

## Verna Fields

by Gerald Peary

If I should venture to LA seeking film employ, I know which doorbell to buzz: Suite 507 at Universal Pictures. Behind the portals and past a secretary sits Verna Fields, a Universal vice president. I could work for this woman. With thirty-eight years of experience in the industry, she knows her business as film executive, but she's an artist first. Fields has edited more than thirty motion pictures, including Peter Bogdanovich's golden period of *What's Up, Doc?* (1972), *Paper Moon* (1973), and *Daisy Miller* (1974). She brought George Lucas, her pupil at USC, into the studios, and she supervised the ground-breaking editing on *American Graffiti* (1973). Then she edited *The Sugarland Express* (1974), 23-year-old Steven Spielberg's first major picture. That work led to her most heralded assignment: cutting *Jaws* (1975).



There are appealing differences between Fields - a nice, approachable, call-me-by-my-first-name Jewish lady - and her movie-myopic director kiddie corps. Fields has a developed (and progressive) political conscience, including a history of artistic involvement with blacklisted talents; and she paid dues-making agit-prop, pro-Chicano documentaries in the orange groves of California. (See below.)

We began our talk on familiar ground for her, with the question of how she strategized to break Hollywood barriers against women in production jobs.

"I'm the wrong one to ask," she said. "I was totally ambitionless. I got into movies by accident. I was on canteen duty during World War II, doing nothing special. I met my friend Margie Johnson one day, and we were on our way to serve coffee to the GIs. But her boyfriend was an assistant editor, so she said, 'Come over to the studio first. It's fun.' Well, this guy met us at the gate. He was cute. I started hanging out there to be with the cute guy."

Actually, the then Verna Hellman was no stranger behind the studio gate. Her father, Sam Hellman, a managing editor of The St. Louis Post-Dispatch, had moved his family to Los Angeles so he could write screenplays. Hellman scripted *Little Miss Marker* (1934) and *Stanley and Livingstone* (1939) and other 1930s successes. But he had higher aspirations for his daughter than Hollywood. "My father was very cerebral," Verna said. He sent her to a fancy Parisian secondary school at the College Feminin de Bouffemont, before she studied at USC, receiving a BA in journalism.

Back at the studio, director Fritz Lang needed help with sound editing, so he asked, “Who is that young girl always hanging around?” Thus “discovered” by Lang, Verna was hired on as an editing apprentice, without knowledge or experience; and four years later, she joined the union.

At the same time, Verna’s crush didn’t go away. “Sam Fields was the cute guy,” she said. “We got married and I became Verna Fields. I had two children and didn’t work for eight years. But in 1954, Sam died suddenly. It was very easy to find employment in those early days of TV. I was sound editor for episodes of *Death Valley Days*, and the children’s programs, *Sky King and Fury*. I’d tell the kids I was the Queen of Saturday Morning.

“I made special arrangements to be able to come home in the afternoon [of each work day] and make dinner for my kids. When they went to bed, I’d keep on. I built a cutting room in back of the house and I’d stay there until 2 a.m.” Between 1954-1960, Fields served as a sound editor for television’s Four Star Productions. In 1960, she emerged as a full-fledged Hollywood editor, thanks to director Irving Lerner.

It is the little-known Lerner, author of leftist articles on film theory in addition to directing (*Murder by Contract*, 1959, *Cry of Battle*, 1963), who became Fields’s mentor. They met behind the scenes on *Spartacus* (1960), where Lerner was putting in uncredited time as a sound editor. Signed to make *Studs Lonigan*, James T. Farrell’s fictional trilogy squeezed into a “B” picture, he brought Fields along to edit. “Lerner’s trust really helped me. He taught me the right way to approach film.”

Fields had found her calling. Quickly, she edited the classic work of cinema vérité-inspired fiction, *The Savage Eye* (1960). In 1961, she won the Motion Picture Sound Editing Award for *El Cid*. In 1965, she was drafted into Lyndon B. Johnson’s Great Society, editing films for the USIA, HEW, and the Office of Economic Opportunity.

“I was interested in using film for social reform,” she said. “We took 16mm cameras into Farmersville, California, where Chicanos picked oranges. We photographed a Chicano turkey shoot and then we invited the real people to see the film. We recorded the stories of two Chicano boys who had been thrown out of high school because they had bottles of cologne in their lockers. The boys said into the camera, ‘They didn’t want us to graduate.’ We ran this piece of film for the school board, and it was clear that the board looked like asses.”

As we talked, Fields became excited, remembering fondly her “1960s experience,” those consciousness-raising days. “Unfortunately, we were cut short by the change of administration. The Office of Economic Opportunity switched from LBJ to Nixon.”

While still working for the USIA, Fields took a one-year teaching job at USC. “I had this footage of unmarked airports for a USIA film, *Journey to the Pacific*, so I hired all these kids from USC to find out where these airports were. George Lucas was a student in my class, and another student recommended him to me. At the same time, I hired Marcia Griffin, who was already in the union as an apprentice editor. It was at my house that she met George.”

When Lucas directed *American Graffiti*, Marcia Griffin, by then Marcia Lucas, did the initial editing cut, then Fields came in for the final version. They are listed as co-editors, and between them they set the style of cutting for the rest of the 1970s: to the nostalgic beat of old rock songs. Marcia Lucas's reward was to become solo editor on *Star Wars*. "Marcia's very down-to-earth. You'd like her," Fields told me. "George is quite an artist with a great visual sense. But for a personality, he's quite withdrawn. He's better now, but then you couldn't get him to say, 'Good morning.'"

Spielberg and *Jaws*? "I was the liaison with the studio for Steven. When they thought of ditching the picture because the shark wasn't working, I told them, 'Keep doing it, even if you need to use miniatures.'"

*Jaws* scared the world, brought in a fortune for Universal, and made Verna Fields, who won an Academy Award, about as famous "overnight" as an editor ever gets. "Steve told me it was because I had cut the first picture that was a monumental success in which you can really see the editing. And people discovered that it was a woman who edited *Jaws*."

Her big reward came in 1976, when Fields was appointed as a Universal Vice President. "I go to all the previews. I have responsibilities on special projects, like supervising the product reel for the forthcoming *Flash Gordon* and shooting a Burt Reynolds' *Smokey and the Bandit II* promo for Showtime. I'm responsible for our films getting rated, from G to R. I make sure that we have proper prints and proper theaters. I see all the dailies of all the films. I go to weekly post-production meetings. Between all that, I try to get scripts read and talk to writers."

How do her former collaborators feel, those Young Turks of Hollywood who used to call her affectionately, "Mother Cutter"?

This is my only question that stung a bit.

"All these young filmmakers are possessive," she said. "They feel I belong to them, and they feel a certain resentment - that I went to the other side. In calmer moments, of course, they know it isn't true, that I can do more for them now."

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