

TIME MARCHES ON TO THE RAMPARTS

By BOSLEY CROWTHER

NEW LONDON, Conn.

THERE has been plenty of lively excitement in this usually quiet old New England town during the past month or so, for it is here that the March of Time has been doing the bulk of the shooting for its first and forthcoming feature-length film, "The Ramparts We Watch." And the good people of New London, who have for generations been inured to sudden violent visitations of one sort or another, have lately found themselves being movie actors all over the place.

To be sure, New London has been invaded by picture companies before this. Camera crews and even Hollywood actors have been here in the past to make location shots at the Coast Guard Academy and at the submarine base across the Thames. But this time it's something much different; this time a complete studio has been set up right in the town, the citizens have been allowed to participate in large and responsive numbers. And this time it is not the town's adjuncts in which the picture people are interested; it is the town itself. And not as a town of today, either, but as a town of yesterday.

That may sound slightly confusing, but this is the way it came about: For many months Louis de Rochemont and his staff at the March of Time had been turning over an idea of making a full-length picture on this country's defenses against war. As is customary at the March of Time, where the pressure is always on, ideas have a way of swirling about like a mass of nebulae until they suddenly mold into shape. And this one soon cumulated into plans for a film which would show not only the military barriers which the United States has erected against the possibility of war but would also explore that less tangible, less comprehensible but much more vulnerable rampart of our national de-

fense, the mass mind of the American people.

The first part of the job was comparatively simple, considering the noted efficiency of the March of Time boys in assembling data. The second and much more significant part was not. Finally Mr. de Rochemont and his staff decided that the best way to demonstrate the mass thinking of Americans in the face of an impending war would be to take a perfect example—to reproduce faithfully and without any *ex post facto* comment the individual reactions of a group of representative people in an average American town during the years bounded by 1914 and 1918.

* * *

The next question was: Where and how to make it? That didn't trouble Mr. de Rochemont long. He is a great believer in authentic detail, even in creative moods. So he decided that the right thing to do was to find a typical town which still looks pretty much the way it did twenty-five years ago, to move his entire production unit in and film the whole thing right there. New London was chosen as the town. And thus, for the past five weeks, an abandoned silk mill (rental, \$150 a month) just a few blocks from the heart of town has been studio and general headquarters for the company which is making "The Ramparts We Watch," and the entire community has been its oyster.

There this reporter found Mr. de Rochemont and his company one lovely day last week finishing up the final shots amid the usual tag-end confusion. The whole ground floor of the mill was filled with interior sets which served as convenient guideposts in a resumé of the film's action. Mr. de Rochemont explained it thus:

Following the accounts of America's military, naval and industrial defenses, the picture will move on into the realm of the mental ramparts. A small, unspecified town which has a college in it will be picked up in 1914 and several key characters in the town will be identified—the newspaper editor, the Congressman, some leading citizens, the college president, an old German professor, his son and many others. By exposition which should be sharply reminiscent to all whose memories hark back to those days, the story will then develop the confusion, the bewilderment, the hysteria which characterized the thinking of such people as the months rolled by and the war came closer and closer home to them. This, the main part of the film, will conclude with the entrainment of the local militia for war, and the picture will probably end with a look at the present national scene and a general epilogue.

* * *

"We don't intend to make any portentous implications," said Mr. de Rochemont. "It is not our desire to damn those who went to war with honest conviction. And I certainly hope no one will think we are inquiring direfully, 'Will it happen again?' We simply mean to show how people act—or did act—as war approached them."

Mr. de Rochemont said that "The Ramparts We Watch" will bear about the same comparison to the familiar type of feature film that

the regular March of Time releases bear to the newsreels.

Perhaps the most interesting phase in the production of this picture is the fact that no one of any professional importance is in the cast, and most of the actors have never had any previous experience whatsoever. In an effort to obtain absolutely true characters, Mr. de Rochemont and his staff scouted high and low for persons who would answer their requirements. Thus, the college president is a gentleman prominent in Boston society, the old German professor is actually a doctor of medicine and a research scientist, his son is a Brown University undergrad, the wife of the Congressman is the widow of a naval officer who lives in New London. The extras were all local people selected for their authenticity.

Twice the main street in New London was decorated with bunting and crowded with costumed extras for a Peace and a Preparedness Day parade. Houses, buildings and a theatre in the town served as perfect backgrounds, with slight alterations (such as neon signs) removed, for significant action. The whole job should cost in the neighborhood of \$215,000, Mr. de Rochemont reckons, and he hopes to have it ready for release by the end of the year. The people of New London are sure it is going to be a great picture.