

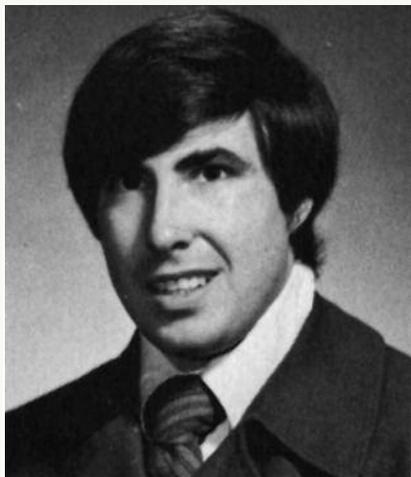
# Ken Mandel Makes History Real For Million of Viewers

BY SHAUN ILLINGWORTH RC '01 SCILS '04

**W**alk into the West Orange office of **Kenneth M. Mandel ENG '69**, and you almost expect to see a sign somewhere that says, "Do Not Disturb—Professor at Work." His bookcases brim with tomes and videos. Stacks of research materials are strewn across the room. And a whiteboard hung behind the desk tracks Mandel's progress on no fewer than nine film projects, some just kernels of ideas, others representing years of effort.

Look a little harder and you might actually see the Emmy Award the Rutgers alum won for his celebrated 1994 film, *George Marshall and the American Century*. It's perched casually on top of a filing cabinet.

Mandel has a gift for making documentaries about larger-than-life subjects—massive engineering feats and sweeping historical events. But his are not the typical black and white films that reprise events in a very formulaic and stilted way. His films are character-driven. They focus on the people behind the events, whether they're well-known figures like George Marshall or individuals pulled



Kenneth Mandel's senior portrait in the 1969 *Scarlet Letter*. PHOTO COURTESY UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES



Mandel (left) appears on a Radio and Television Correspondents' Association panel with actress Mariska Hargitay, who narrated *America Rebuilds: Return to Ground Zero*, in 2006.

PHOTO COURTESY OF KENNETH MANDEL, ENG '69

from everyday life, like a worker digging through the rubble at Ground Zero or a partisan fighting in an Eastern European forest.

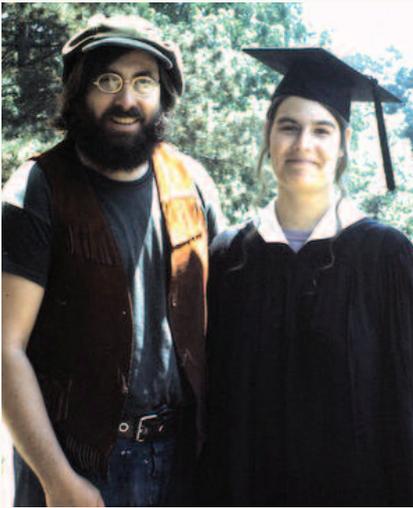
"My father used to always say, 'Do something that makes you happy,'" recalls Mandel. His parents were natives of Manhattan's Lower East Side, where they raised their son for the first three years of his life. The family moved to Newark in 1950, then to Hillside, New Jersey, in 1961, where Ken graduated from high school in 1964.

Showing an early aptitude for math and science, a guidance counselor suggested he apply to engineering schools. He took the advice, and was soon accepted to Rutgers' five-year program, which offered a B.S. in Engineering and a B.A. in Liberal Arts. Eventually, he decided to specialize in industrial engineering because, he recalls, "you learned a little bit about all the engineering disciplines. I

thought it might be a little more interesting."

In Mandel's later years on the banks, the burgeoning Vietnam antiwar movement began to occupy his thoughts. "Initially, opposing the war wasn't the thing to do," Mandel asserts, "but the more you read about it and the more you thought about it, the war just made no sense." He soon began attending local and national antiwar protests, including the "Levitate the Pentagon" rally in October 1967.

While at Rutgers, Mandel also became involved in the community, helping to found and run a co-op in New Brunswick, as well as the city's first underground newspaper, *All You Can Eat*. He graduated with his BS degree in Engineering in 1969, and around this time met his future wife, **Janet Cohen DC '71**. By late 1971, he recalls, "Things were getting back to normal on campus, but we were still looking for ways to make our mark politically."



Ken and his future wife, Janet Cohen, at her graduation from Douglass College in 1971.

PHOTO COURTESY OF KENNETH MANDEL, ENG '69

### Finding his Voice in Filmmaking

Mandel devoted most of the 1970s to political work. The experience proved invaluable as he worked with the media during campaigns, produced TV shows and founded an advertising firm.

"I sort of learned it by the seat of my pants," he confesses, "and what I learned was that I was a pretty good storyteller. The technical aspects didn't scare me, and I had this problem-solving mentality."

By the early 1980s, Mandel was ready to commit himself to filmmaking. His undergraduate studies piqued his interest in documenting feats of engineering excellence. He threw himself into what eventually became the *Great Projects* series. "As fate would have it," Mandel recalls, "it took almost 20 years to actually get it broadcast – as in 20 years from 'This is a great idea,' to 'Tune in on Thursday night.'"

Aired by PBS in the summer of 2002, the four *Great Projects* films showcased the engineers behind some of America's most extraordinary public works: taming the Colorado and Mississippi Rivers, electrifying the nation, building the bridges of New York City, and Boston's Big Dig. The *Associated Press* wrote, "As with all the best documentaries, *Great Projects* is rich in historical sights and sounds ... [and] also is filled with intriguing interviews and reminiscences."

The same could be said for the many other films produced by Mandel and his friend, Daniel Polin, who together formed in 1988 their own production company, the Great Projects Film Company.

"We muddled through those first few years," Mandel remembers. "We produced shows that I thought were really good

stories to tell." While attending conferences in the 1980s on "great projects" to feature, he struck upon the idea of doing a film on George Marshall, orchestrator of some of the most monumental "projects" in history – like the mobilization of the U.S. Armed Forces in World War II and the Marshall Plan.

*"...what I learned was that I was a pretty good storyteller. The technical aspects didn't scare me, and I had this problem-solving mentality."*

KENNETH MANDEL ENG '69

Mandel remembers the film as "probably the only movie that came out exactly the way I wanted it to." The film's signature technique, using interviews conducted by Marshall's official biographer, Forrest Pogue, allowed Marshall to "speak for himself. It really captures you from the first words out of his mouth," explained Mandel, by adding emotional

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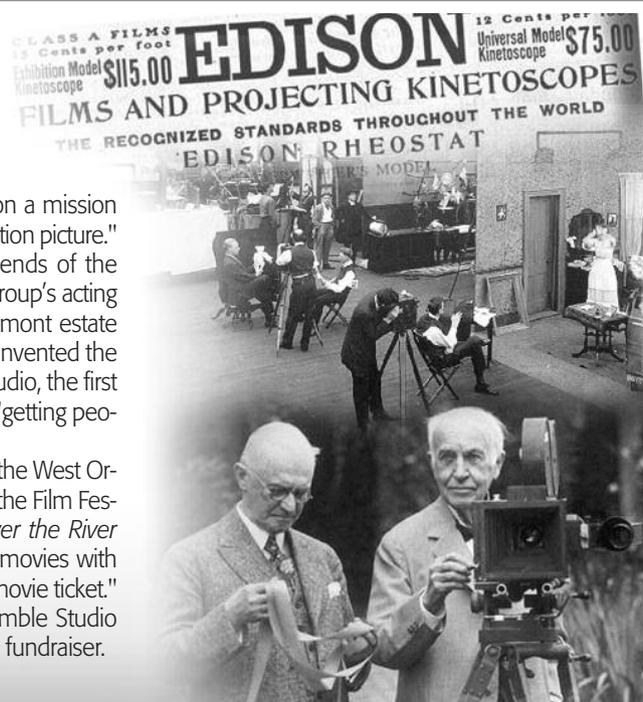
## Remembering the Wizard of Menlo Park

For nearly 25 years, **Kenneth Mandel ENG '69** has been on a mission to remind people that West Orange is "the birthplace of the motion picture."

Soon after he moved there, he became active with Friends of the Thomas Edison National Historic Park, recently becoming the group's acting chairman. Friends helps support and promote Edison's Glenmont estate and lab, now part of the National Park Service, where Edison invented the motion picture camera and established his Black Maria film studio, the first in the world. As with his films, Mandel says he greatly enjoys "getting people acquainted with their history."

In 2005, at the urging of community leaders, he founded the West Orange Film Society and the Classic Film Festival. Each February, the Film Festival screens well-known films, like *Hud* and *The Bridge Over the River Kwai*, while the Film Society brings in experts to discuss the movies with audiences. He describes it as "a film course for the price of a movie ticket."

Mandel has also been an ardent supporter of the Ensemble Studio Theater in Manhattan as a former board chairman and major fundraiser.



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depth and insight that formal speeches and other recordings of the rather reserved Marshall would have lacked.

*George Marshall and the American Century* earned critical praise and the Emmy for Outstanding Historical Programming-Long Form in 1994. Colin Powell called the film "a stunningly beautiful story about a great American." Mandel's next venture, a collaboration involving Great Projects Film Company and legendary broadcaster Perry Wolff, resulted in the Academy Award-nominated film *An Essay on Matisse* (1996).



Mandel and his crew on location at the Kennebec Mine in Alaska's Wrangell Mountains while filming *Building Alaska* (2009). PHOTO COURTESY OF KENNETH MANDEL, ENG '69

In 1997, Mandel's *The Trial of Adolph Eichmann* earned Great Projects and PBS another Emmy nomination. The New York Times noted, "The defendant is not the true subject of the film...his significance fades beside the enormity of the Holocaust," as revealed in the stories of the survivors. Mandel recalls that the interviews he filmed with those who testified in the Eichmann trial were difficult

on both sides of the camera, but that the survivors handled them with a sense of stoic duty to report what had happened. "You feel like their stories are so important," he explains, "that you can barely scratch the surface of their experience."

More successful films followed. *Crucible of Empire: The Spanish-American War* (1999) was called "a fascinating, clear-eyed look at a hazy crossroads in America's path toward becoming a world power," by *Forbes Magazine*. In *Resistance: Untold Stories of Jewish Partisans* (2001), Mandel used interviews with surviving partisans to illuminate their brave exploits against the Nazis and debunk the fallacy that Jews did little to resist their oppressors. *Entertainment Weekly* exclaimed, "This grim, searing docu shatters that myth....Telling their story rights a long-perpetuated wrong."

### The Impact of 9/11

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 would open a new chapter in Mandel's career. Rather than examine the distant past, he now found himself documenting history in the making. Days after the attacks, he learned that his friend, George Tamaro, was a key advisor at Ground Zero. A partner of Mandel's cousin, **Joel Moskowitz, ENG '68**, at Mueser Rutledge Consulting Engineers, Tamaro had also been a consultant on the *Great Projects* series. Mandel immediately pitched Tamaro the idea of documenting the unfathomable challenges involved in the recovery and rebuilding efforts.

Within weeks, Mandel had the backing of Mayor Rudy Giuliani's office and was suddenly leading the only film crew to capture the heroic work being done at Ground Zero. Mandel says he "felt like one of those World War II combat photographers whose footage would be used for decades afterwards." Indeed, the months spent filming at Ground Zero had a profound impact on the filmmaker and his crew. He describes coming home at night "covered with this sooty stuff. You'd be so depressed you wouldn't want to go back the next day."

The result of this emotionally wrought labor was *America Rebuilds: A Year At*



Mandel is all smiles with the Scarlet Knight. In the fall, when he is not behind the camera, Ken Mandel can be found in the stands rooting on the Rutgers Football team. PHOTO COURTESY OF KENNETH MANDEL, ENG '69

*Ground Zero*, aired in September 2002. It poignantly captured how engineers and workers dealt with the 9/11 aftermath from an engineering perspective, as well as the delicate issue of respectfully recovering any human remains. The film also records how the community of Lower Manhattan set out to rebuild and how survivors and victims' families sought to honor the deceased. A follow-up film, *America Rebuilds II*, aired on the five-year anniversary of the attacks.

Mandel's most recent film, *Building Alaska* (2009), showcases the achievements of the builders of Alaska's railroads and roadways, which opened up the "Last Frontier." The latest project burning a hole in his whiteboard has him trekking to the 49th State again—a biography of the late Wally Hickel, former Alaska Governor and Secretary of the Interior, whom Mandel came to know while working on *Building Alaska*.

Looking back on his illustrious career, Mandel's only regret is that no matter how well-made the film, his subjects can only be partially explored in the confines of an hour or two. "I usually call my documentaries 'mental 2x4s' that you whack somebody in the head with and say, 'Boom, think about this.' Then they can get interested and delve into it."

Anyone who has seen Mandel's brilliant films is undoubtedly grateful for the "gentle" nudge. 📷