16mm cameras in those days—shooting documentaries, corporate films and news. The newsreel cameramen, in those days, were using 16mm Bach Auricon cameras and they also carried a Bell & Howell 16mm Filmo as well. And as part of this package, they always had a 25 mm Angénieux prime lens that was *f*/.095. It was very fast and a very good lens.

Angénieux made a 14 mm lens for 35mm format that they never put in any kind of lens mount. So Birns and Sawyer and other companies bought those lenses -- it was the barrel and iris assembly -- and they added the mount. They sold many of those lenses and a lot of them were fitted with Arriflex Standard 35 mounts. In those days, the widest lens for the Arriflex 35mm camera was the Cooke 18 mm.

Of course, at Birns and Sawyer we had all kinds of different Angénieux zooms. Since they were fitted on the Auricon 16mm cameras, these Angénieux zooms came with optical finders. I got pretty good at repairing them. Here's a funny story—well, maybe not so funny.



Denny Clairmont was awarded the John A. Bonner Medal of Commendation by the Board of Governors of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Science on February 12, 2011. photo ©A.M.P.A.S

One time the newsreel crews were at Century City to cover a presidential visit. This was in the late '60s, early '70s. It wasn't a riot; it was a protest march against the Vietnam War. The police started beating people for no reason at all. The newsreel camera crews were running around filming with their Auricons. The police didn't want to be filmed, so they started running around with their nightsticks breaking the lenses off the cameras.

So I was very busy repairing all those broken Angénieux zoom lenses.

Birns and Sawyer used to buy Angénieux 12-120 zooms fitted with C mounts for 16mm format. But we couldn't buy Angénieux lenses fitted with Arriflex mounts because Arriflex had an exclusive arrangement where only they could sell Angénieux lenses with Arriflex mounts.

So we'd buy the Angénieux 16mm zooms with C mounts and we made our own Arriflex mounts for them. The Angénieux zooms with C mounts came at much lower price; it was the same lens, just a different mount.

## **What about 35mm format zooms?**

Angénieux had a 20-120mm zoom. I would buy those from Henryk Chroscicki because he had the best price. They cost about \$5,000 in those days.

One day we got a huge box of hardware and spare parts for An-

# Denny Clairmont



Left: Denny Clairmont with Arriflex 2C and Angénieux zoom.

Above: Denny's father Leonard Clairmont in the jungle with camera and essential accessories—pith helmet and pistol.

génieux zoom lenses, the metal housings, barrels, and so on. That was because they were selling the lenses to Panavision. But because Panavision was Panavising the lenses, including the barrels, all these extra barrels and parts were left over. This was long before Cooke got into making zoom lenses.

If you look up Angénieux on IMDB you're going to find that almost every recent movie was shot with Angénieux Optimo zoom lenses. Even Panavision, who make their own zooms now, also have a lot of customers insisting on Optimos.

## **You started Clairmont Camera in what year?**

I started at Birns and Sawyer in 1965. I was there until about 1976. We started Clairmont-Engel in 1976. The Engels retired as partners in 1980, and that's when we became just Clairmont Camera —1980.

We were initially on Franklin Avenue and Highland in a three-story building and we had part of the third floor there. But we outgrew that space so we moved over to Lankershim, near Magnolia. We were there until the Engels retired and then we moved to Vineland, near Ventura Blvd. We were there for many years until we built our building here at 4343 Lankershim Boulevard in North Hollywood in 1994.

Just in time for the earthquake.

We got the Angénieux 25-250, and then the Angénieux 25-250 HP, followed the Angénieux 25-250 HR. I believe we ordered 60 of those.

## **How many Angénieux zooms do you think you've ordered?**

That's a good question. I would say more than 500.

**I think you have more than anybody else in the world.**

**I would think so.**

**Would you say most of them are used on features or commercials?**

Everything. Absolutely every kind of production uses them.

**Have you noticed a change over the years in the use of the zoom? Is it used more often now that the cameras are becoming more sensitive?**

Well, on the jobs we do, they use the zoom lenses on almost all jobs. And then, they always go with prime lenses for handheld, Steadicam or when they need a faster lens.

**Would you say the bulk of most shows are done with a zoom?**

That is correct. Most of them are an Angénieux 24-290.

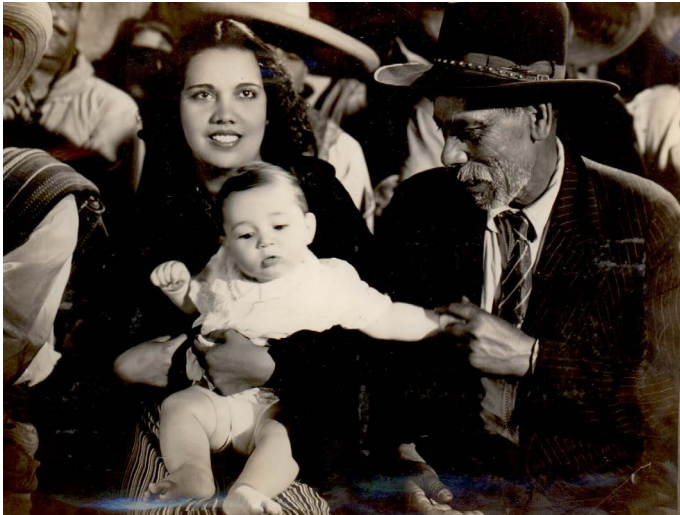
**That's really the workhorse, isn't it?**

Yes, it is. We have several hundred of them.

**Probably 95 percent of episodic TV are shot with zooms because you can save time.**

That's right. And the zoom gives you the wonderful ability to adjust framing by creeping in or out. I wouldn't call it zooming. During a pan or a dolly you can make small adjustments of the image.





Above: Denny, child actor, age 10 months, in his first movie, "The Gay Desperado," starring Leo Carrillo. Denny earned \$10 for 3 minutes of work. He went on to appear in 57 movies as an extra, stand in, and actor with lines.

## **Is there a change in the way zooms are used or the way you rent them? The new Optimos are lighter and smaller.**

One of the things I was going to talk about is the Optimo 24-290. It weighs 24 pounds. We really needed a lens to compete with Panavision. They had a 23-280 and we really needed something.

That was around '95, '96. I went to Angénieux and I told them, "You have to come up with something." We talked and they said they would look into it. Well, they got to work.

And then they invited me back to St. Héand and I sat there with them and they showed me a Powerpoint with three lenses they thought they could design. They came up with one that was fantastic. It was very sharp all the way out to the edges. It was really good, but it weighed 100 pounds. "Can't do that," I said. Then they showed me they had a second one that was also very big and very expensive.

Finally, they showed me what we call the 24-290 today. They showed me all the CAD drawings and the MTF measurements. In every case, it was excellent and it was better than any of their previous zooms.

I said, "This is it." It weighed about the same as the Panavision lens. And so they made it. Then we sat down and talked about it being just one lens. "You need to come up with a whole line of lenses," I said. So we talked about a future line of lenses. And over the next few years, they would talk to me and ask me for ideas and what they should come up with.

I always told them we had to have an image circle of 30 mm. They made a mistake on one lens, the 17-80. It had a smaller image circle. Somebody had told them they didn't need the larger diameter and that all they needed to cover was 1.85 and TV, which they did. And then they learned really quickly and never made that mistake again.

## **You were always advising Angénieux?**

Yes. I continue to do that. We're always talking.

## **What do you think about the Servo handgrip unit on the Angénieux zooms? Are any of your customers using these on-board controls?**

That's a sore subject with me because the assistants often ask us to take it off. So we take it off. Here's what I think. I think it



Denny Clairmont as child actor, pulling the hat of Lon Chaney, Jr on "Strange Confession" (1945).

should be left on the lens. You leave it on the lens. The servo has 3 motors in it. With the unit on the lens, if you want to use a normal, manual follow focus, you can simply disengage the motors. And then you can still put your follow focus on the left side of the camera where we always use it and it will work perfectly.

It's not a problem. If you're using a FIZ wireless lens control system from Howard Preston, as most people use today, or ARRI's, cmotion's or Scorpio's, or whatever you have, you just plug it in, and it will work. If you want to put the camera on a 70-foot crane with a remote head, you can engage the iris motor as well as the zoom and focus, and control your exposure right there from the ground.

And it gets better than that. The Angénieux Servo has metadata in it. I think that's really important today, especially on movies that have a lot of post and computer graphics. So, for all these reasons, I think it's useful and I think it should be left on the lens all the time.

## **Moving on to anamorphic—you have the new Angénieux anamorphic zooms. I think you got the first ones?**

Oh, yes. Absolutely. We have the 56-152 mm anamorphic zoom and people are becoming aware of it. One of our DP clients saw it recently, fell in love with it, and shot damn near his entire movie with that one lens. He also used the 0.75x wide angle attachment that goes on the front and makes it a 42-114 mm zoom. That wide angle attachment is really good. It's also interesting that it won't work on non-Angénieux zooms. And it works for both the Angénieux spherical Optimos and anamorphic as well. You can zoom through the entire range. It surprised the hell out of me.

## **How do you think Angénieux zoom lenses have influenced the style of the way people are shooting?**

You can zoom with them, you can use them like a prime and slightly adjust the framing in and out, or you can make subtle moves. My father always told me it's called a motion picture because things move, and within four seconds, you usually have to have some sort of a move. Either the camera moves, the actors move, or something has to move. Otherwise, the audience will become very bored. So, with the zoom, you can add motion to the shot. That concept goes back to the beginning of zoom lenses, which Angénieux pioneered.