

KEN BURNS: AMERICA'S FOREMOST AMERICAN CHRONICLER OF THE AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

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Nobody knows America better than Ken Burns. For years, Burns has informed and educated American audiences with his informative and educational films about the icons and events that have defined this great land. After *The Civil War*, *Baseball*, *Lewis and Clark*, and, most recently, *Jazz*, skeptics claimed he could get no closer to the pulse of the American experience. As we've learned, these skeptics are wrong--dangerously wrong.



American
Filmmaker Ken
Burns

We caught up with the master filmician in the Salina, Kansas Bingo Hall, where he was on location filming for his upcoming project, Ken Burns' *Flax*. He spoke to us briefly about a his upcoming projects.

KEN BURNS' FLAX

"Most people know flax only as another sweater color in a J. Crew catalog. But it was a crucial grain in our Nation's progress. Barring wheat, alfalfa, and oats, flax is truly America's greatest and most influential grain. Flax is to American agriculture what Louis Armstrong was to jazz—Winton Marsalis can verify this. It was essential to our victory in the Revolutionary War. I have twelve thousand still photographs and catchy folk songs to prove it. You've heard of the amber waves of grain? That's flax. Khaki pants? Flax. The first American flag? Well, wool. But flax would have been better."

KEN BURNS' SLURPEE

"One of America's most oft-maligned frozen beverages, ghettoized by the daiquiri and colada set. What's left unsaid is that, were it not for cherry Slurpees, JFK never would have been elected President. My seventeen-night, pay-per-view special doesn't touch on that, but it's true."

KEN BURNS' HAIRCUT

"Mine's an honest cut. Some—nay, many—say it looks pre-pubescent. But it's honest. I'm all about honesty. Like America. I predict that someday mine will be regarded among the greatest haircuts in our troubled history."

KEN BURNS' CHEESEBURGER

"Many of us take the cheeseburger totally for granted. For example, you drive into your favorite roadside restau-

rant and there they are—hundreds of them! Even right here in this bingo hall. Look—there's one, and another. That little old lady, she's eating one, too! They're everywhere! They're even eating them in Canada! Which prompted me to ask: 'What are the cultural ramifications of such a ubiquitous foodstuff?' Well, they are myriad, and I plan to investigate every single one of them in my 28-part series, which will debut on PBS in late 2005. *Cheeseburger* is my most ambitious project since *Jazz*."

His most ambitious project since *Jazz*!? We just couldn't let Burns escape without qualifying such a statement. He graciously offered to let us print a short excerpt from his screenplay.

KEN BURNS' CHEESEBURGER: AN EXCERPT

FADE IN: Shot of a burger frying on a diner grill. Grease pops. A hand appears, top right, places a slice of American on the patty. Hand retreats from frame. As cheese begins to melt, freeze-frame, then slow zoom toward burger as sound effect of grease popping continues. When burger fills the frame, visual and audio dissolve to:



A Man Dreams
of America

CLOSE-UP of the Hamburglar, taking a half-hearted bite of a hamburger. Sound effect of grease becomes the falling of a light rain, which we recognize as camera pulls back, revealing Hamburglar sitting in a tiny, red, plastic chair in a McDonald's PlayStation, the floor-to-ceiling Plexiglas wall behind him being touched from outside by rain. Hamburglar looks sadly at his burger, sets it on its wrapper on his lap. He lights a cigarette, blows a plume of smoke straight up, then looks at the camera:

"I should have been the Cheeseburgerlar."

He looks down at his hamburger as Voiceover of Ronald Goldberg begins:

"It's the American dream. It's baseball and Grandma and apple pie all ground up, cooked, and stuck on a bun. It's what every single one of us dreams about."

CUT TO: Well-dressed man, sitting in a high-backed brown leather chair. The wall behind him is lined with diplo-

mas and awards. Before him on his desk rests a solid-gold statue of a cheeseburger. Caption on screen reads: *Ronald Goldberg, Dean of McDonald's Hamburger College.*

"Millions of people strive to serve that dream each year. Maybe billions and billions. But so few attain it. These kids come in here and you can just see it in their eyes--that hunger. They've sacrificed so much, worked hard, done all the right things just so they could get here. But hunger's only part of it. It's not enough to want it. On orientation day, I tell them, 'Look at the person to the left of you; look at the person to your right. One of you won't be here next semester.' That's America."

CUT BACK TO: Freeze-frame of cheeseburger. The sizzling sound grows louder and louder as we continue to zoom-in until the burger is almost unrecognizable.

CUT TO: Bespectacled, bearded man in wrinkled shirt and faded sport coat. He sits in a nondescript office, surrounded by books. Caption: Dr. Raymond "Skip" Holden, Assistant Professor of Amero-American Studies, New York University.

"I can't begin to tell you how many papers I've seen presented at these so called scholarly conferences where the tenure-grubbing pretender at the podium makes wild, specious claims about how the cheeseburger originated in Germany. The fact of the matter, as one would find if one simply explored the extant primary sources, is that the German creation, while made of seasoned ground beef that was formed into patties and then cooked and served between two layers of bread, and which were by all accounts quite delicious (unlike many of my colleagues, I am not one of these Hamburg-bashers!), this creation lacked the very element that defines the cheeseburger as a uniquely American culinary form: cheese. My research clearly shows that this particular innovation, while not yet traceable to an exact person or date, most likely originated in the early part of the 20th century in Queens, New York. There is a folk tale from that region in which a young short-order cook is visited in a dream by a benign presence who leads him to a pasture. There the young man spies a cow carrying, atop its back, a giant wheel of cheese. The cook awakes in a

start, races to his stove, and the rest, of course, is history. American history."

CUT BACK TO: Hamburglar. He holds his burger in his right hand, gestures with it.

"America made me want something I don't even want."

He takes a bite as Voiceover of Thaddeus Powers begins:

"The Burglar's a bitter little man. He wasn't even born in this country, you know."

CUT TO: Tall, incredibly handsome, 40-ish, CEO-type man. He is walking on a treadmill in an opulent-looking, corporate office. Caption: *Thaddeus Powers, A.K.A. "Ronald McDonald"*

"We took him in off the street. Two-bit, common thief. Didn't even have a costume. We gave him life, an identity. Now he's a broken-down has-been with soaring cholesterol. Yeah, he came to us with the 'Cheeseburglar' idea. But you wanna know the truth? By then, the guy was such a gluttonous criminal we didn't even want him associated with our hamburgers, much less the jewel in our crown. We're still waiting for a man with enough integrity to bear that mantle. You know how they say that greatness only comes around once a generation? Well, I'm still waiting for my Cheeseburglar."

CUT TO: Older, red-faced man, wears a bow tie. He's seated on a barstool, a shot and a beer in front of him. Caption: Arthur Smithson, Historian.

"What few people realize is that a cheeseburger isn't just a meal. It's America. You go to Europe and ask for a cheeseburger, you go to Asia, China, and whatnot--they just look at you like you're speaking a whole other language. The cheeseburger is the most awe-inspiring, momentous, far-reaching creation in the history of our planet. Like America. A cheeseburger is both a microcosm and a macrocosm of everything that's good and great about this land. Both. Think about that next time you're taking a bite out of the best America has to offer."

RETURN TO: Close-up of the freeze-framed cheeseburger. The sound effect of grease popping dissolves into applause. Slow fade to black. ♣