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Forty in Webster Groves

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FORTY IN WEBSTER GROVES

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**By
Sheila Condon, B.S.**

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An Abstract Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School
of Lindenwood College in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of Master of Art
1992
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Now the teenagers are forty in Webster Groves. I decided

Since I am earning a master of art in Mass Communication with an emphasis in video production, I decided to make a video documentary culminating the writing, interviewing, photography and editing skills gained through my studies.

In the fall of 1965, CBS News producer Arthur Barron and reporter Charles Kuralt came to Webster Groves, Missouri to make a documentary.

It was supposed to be about the average sixteen-year-old in an upper-middle-class suburb. Instead it criticized both the teenagers' and their parents' values making them appear highly superficial and materialistic.

Sixteen in Webster Groves was based on a 36-page survey designed by Barron and the University of Chicago National Opinion Research Center. The results of the survey were to reveal the teenagers thoughts on life, education, and politics. When the results were in, an employee at the University of Chicago remarked that the film should not be called *Sixteen in Webster Groves* but *Forty in Webster Groves*.

Now the teenagers are forty *in Webster Groves*. I decided

to re-visit them on the eve of their twenty-fifth high school reunion to explore their feelings on the documentary.

I chose four people who were involved in the original documentary: A parent, the football queen, a hood, and a newspaper columnist who lived in Webster Groves at the time. All four had different perspectives on the film, some quite remarkable.

The theme of *Forty in Webster Groves* is that the conservative parents of the sixties have not changed with the times, but the conservative students have. To express my theme, I cut from clips of the original documentary to reactions from the four interviews. It becomes quite obvious by the end of the program that the parents have not changed much but the former students have.

Sixteen in Webster Groves: Fact or Fiction?

Assistant Professor Michael Davis, PhD
Chairperson and Advisor

Assistant Professor Edna Bernard

Adjunct Professor Carolyn Scott

by
Sheila Condon, B.S.

A Culminating Project Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School
of Lindenwood College in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of Master of Art.

1992

COMMITTEE IN CHARGE OF CANDIDACY:

Assistant Professor Michael Castro, PhD.,
Chairperson and Advisor

Assistant Professor Edie Barnard

Adjunct Professor Carolyn Scott

In 1965 CBS news producer Arthur Barron was assigned to make a documentary portraying the average, middle-class American, middle class sixteen-year-old. Barron had recently completed the *Berkely Rebels*, a documentary about four University of California at Berkely students who were considered *anti establishment*, or activists (Rosenthal 140).

He was now to make a documentary on the average sixteen-year-old and portray him in a positive light.

He wanted to base his findings on scientific research. To do this, Barron enlisted the help of the University of Chicago National Opinion Research Center to develop a survey for the sixteen-year-olds. He also went to the census bureau to find the perfect community. Barron was searching for a typical, upper-middle-class American community that represented education, home ownership, and income (Rosenthal 135).

The census bureau came up with seven ideal communities. Of those, Barron chose Webster Groves because he liked the name. With an average income of \$8,500 annually, it fit the bill comfortably (Start 231).

In an interview in The New Documentary in Action,

In an interview in The New Documentary in Action, Barron tells author Alan Rosenthal that initially he did want to portray the teenager in a positive light. He said that Webster Groves had a fine school system, was a fine community, and most of its children went on to college (Rosenthal 134).

Barron approached the Webster Groves School Board who overwhelmingly approved. He then administered a 36-page survey to the sixteen-year-olds of Webster Groves High School (Kuralt 2).

The results of the questionnaire were the beginning of the end for the people of Webster Groves. Barron reflected on the results:

The people involved at the University of Chicago said to me: *The film shouldn't be called "Sixteen in Webster Groves," but "Forty in Webster Groves"* The picture revealed by the survey was not one of youth experiencing a beautiful freedom and undergoing a period of extreme idealism and self-expression, but a picture of children who were robotized, narrow, and prejudiced--dupes of the values which produced their parents and which produced an American Capitalist, middle-class bureaucratic society (Rosenthal 135).

CBS came to film the sixteen-year-olds of Webster Groves from November 1, to December 1, 1965 giving Webster

its sixty minutes of fame. It took two months for the producers to cut twenty-two hours of film into a one hour television program (Start 233).

Scheduled for early in February, the show was canceled, rescheduled for Friday, February 25, 1966. All over Webster Groves TV sets went on. You could have heard a pin drop a minute past eight.

You could have heard a pin drop at a thirty minutes past nine, half hour after the show ended. Most of Webster was sitting in stunned silence. They just couldn't believe what had happened (Start 233).

However, the citizens of Webster Groves got the last word. For the first time in the history of broadcast television, the producers and Charles Kuralt went back to Webster Groves to film the town's reaction. Unfortunately, most did not come off much better (Rosenthal 139).

Trouble began in the first few minutes of the film.

Sixteen in Webster Groves opened with a group of very somber looking teenagers with a voice-over of Charles Kuralt saying:

They are sixteen-years-old and they live in Webster Groves, Missouri. They are children of abundance, of privilege, of the good life in America. But is there something missing in their lives--something that

has nothing to do with good schools, nice houses and two cars in the garage? Is something missing? (Kuralt 1).

St Louis Post-Dispatch columnist and author of Webster Groves, Clarissa Start stated in her book that something was indeed missing--a classmate who had died. The students were holding a memorial service for him, presenting a flag in his honor (Start 233).

Kuralt addressed this issue in *Webster Groves Revisited*. He stated that none of the footage from the memorial service was used. However, Start insists that this is not true (Kuralt, 29).

As *Sixteen in Webster Groves* progressed, Webster teens looked complacent and materialistic. Kuralt dubbed Webster Groves as a *place where silverware makes you feel good* (Kuralt 3).

Still, other discrepancies cropped up in the documentary. One scene at the Monday Club showed a group of parents dancing.

Parents were shown, a pretty lively group of them. One Sunday school teacher took a lot of kidding from friends who *didn't know she could dance like that*. She had to explain that she couldn't. The

camera had flashed her face on the body of a go-go dancer CBS brought for their entertainment (Start 235).

That was not the only distorted instance. Start also mentioned that some of the student replies were used out of context. Sometimes the reply was used as an answer to a question that had not been asked.

Sample: A football player was asked what he did to prepare for the big game. *I go down to the basement and lift weights, he said.* On the documentary, the question was about his reaction to pressures from his parents to excel. What did he do when pushed to his limits--*go down in the basement and lift weights* (Start 235).

What seemed to bother the citizens of Webster Groves the most was what was left out of the documentary. Only a passing mention of the churches, or the teens' involvement in community service was presented.

Arthur Barron also interviewed Sister Jaqueline of Webster University who was in the national news at the time. Barron said it was one of the finest interviews he had ever done. It was absent in the documentary (Start 233).

The parents of Webster Groves came off looking the worst. Barron said that the parents were highly materialistic

and that their values were absolutely deplorable. One of Barron's techniques to emphasize this point was to put lights on a red convertible parked in front of a home so it was clearly visible from the window in the background (Rosenthal 135-137).

Not everyone was terrible upset about the documentary.

Sue Weber Feldmann, the Webster Groves Football Queen of 1965, admitted in a 1986 interview in St. Louis Magazine:

Looking Back at it now it was more truthful than we would like to admit. It portrayed the girls as wanting four-bedroom houses and silver. At the time because we were insulated, it made us look superficial. But at sixteen, we were superficial. (Friedman 49).

Perhaps of all the people featured in the documentary,

Feldmann received the most unusual response. She was the only person in the film to be identified by first and last name.

She received a dozen letters from all over the United States and one from Germany. The letters were not exactly fan mail.

People wrote to her asking if she really drove a Corvette to school. She did not (Feldmann).

Did Barron's version of life in Webster Groves--differing greatly to some of the residents who live there--make the documentary legitimate?

As a film maker Barron was expressing his point of view and used techniques to make his point. The film was quite effective.

Documentaries are supposed to portray or analyze people or events with little or no fictionalization.

Barron did use a little fiction in some of his filming and was highly criticized. One episode involved a two minute scene in which some teenage girls were putting on makeup. The scene was highly stylized and looked like a commercial. The girls were seen in close-ups applying make-up, lipstick, and eyeshadow. To make the scene look softer, vaseline was applied to the lens (Rosenthal 138).

According to Barron, the president of CBS news did not like that scene:

I was told that in the future not to do scenes like that because they weren't true. It was shaped journalism. This brings in the whole problem of objectivity, truth, and journalism on the networks. For the networks the truth has to be recorded, not

shaped (Rosenthal 138).

Another created sequence in the film was the car driving scene. Barron stated that he found that driving was important to the sixteen-year-olds, a form of freedom, a way of getting away from it all (Rosenthal 136).

I decided that there had to be a scene in the film which reflected that survey finding, so I designed a scene to evoke that feeling. What I did was to send out word to twenty kids that I wanted them to assemble with their cars at a particular hour on a particular day at a particular spot. I told them we would rendezvous with them at a particular time to film them, and some we would meet later; I told them that the cameraman would be on this street, with the camera down in the sewer, and we would do the filming, and that there would be a helicopter section of filming, and so on. It was designed and shaped almost as though we were making a feature film (Rosenthal 136).

Reflecting on this scene recently, Sue Weber Feldmann, who was in one of the cars stated: *If we were driving like that on Lockwood any other day of the year, we would have been arrested* (Feldmann).

Barron was trying to capture the carefree feelings of the teenagers as they cruised. The slow-motion and odd angles did indeed reflect a dream-like sequence.

Another criticism by many of the people of Webster Groves was that the parents who were featured in the film were a minority, a narrow-minded group of parents who were not statistically representative of all, or even most, of Webster's parents.

I thought very seriously about making the group more dynamic, in the sense of having parents who disagree, but rejected it for the following reasons. It is not my job as a film maker to be an encyclopedia, to show what is the total reality of the situation. I was out to capture the overwhelming feeling of the community, and I wanted to do that in the strongest, most cinematic, most devastating way possible (Rosenthal 137).

Although most of the people in Webster will never agree, *Sixteen in Webster Groves* did have value as a documentary.

Arthur Barron portrayed the community as he saw it and based his portrayal on the survey findings. He had certain notions of what the people of Webster Groves were like and filmed to portray his point of view.

Not all parents were narrow-minded, and not all families were wealthy. But had Barron done the documentary the way the people of Webster Groves would have liked, it would not have been as an effective film.

Apparently his peers agreed, *Sixteen in Webster Groves* was awarded the 1967 Film Festival Award for the best social documentary of the year (Rosenthal 132).

The film was photographed in two styles-cinema verite", and staged scenes. Both were used to enhance Barron's point-of-view based on the survey results.

Using these techniques Barron portrayed Webster Groves as he saw it, not from all points of view. If all points of view were stated, none would be obvious therefore the message would be unclear.

Sixteen in Webster Groves may not be a total picture of life in Webster Groves, but it does portray a part of the community.

Barron questioned the values of certain parents and portrayed how these values impacted upon their children. The year was 1965 and such values were coming into question.

In retrospect, many of those involved in the documentary, mostly the sixteen-year-olds, realize that it was truthful.

Judging the value of *Sixteen in Webster Groves* as a

documentary, depends upon viewpoint. Through Barron's point-of-view, it is a highly stylized, emotional film. Seen through the eyes of some of those portrayed in it, it is a not-so-nice piece of fiction.

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