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November 21, 2007

DURHAM, N.H. – The 1949 release of the film “Lost Boundaries” brought the complicated reality of race to light with the story of a family of light-skinned blacks disclosing to their community that they were black. Based on the true story of a Keene, N.H., family, the film was made on the University of New Hampshire campus and in Portsmouth, and packed theaters nationwide. This month, the UNH Center for New England hosts a symposium that looks at the legacy of the movie.

Larry Benaquist, professor and chair of the Film Studies Program at Keene State College, will present his lecture “Lost Boundaries: A New Hampshire Story of Race, Family, and Community,” from 12:30 to 2 p.m., Tuesday, Nov. 27, 2007, in the Memorial Union Building Theater I. A roundtable discussion will follow. The symposium is part of the Center for New England Culture’s Heritage New Hampshire Lecture Series, and is free and open to the public.

Benaquist will lecture on the making of Louis de Rochement’s film, “Lost Boundaries” and present selections from his documentary on the family of Albert and Thyra Johnston of Keene -- the subject of the film -- and their life afterwards.

“When Louis de Rochemont heard the story of the Johnston family, he knew he was on to something that went beyond race, to the heart of what it means to be a Yankee, and an American — our sense of community. Here was a gifted doctor and his cultured, loving family, whose racial heritage ran the risk of disenfranchising them from the community of men,” Benaquist said.

“By engineering the publication of the story in the Reader’s Digest in 1947, the book in 1948, and the film in 1949, de Rochemont exposed the dark side of America to itself through the eyes of the despised group, which had not really happened before. Louis de Rochemont’s bravery is epitomized in this act,” he said.

According to the New York Times, the movie, which won a series of major awards, “was so powerful that when the lights came up after the world premiere in New York, the audience sat in stunned silence.”

In 1989, Keene State College hosted the 40th anniversary “Lost Boundaries” reunion, which brought cast, crew, and the Johnston family together, with the community of Keene, to view a screening of the film. The event was covered by NPR, The Washington Post, and the Boston Globe, and resulted in an Emmy-nominated documentary produced by NHPTV, “Home to Keene: The Lost Boundaries Reunion.”

Benaquist is founder and chair of the Film Studies Program at Keene State College. He is a documentary filmmaker, most recently having produced “Here Am I, Send Me: The Journey of Jonathan Daniels.”

The Center for New England Culture's Heritage New Hampshire Lecture Series is supported by an endowment from Heritage New Hampshire. The series annually presents lectures on the images, people, and places of New England, featuring the best of contemporary scholarship on the region. For further information, contact David H. Watters, Director, Center for New England Culture, University of New Hampshire (603-862-0353; david.watters@unh.edu).

