When Fulbright scholar Carol Littleton, a master's degree in French literature in hand, opted for a movie industry career, she was advised that, at 29, she was "too old" to make her mark in films.

In 1970, despite the discouraging words, she began working her way through a raft of entry-level jobs — helping in an office, cleaning toilets, sweeping floors. In 1983, Littleton emerged with an Academy Award nomination for her work as film editor of the 1982 blockbuster "E.T., the Extra-Terrestrial."

A slight smile and a hint of humor color her words as the University of Oklahoma graduate admits that the nomination provided her a "moment of sweet revenge." In little more than 10 years, the intense, talented and unassuming film editor has virtually conquered her craft and gained the respect of industry contemporaries.

Casually settling herself on an oversized couch in the almost austere living room of her Hollywood Hills home, she recalls those initial years. In a candid, down-to-earth style, she traces the erratic route from her Miami, Oklahoma, country home to the white, '20s-style bungalow she shares with cinematographer husband, John Bailey.
Although born in Oklahoma City, Littleton moved to Miami at the age of three. "I lived in the country until I went to college... and I was in college 'forever,'” she quips, recalling the years spent in pursuit of higher education. From 1960-69, the Littleton name was inscribed on the rolls of institutions here and abroad: Cottey College in Missouri; the University of Oklahoma; the University of Mexico; the University of California, Los Angeles; Weisbaden, West Germany; and Paris, France. She emerged from academia with an OU B.A. in 1965 and a M.A. in 1970. While completing her thesis in France, via the Fulbright, she observed the "peak of the social revolution" and was immersed in that country's new-wave cinema.

"I loved going to the movies," the slender, 41-year-old film editor confesses. She recalls contemporaries then studying film. "We were kids... all interested in movies... None of us ever thought we'd do what we dreamed about."

Eventually, it was Bailey and his involvement in the film industry that ignited Littleton's interest. The pair — Bailey, a 64" Los Angeles scholar-student, and the blue-eyed, auburn-haired Oklahoman — met while studying abroad in the early '60s. It was "like at first sight," Littleton says, "but that was it... We corresponded." The friendship developed. "When I finally moved to Los Angeles, it was because John asked me."

Romance was not the only interest developing. "The more I was around him and his friends, the more I realized I could do this too — and without going to school," she says.

Her original plans to teach school had proved disillusioning, and her next job with an advertising agency did not fill her career development criteria. So, the aspiring film editor sought her place among creative and technical teams "making movies."

As an observer at first, "I did a bunch of crazy jobs," she says of her scrub-and-broom beginning. Advancing to other tasks, she was allowed to reclaim film (taking large reels of tape with footage to be salvaged and spliced together) and do sound transfer (reproducing sound from one medium to another). Once, cutting 16-millimeter negatives, she looked closely at the images and discovered she was in the "porno trade." "A short-lived job," she laughs.

In 1972, after she and Bailey were married, Littleton got her first break. Bailey was signed to shoot a film, and Littleton approached the director, a friend, to ask for the post of editorial assistant.

"He asked, 'What do you know?'... Can you sync dailies?' she recalls, explaining that the assignment called for marking the picture slates, marking the sound slates and cutting each to match. "I'd never done anything. But I'm not easily intimidated — or maybe ignorance is bliss..."

"Editing has it all, touching the film, working on it, working with sound, the story, the picture, the images. Editors have more power over a film than is ever recognized."

"I went out and bought a book and followed the directions. There was one day, with a stack of dailies... It wasn't very much — two rolls of film. Now, I laugh about it," she says of that first assignment. With splicer and synchronizer — "that I'd never even touched before" — and The Technique of the 35-Millimeter Cutting Room, Littleton began. "I remember sitting in the theater, looking at the dailies, and I was praying I'd gotten it right."

That first, low-budget horror film gave Littleton the title of film "assistant." "I went back to the places where I'd been doing sound transfer and was given a job syncing dailies," she recalls. Various odd jobs gradually broadened her experience.

From 1974-76, Littleton worked cutting commercials, a "fringe business in the industry," she notes. "By then, I had a meal ticket with commercials, so I started working nights and weekends cutting anything I could in the way of dramatic film."

Littleton began to sharpen her focus; she centered her energies on editing film. "I was never interested in an administrative job. I really wanted to make movies — physically — to hold them and cut them — to do the work," she says. "There's something marvelous about working with your hands.

"I've always been interested in literature," she explains, "and storytelling is the most fascinating part of film making). Well, editing has it all, touching the film, working on it, working with sound, the story, the picture, the images. Film editors have more power over a film than is ever recognized. There's an arsenal of very small, minute decisions that affect a film. Eventually all those add up."

Once Littleton's first feature-length film was completed, her confidence level went up accordingly. "It made me really believe that I could do films of substance that could make a difference in people's lives and that would make a difference in my life."

Making a difference seems to be a family trait, Littleton concedes. "I come from a long line of very determined ladies." Her mother, Mildred Littleton, after rearing three daughters, Betty, Carol and Charlene, returned to school to garner the credentials, then taught fourth graders until she retired. Older sister Betty, a Stephens College vice president, recently took a leave of absence to enter law school at 55 years of age.

"The world is changing," Littleton reasons. "It's not unusual for people to go through two or three careers in a lifetime. I'm probably going to live to be 100, so why not have two or three interesting careers... I was a student long enough to call it a career."

As a foundation for her "second" career, Littleton found commercials a fertile training ground. "It was during the 'golden age' of commercials. I learned and used all the tricks that editors can use — dissolve, stop-motion, opticals, animation — I got to follow in quick succession the whole routine, from dailies to finished product. When I started cutting low-budget (movie) films, I did everything — the music, special effects, dialogue, picture cutting," she says. "I was even my own assistant." (Continued)
Littleton's hand adjusts the machine to view a scene from "The Big Chill" in one of the lonely, tedious, exacting sessions that go into the editing process.

"Legacy," her first full-length film, was followed by "The Hazing," then "The Mafu Cage," a production directed by Karen Arthur. "From there, I went to a 'Movie of the Week' titled 'Battered,'" Littleton says. The film depicted the battered wife syndrome.

"In 1979, I did 'French Postcards,' my first real industry picture." The movie, set in France, took Littleton abroad again. "It was marvelous. Since I had been a student abroad, it was like déjà vu for me." As the only American on the crew — her two assistants were French — she immersed herself in the culture and her work. "I was inside the cutting room, so I didn't get to see that much, but it was fun to be in that environment."

Although usually based in Los Angeles, Littleton and Bailey currently maintain an apartment in New York City. "We're a bi-coastal couple," she explains. But while a cinematographer's career requires frequent travel, film editors generally don't jet to various filming sites. "The Big Chill" provided a rare opportunity for the husband and wife team to work together "on location" in South Carolina.

That film, which Littleton terms a "dramatic comedy" focused on a gathering of seven friends from the '60s era, was the second film edited by Littleton for writer-director Lawrence Kasdan. The first, "Body Heat," chronicles a steamy love affair and is a tribute to film noir updated to the '80s. Both called upon the film editor's ability to deftly heighten the films' intensely creative presentations.

Describing "Body Heat" as "a thriller, a study of sexual obsession and a stylistic interpretation of contemporary Angst," Littleton remembers sitting in the dark room, cutting the film. "I cooled it off bit," she quips, recalling the erotic scenes. "You should have seen what was left on the floor."

As film editor, Littleton describes her work "in support of the director" as "an instrument" to craft the visions he conceives. The job is demanding; with the director immersed in the immediate concerns of daily shooting, initial selections fall upon the film editor. Assembling a rough cut, Littleton essentially puts the scenes together in tight form. Intense collaboration between editor and director come after that first cut, as the two work together to pare the film down to a manageable time frame and structure.

In dubbing in sound, the film editor works closely with both sound editor and sound effects editor. Music is scored by a music editor, and when the major components are complete, a unified version of the film emerges. "The editing process is sort of a Zen occupation, tedious and exacting. You are alone with the material over a long period of time," she says. Twelve-hour days can become the norm.

While Littleton may be alone in the cutting room, she has marvelous companions on film. "E.T." captured the hearts of millions of fans, and Littleton helped to bring the capricious creature to life.

The movie was rejected by numerous movie industry chiefs. "Columbia said, in all their wisdom, that it was a stupid film, and nobody would go see it," she recalls. "One wonders how innovative films get made; usually it's a fluke. Then, when somebody gets a good idea, and it makes a popular movie, you see a bunch of carbon copies appear."

Lauding "E.T." director Stephen Spielberg's creative style, Littleton says, "He's a very passionate man. He loves life, and he loves what he's doing." While other directors seek box-office guarantees, Spielberg "doesn't manipulate" the medium. "He doesn't say, 'I'm going to make a movie that people are going to like.' He makes a movie that he likes," she muses. "I think it's that level of commitment and conviction that makes good movies."

Working with Spielberg proved a memorable feat. The director had seen her work in "Body Heat," and when the film editor he initially ap-
"Body Heat," the erotic thriller with William Hurt and Kathleen Turner, was even steamier before it received the Littleton treatment in the cutting room.

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