Our Uncle Jim's Road to the Oscars
by Mary Palmstrom and Terry Shute Potter
AUTHORS’ FOREWORD

James Lovell Shute II—Uncle Jim to us—was our great uncle. While we met him perhaps once or twice when we were young, our generation didn’t know much about his life. Terry and I never met until the early 2000s, after we both became interested in learning about our family history.

In 2005 Terry decided to write Jim’s biography, and this story is based on that longer, unpublished piece.
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Oscar, Oscar... whose films won an Oscar? One of Gloucester’s own, James Lovell Shute II, that’s who. Decades before Gloucester earned Oscar recognition via the award-winning film of 2022, Coda, Jim’s involvement in two documentaries was recognized by two Oscars in 1949 and 1955.

Early Days in Gloucester

Born and raised in Gloucester, Jim was the fourth of five children born to William T. and Marion “Mattie” Shute. Educated in the Gloucester public school system, James followed the Classical Course program in high school. He also entered the military program at the school and, by his graduation in 1919, had earned the honor of being Adjutant of the 2nd Battalion and the Lieutenant of Company E. He was also the recipient of the “Sawyer Medal,” awarded to the students in each grade who obtain the highest grade point average. Jim continued his education at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, where he studied Antiques, Design, and Life.

As a child, Jim became interested in playing the piano (his love of music lasted his whole life). His other lifelong interest in theater was likely inspired by his parents and older siblings’ involvement in a Gloucester theater group, the Chapin Guild. The Guild performed plays and was predominantly comprised of people from the Independent Christian Church. Most of the performances were held in the church vestry, and records show that they designed, built, and
painted sets for these productions. Jim’s college studies combined with his early love of music and theater paved the way to a career in stage design and technical theater.

One of his Merchant cousins Abby Shute Merchant (a first cousin once removed and named after Jim’s grandmother), may also deserve some credit for influencing the interest Jim developed in theater. She studied theater and writing at Smith College, and after graduating, she worked as a writer. For two years, Abby was a part owner of the Prairie Playhouse in Galesburg, IL. She worked as a playwright from 1912 to 1940 and wrote a number of plays. During much of their adult lives, Abby and Jim were good friends, especially when they both lived in New York City.

While studying at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Jim became involved with George P. Baker’s “47 Workshop,” which focused on playwriting and was gaining prominence at Harvard. His cousin Abby also studied in the workshop a few years earlier. During that time, Jim’s primary interest was in the technical side of theater, but he also tried his hand at acting and writing.

Jim’s connection with the “47 Workshop” also led to his eventual work with Eugene O’Neill and Robert Edmond Jones; both had also been part of the program years prior and had then moved on and established the Provincetown Playhouse on the tip of Cape Cod. In 1922, Jim began working as a production assistant at the Provincetown Playhouse, where he started by doing whatever was necessary, even sweeping floors. A few years after starting in Provincetown, the playhouse moved to Greenwich Village, NY. Starting there eventually landed Jim in New York City, where he had always wanted to be. Thanks to that job, Jim entered the world of professional entertainment. That first job helped give him access to an extensive network of talented individuals with established careers in theater.

On to Broadway

Some might be surprised to learn that Jim performed on Broadway before turning to writing as his primary focus. That took place on April 6, 1924, when the Provincetown Playhouse presented the Provincetown Players in a performance of *The Ancient Mariner*, in which Jim had a small part. Perhaps this was a fitting first play for a young man from a Gloucester family with
ties going well back to early fishermen and the fishing industry. Jim had another small part in *The Crime in Whistler’s Room*, which opened on Broadway on October 12, 1924, and again in March 1926 at the Cherry Lane Playhouse, in a production of *The Moon is a Gong*. In addition to his other job and the small acting parts, Jim created stage settings and illustrations for the *One-Act Plays for Young People* by Moritz Jagendorf.

In subsequent years, Jim continued working as a writer and traveling in Europe. Once he returned from Europe around 1930, he became an assistant to Jed Harris, a theatrical producer with a long and successful career on Broadway. (Family information indicates that it was around this time that he began to be called Jimmy by his good friends.) During Jimmy’s time with Jed Harris, Harris launched some
very successful shows on Broadway: *Uncle Vanya* (starring Lillian Gish), *Croquette* (starring Helen Hayes), *The Green Bay Tree* (starring Laurence Olivier), and *The Lake* (starring Katharine Hepburn). Katharine was one of Jimmy’s long-time friends, and they likely met during his time with Harris. Due to Jimmy’s work as an assistant to Harris, he was able to meet many others with similar aspirations, and one of them was Nancy Hamilton. She broke into Broadway in 1934 as a lyricist for *New Faces* and was the lyricist for three highly successful Broadway musical reviews; she also wrote the lyrics for the popular song *How High the Moon*. They remained close friends for the rest of their lives.

While the country was still recovering from the Great Depression, and jobs were still not always easy to find, Jimmy left his position with Jed Harris and Broadway in 1934. Fortune was on his side, though the exact history of securing his next job isn’t known. He joined one of the hottest screenwriting duos in film, Charles MacArthur and Ben Hecht. An unfortunate health problem resulted in Jimmy leaving that job later that same year.

**The March of Time**

Jimmy’s next adventure led him to the March of Time (MOT), a series of short feature films sponsored by Time, Inc., which had begun as a radio show. The new MOT film series was designed to use actual news footage along with re-enactments to produce 20-minute programs. He stayed in various positions at the MOT from 1935 to 1949. Jimmy describes getting the job with MOT this way, “I was absolutely unemployed, and then this girl I knew who knew Roy Larson over at Time, Inc. told me to go see him; he was doing something.” Thanks to the tip, Jimmy went to see Roy, and he then met with De Rochemont, a veteran filmmaker enlisted by Roy to produce the new film series. De Rochemont often hired people he liked and put them in jobs he had open, whether or not they had any experience or ability. According to Jimmy, “I never thought I’d last. I thought I was going to be fired. This was work I knew nothing about; I just fell into it.” Jimmy also recalled feeling he was hired principally because his grandfather’s first cousin was Henry A. Shute, the author of De Rochemont’s favorite book, *The Diary of a Real Boy*.

With only his theater background and no screenplay writing experience, Jimmy began at MOT during its 3rd issue in June 1935. During his time with MOT, he wrote script, commentary, or
both for some 200 films. Over the nearly fifteen years with MOT, Jimmy was first the Chief Script Writer, then the Head of the Editorial Board, and in the final year, was an Associate Producer. Acting on the tip from that friend landed him the job that led to his award-winning writing career. Louis De Rochemont became fascinated with the idea of making a feature film and, after some effort, convinced the staff at Time, Inc. to produce a feature-length documentary without harming their “news” reputation. The first one was *The Ramparts We Watch*, released in 1940. Jimmy was involved throughout the making of this film, which as with the shorter MOT films, used actual news footage and re-enactments. After the success of this first effort, they moved on to *We Are the Marines*, written by Jimmy in collaboration with John Martin, J. Everitt, and John Monks; directed by Jack Glenn and Lothar Wolff; and produced by De Rochemont. This film was released in 1942.

**1949 Oscar Win: A Chance to Live**

Throughout Jimmy’s time with MOT, *March of Time* was nominated for five Academy Awards in the Documentary category. Finally, in 1949 the MOT won the Oscar for *A Chance to Live*, a film about a Catholic priest and the orphaned boy’s community he began in Italy following the War. As the Associate Producer, Jimmy was responsible for this film’s production scripts and narration, and he did some directing. Jimmy had relocated to Paris when those awards were announced, so he received the news via telegram.

The move to Paris was the result of MOT winding down and an offer from Lothar Wolff (formerly a director with MOT) to join the Office of Military Government, U.S. (OMGUS) film unit, European division as head of the scriptwriting department in Paris. Jimmy accepted the offer and noted in his answer, “As far as I am concerned, my life began when I was 50.” Jimmy chose to take a leave of absence from MOT, which lasted two years.
OMGUS was part of the Marshall Plan and officially The European Recovery Program which aimed to help Europe recover from World War II. The goal was to produce 20–30-minute films to help motivate the Europeans to take the necessary actions to recover from the suffering and devastation World War II had caused. Thanks to this new position, Jimmy had the chance to travel all over Europe while working with many talented people in the Motion Picture Division who believed in the ability of film to effect social change. Notes provided by Jimmy indicate that during this time, six to eight of the films he wrote for the Marshall Plan Film Unit were honored by being chosen for showing at the Cannes, Edinburgh, and Venice Film Festivals.

Since Jimmy was only on leave from the MOT, he still worked on some small projects for them even though his main job was with the Marshall Plan Film Unit. In 1950, he worked on another feature-length MOT documentary, *The Holy Year at the Vatican*, produced by Richard De Rochemont and edited by Lothar Wolff. Around this time, Jimmy was also working with Nancy Hamilton on the script and narration for *Helen Keller in Her Story* (also known as “The Unconquered”), and its filming began in 1952.

**1955 Oscar Win: Helen Keller in Her Story**

While working on the script for *Helen Keller in Her Story*, Jimmy went to Italy and decided to stay there permanently. He remained there for two and a half years, and most likely, he no longer held the same position with the Marshall Plan Film Unit. During his time in Italy, he completed the final draft of the Helen Keller documentary. His work did not go unnoticed and in 1955, *Helen Keller in Her Story*, won the Academy Award for Best Feature Documentary with Nancy Hamilton as producer. In 1954 Jimmy returned to the place he most often called home, New York City. At this time, he turned to freelance writing and consulting work for the Ford Foundation. The Ford Foundation is an international organization formed to strengthen democratic values, reduce poverty and injustice, promote international cooperation, and support human achievement.

Throughout his career, Jimmy had also worked on some commercial films for many well-known companies, including some of the following: the New York Stock Exchange, Bank of America, the Cleveland Electric Illuminating Company, the American Red Cross, the United States Air Force, and the United States Navy. These were not the films that earned him honors or awards,
but they helped make sure his rent and things like the theater, symphony concerts, and personal travel expenses could be afforded. His writing career continued with writing the narration for Louis De Rochemont’s 1958 Cinemiracle film, *Windjammer, the Voyage of the Christian Radich*, a box-office attraction in this country, as well as in Europe and Canada. He also completed a series of short films publicizing the construction of the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, *A Legend is Born* featuring Risë Stevens of the Metropolitan Opera, and *Design for Music* featuring Leonard Bernstein (May 1960). Part of his later freelance work also included television writing, producing and directing documentaries, and condensed operas.

Not all efforts lead to notable awards. Sometimes knowing a good script or film has been produced gives one all the satisfaction needed. At other times, it is quite special to earn something that is often elusive—wished for by many by only won by a small few. We are honored that the Oscars recognized his contributions and that we have a chance to share Uncle Jim’s story. James Lovell Shute II was one of Gloucester’s own.

**JAMES LOVELL SHUTE, II DECEMBER 18, 1900 – JANUARY 9, 1981**
AFTERWORD

Author Terry Shute Potter developed brain cancer in 2017. Sadly, after a courageous battle, she passed away in April 2019. Before her death, Terry was Director of the J. Welles Henderson Archive & Library at the Independence Seaport Museum in Philadelphia.

Co-author Mary Palmstrom was born and raised in Ohio. She spent 35 years happily teaching junior high and high school art, retiring in 2011.

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