The story of Mental Hygiene began, for me, in winter 1979. Within the cloistered confines of Glassboro State College the editors of Venue—of which I was one—staged an eight-hour film festival, Filmarama. It featured battered 16mm prints from the college “Ed. Media” department: Cattle (a documentary about slaughterhouses), Johnny Lingo (a Mormon film about Pacific islanders), and everyone’s favorite, Chalk and Chalkboards. The evening ended with Dating: Do’s and Don’ts, a classroom film from the 1940s rented from a company named Kitt-Parker for five bucks.

Jump ahead 21 years to winter 2000. Ed. Media no longer exists, nor do the films borrowed from it for Filmarama, long ago thrown away by some cost-cutting bureaucrat. Kitt-Parker didn’t survive either, killed by video and five-dollar film rentals. But Dating: Do’s and Don’ts survived. In fact, the exact same print shown at Filmarama in 1979 was on the screen in New York City, at the prestigious American Museum of the Moving Image, part of a 14-show, 75-film retrospective, before a standing-room-only crowd. And I was the one showing it.

How did this happen?

Ten years after graduation I became reacquainted with Dating: Do’s and Don’ts at the newborn Comedy Channel in New York. By an odd twist of fate, The Comedy Channel had a collection of old educational films it wanted chopped into funny thirty-second clips, which it intended to run when it didn’t have commercials. I was hired to do the chopping.

Watching those films was like meeting an old friend. Dating: Do’s and Don’ts was as mind-bending as I’d remembered it, and there were dozens of other titles I’d never seen: Good Table Manners, where 14-year-old Chuck is visited by 21-year-old “Chuck-from-the-future” who teaches him how to eat soup quietly; Social Courtesy, where malcontent Bill is harangued by an invisible narrator until he learns to stand whenever adults enter a room; and Are You Popular?, where Wally asks Caroline to a weenie roast and everyone learns that “girls who park in cars are...
not really popular.”

There were darker films as well, creepy morality tales that showed the horrors awaiting teens who dared to break the rules: Red Asphalt, Girls Beware, The Bottle and the Throttle, You Bet Your Eyes!, A Date with Death, Fast Way Nowhere, Why Drown?, and Drug Abuse: The Chemical Tomb.

Watching those films in their ten-minute entirety, much as a school kid would have done in the 1950s, warmed me to their low-budget zeal—misguided as it often was. I began to ask questions: What kind of people made these films? Did kids actually believe them? How many were made? What happened to them all? The folks at The Comedy Channel did not know and did not care. Old classroom films were junk. They were dead, part of the past, good only for a cheap laugh. Beyond that they weren't worth thinking about.

But I was thinking about them. I had time, as The Comedy Channel had fired me in a general staff purge. I decided that these films, which I dubbed “mental hygiene,” merited a book.

For the next ten years I pieced together their story, studio by studio, title by title. Mental hygiene films, I slowly learned, were the apex of social engineering in the quarter-century following World War II. They were a special kind of classroom film, designed to shape the behavior of their young viewers, a product of a confused and nervous America. Conformity was the matrix of adult life in these years, yet many young people routinely flouted convention and refused to fit in with society. This struck fear in the hearts of parents and educators.

To scotch this rebellion, adults sought help from Ph.D.s and social scientists and embraced a new technology to deliver social guidance: the classroom mental hygiene film. These short movies covered a broad swath of everyday behavior, including party etiquette, personal hygiene, substance abuse, venereal disease, juvenile delinquency, and the awful things that always happened to kids who drove fast on prom night:

(Scene: a speeding convertible)
JOAN: Please don't drive so fast, Nicky. We're in no hurry.
NICK: I'm always in a hurry, honey. (honks horn rudely) That blasted truck. I'll show him!
JOAN: Oh, no, Nick, not on a curve. There's another car coming! Nick, look out!!!
(horrible crashing sounds; screen goes black)

Mental hygiene films did not represent pinnacles of film artistry, nor were they expected to. Instead, they took their cues from the widely successful training and propaganda films of World War II and sought to portray everyday life as “realistically” as possible. A classroom audience was not supposed to watch a mental hygiene film and be enthralled by its direction, cinematography, acting or editing. They were supposed to believe that what they saw was real and embrace the film's point of view as their own.

This approach may have suited mid-twentieth-century educators, but it plays havoc with our notions today of what life was really like in, say, 1954. The images of helpful, well-mannered teenagers in Appreciating Our Parents and Friendship Begins at Home are soothing, but it bears remembering that there would have been no mental hygiene films if the young really had behaved so pleasantly. Productions like What Makes a Good Party? and Fun of Being Thoughtful depict life not as it was, but as the films' adult supporters wanted it to be.

Those who created these films were for the most part anonymous, valued more for their ability to grind out product than for their talents as filmmakers. Crews were small, sets were improvised, equipment was minimal, actors were often just kids from the neighborhood. Despite these obstacles distinct filmmaking styles emerged among the major producers: the merciless optimism of Coronet, the Patrician snobbery of Knickerbocker, the smoldering doom of Centron. Viewing mental hygiene films as a genre, as I was doing, revealed something unexpected: a range of competence and technique in a class of filmmaking that was generally thought to have had none.

Hundreds of mental hygiene films were produced during their 25-year reign, but only a handful made it to our time. Schools got their money's worth by screening prints until they were spliced and shredded. Prints that escaped destruction on the job were thrown in the garbage when their message became unfashionable or when school AV departments shifted to video. When mental hygiene production companies went out of business, as they all eventually did, their master reels were thrown away, along with...
almost all information about the films’ creators, casts and costs. Preservationists, historians and film scholars showed little interest in saving what remained. At least half of all mental hygiene titles have vanished forever, and many survive as only a single, battered print.

Much of that survival I credit to one man, Rick Prelinger, whose Prelinger Archives supplied the films I first saw at The Comedy Channel. Rick’s mission, as he saw it, was to rescue these films from the garbage: not to restore them (for which there was no money) nor even to look at them (for which there was no time). He was happy to make his collection of some fifty thousand titles available to me, the first person interested in watching them.

By another odd coincidence, Rick’s research into the history of mental hygiene consisted of a single phone number, that of John Lindsay, who starred as “Woody” in Dating: Do’s and Don’ts. Lindsay turned out to live less than a mile from the suburban Chicago studio where his role was filmed in 1949:

(Scene: a darkened front porch)
WOODY: Well...it’s getting late....
ANN: Yes it is. Umm...let’s try to get back early NEXT time for some sandwiches.
WOODY: Hey, that sounds good. I’ll call you next week!
ANN: Will you?

Films like Dating: Do’s and Don’ts were the cutting edge of social coercion in their day. Their goal was “attitude adjustment” and their approach was subtle: to create an imitation world of malt shops, classrooms and suburban homes and populate it with average-looking teenagers acting the way parents wanted teenagers to act.

The theory, a uniquely American blend of ivory tower psychology and Madison Avenue marketing, was that impressionable young people would unconsciously adopt “correct” behavior patterns by seeing themselves as the characters on the screen. There would be no dangerous kisses on dark front porches as long as teenagers followed the script laid out by Woody and Ann.

The problem, which initially escaped adults, was that teenagers didn’t identify with Woody and Ann; they saw themselves more as James Dean in Rebel without a Cause or Marlon Brando in The Wild One.

While mental hygiene films relentlessly preached clean thinking, good grooming, lawfulness, togetherness, sobriety and safety, wave after wave of young Americans wanted nothing more than to be sloppy, reckless, sullen, high, dirty-minded, independent delinquents.

As a consequence, films such as Dating: Do’s and Don’ts gave way to less presumptuous (if no less didactic) titles such as Right or Wrong? and How to Say No, which themselves were replaced by fear films about juvenile delinquency (The Trouble Maker), highway accidents (Don’t Push Your Luck!), and drug abuse (Keep Off the Grass) as young people grew less willing to toe the line. Only ten years after the release of Dating: Do’s and Don’ts schools were showing The Innocent Party, the first film about venereal disease among teen-agers.

Decades later, John Lindsay was out of acting and pursuing a successful career in the Chicago commodities market. My conversations with him unearthed the name of his old director, Ted Peshak; Ted gave me the name of his old cameraman, Bill Rockar; Bill put me in touch with a scriptwriter, Trudy Travis; and so it went. The educational film community turned out to be close-
During the mental hygiene era was haphazard at best. Schools in the early years were ill-equipped for social engineering through film; the message, no matter how artfully delivered, was often lost through weak projector bulbs, choppy prints and Cinderblock acoustics. Even under the best of conditions classroom film use was capricious. One of the most frequent questions I hear from baby boom audience members concerns the sometimes bizarre titles they were forced to sit through: films on blasting cap dangers, exploding water tanks and the hazards of home dry cleaning. “Why did we have to watch them?” they ask, begging for an answer 40 years after the fact. I haven’t a clue. It must have been a rainy day.

Researching mental hygiene took me to Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, Indiana, Ohio, Illinois, New York and California, and exposed me to hundreds of hours of tasteful grooming, wholesome group activities and tactfully avoided good-night kisses. And that raises the question: What, exactly, is so wrong with mental hygiene films? Don’t we yearn for a world that is less boorish and more polite? Shouldn’t kids be taught right from wrong, courtesy from selfishness?

That attitude, along with a healthy dollop of curiosity, is what I suspect drew those standing-room-only crowds to New York this past winter. Dating: Do’s and Don’ts is no longer kitsch; in fact, to some it’s cutting edge. But I always remind my audiences of the two—right and wrong—and characters who were either popular and nice or delinquent and unattractive. Even the question marks in titles such as Are Manners Important? and Are You Ready for Marriage? were rhetorical; audiences already knew the answers: Yes and No.

The difference between the world as it was then and now is most apparent in mental hygiene “girls only” features. These covered a swath of life that encompassed poise, posture, fashion, social skills, and the apparently boundless field of home economics. This nonetheless limited world was never presented as such; the films simply preached the joys of domesticity and stressed that women did certain things better than men: cooking, caring for children, organizing things, listening and understanding, appreciating beauty, being supportive.

The idea that women might have other priorities—business, politics, ambition, leadership—never intruded.

Teachers, the square pegs in the round hole of visual education, never seemed to fit. At first, mental hygiene films—all classroom films, really—were designed to be self-contained. The thesis driving film use in schools was that film delivered perfect advice frozen in cellulose acetate, eliminating the chance teachers might deliver inconsistent information. David Smart, one of the pioneers of the mental hygiene field, reported edly arrived at the ten-minute length for classroom films after visiting several schools and timing how long teachers spent in the break room. The goal, as he saw it, was to get the teacher as far out of the way as possible.

When it became apparent that kids were disobeying the perfect advice given in mental hygiene films, visual education specialists turned this approach on its head. It was not the films that were at fault, the experts cried, but the teachers’ lack of involvement. The ideal situation, they explained, would be for a teacher to first carefully review catalogs of all available films from all available producers, determine which film best fit the curriculum, order it so it would arrive at least a day ahead of the screening, preview the film (taking notes), introduce the film to the class, show the film (stopping at key points), show the film again in its entirety, then lead a post-screening discussion. Needless to say, few teachers had time to fulfill these criteria.

In practice, the use of classroom films