

## Society History

By C. Francis Jenkins

Our Society has now definitely reached the growth where its influence is sought. This enviable state is gratifying to me, personally, as you will see if you will permit me to recount the history of its birth.

Every national organization of the motion picture industry, by whatever name, has had its Committee on Standards. I was first elected to membership on that Committee of the Motion Picture Board of Trade. We met once, then "blewey." I was next elected on a similar Committee of the present National body, and on call made a trip from Washington to New York to find not a single other member or officer present, with the exception of the secretary of this Committee who was also Secretary of the National Association, in whose office we were supposed to meet. At my insistence he phoned members nearby, but without result. "Blewey" again.

On the way home that afternoon I fidgeted in my chair, fussed over conditions which made for such fruitless efforts, and determined I would put my personal standing in the industry to the risky test of inviting engineers to come to Washington for the purpose of organizing a Society of Motion Picture Engineers, on my own responsibility. I am terrified even now every time I think of the chagrin I would have felt had the call gone unacknowledged.

But a most gratifying response rewarded my anxious wait on the fateful day, for Mr. Don J. Bell came down from Chicago, Messrs. Willett and Westcott from Boston; Cromelin, Cannock, Gillett and Miles from New York. These gentlemen with Mr. Brockett and myself formed a very substantial nucleus indeed. We adopted a constitution and by-laws, and adjourned to meet in New York in October after incorporation should be completed.

---

Excerpted from President's Address, originally published in *Trans. SMPE*, November 1918. C. F. Jenkins was the Society's first President.

And right here was where our little bark first struck rough water. Twenty-four hours before this New York meeting our Secretary sent out unauthorized notices that the meeting was adjourned three months to meet in Atlantic City. Happily this calamity was averted when a considerable number of telegrams, hastily dispatched, collected a very substantial gathering, and permanent officers and directors were elected. This was indeed a critical time. I remember that a gentleman met me in the lobby when the future of the Society was trembling in the balance, and introducing himself, said he came from Pittsburgh with another gentleman, both of whom would like to join the Society if it was going to amount to anything. I told him it was going to amount to a-plenty even if I had to knock down and drag out all obstructionists. These two gentlemen, Mr. Wible and Mr. Campe, have proved stalwart workers, and have added materially indeed to the stability of our organization, as you all know.

Our next meeting, Atlantic City, marked the beginning of our real purpose — namely, the dissemination of specialized data relating to our art; and the next meeting held in Chicago, added a set of unanimously-adopted standards. This data and these standards have already been in considerable and growing demand. Each copy of our *Transactions* is valuable, but I think all of us will agree that our last printed volume is not only a very valuable publication but one of the finest pieces of printed matter ever publicly distributed.

Our Society is now a well-knit body, and certainly the time has come when much of the arduous work which necessarily during the heading months of such a body devolved upon the office of the President, can to advantage be delegated, as is demonstrated by the excellent work of the Papers Committee.

If you will permit me to speak from this experience as your Presiding Officer I should like to make a few recom-

mendations, two at least, that I think worthy to be adopted at once. First, that the officers who pass on expense vouchers and sign checks therefor, whether the treasurer and president, or a vice-president, should, for convenience and efficiency, reside in the same city. Second, that to the duties of the Papers Committee be added responsibility of the publication of the *Transactions*, certainly so after the work now in hand is completed and out of the way.

As I said at the Rochester meeting, I am not a candidate for a third Presidential term. But before relinquishing my opportunity to speak from the chair, I should like to confess to two errors of personal judgment. The first was the effort to prepare at the request of the Federal Government, a camera specification for war work, in conjunction with Don Bell and Carl Gregory. It wasn't wholly a success because these camera authorities couldn't agree. This should have been a warning to me that the request of the Underwriters Laboratories that we adopt an alleged ideal specification for a projecting machine was unlikely of approval by makers of diverse models, which was my second mistake.

It did one thing, however, well worth while. It clarified the atmosphere and made more distinct to me and perhaps to others of us, the objects for which this Society was organized and even more strikingly the things for which it is *not* organized.

For example, the Society of Motion Picture Engineers is not a judicial body to settle controversies between conflicting interests or to promulgate recommendations which make for class-discrimination. If our Society ever degenerates into a contest between factions each trying to use the Society for personal advantage, then our usefulness is ended and our organization will soon break up as others in the motion picture industry have already done.

What we *did* organize for was to set our official seal on standards general-

ly recognized as standards; and second, and perhaps best of all, to put into permanent form for world-wide distribution, the specialized knowledge which our members, experts in their particular line, are so unselfishly furnishing for this purpose. And while the official stamping of generally acknowledged standards is a necessary duty, for myself I have found the most interest in our meetings has come from the valuable papers read and printed, and I don't believe the limited time of our meetings can be spent in a more worth-while manner.

And it is by the printed copies of

these papers that we shall be remembered, for they will doubtless find their way not only into the hands of our members and others of our own industry but into libraries generally. Perhaps nothing is more to be desired or would add more to our prestige or usefulness.

And there is a wonderful collection of data already collated. Do you want to know the percentage of loss of light by reason of the tinting of films — it is in the *Transactions*. Do you want to know the distortion error due to angular projection — it is in the book! Do you want to know the source of loss of

light at various points in the optical system — it is in your own printed copy. Do you want to know the cause of the stroboscopic effect of shutters — it is in the booklet sent our members. Do you want to know the proper current density for carbon arcs — reach for the bound volume. Do you want to know the advantages and disadvantages of various electric current devices — it is in the unselfish report of that Committee.

Gentlemen, I thank you for hearing me through. I have a fatherly feeling for this Society.

---

## SMPTE Membership — Then and Now

By Joyce R. Hurwitz

What makes up the membership of the SMPTE? Let us go back for a brief look at the beginnings of the Society, its plans and growth over the decades. The idea for the Society is credited to C. Francis Jenkins, an inventor living in Washington, D.C. Recognizing the need for standardization in an increasingly chaotic motion-picture industry where each manufacturer was introducing his own design, Jenkins attempted to set up an organization to deal with this problem.

Jenkins met with two of his colleagues, E. K. Gillett and N. J. Brown, in Atlantic City to discuss the situation. In July 1916, a meeting was held in Washington, D.C., with seven additional engineers, and the decision was reached to form a society of engineering specialists. A constitution was worked out, and Jenkins was elected chairman. The Society was officially incorporated on July 24, 1916, with its objective the advancement in the theory and practice of motion-picture engineering and the allied arts and sciences, the standardization of the mechanisms and practices employed therein, and the maintenance of a

high professional standing among its members.

Response to the formation of the Society was enthusiastic, and 26 people attended the first meeting of the SMPE at the Hotel Astor in New York City, October 2-3, 1916. Jenkins was elected President, the constitution ratified, an emblem for the Society was approved, and six committees were established. Jenkins chaired an engineering committee on optics as well as the membership committee. The basic aim of the fledgling organization was set forth by Jenkins in an address to the membership in 1917, when he stated: "The prime purpose of the organization of the Society is to standardize our industry."

From this modest beginning the Society has grown to almost 9500 members living and working in many areas of the globe. From its inception, the membership represented every branch of the motion-picture industry, dealing with both the artistic and scientific aspects of photography processing, distribution, and projection. These early members were also chemists, engineers, and researchers interested in furthering the development of motion pictures. In 1950, the Society acknowledged the growth and importance of the infant television industry by changing its name to the

Society of Motion Picture and Television Engineers (SMPTE).

In the early years, through the late 1920s, all members of the Society took an active part in the production of standards, which were published in the *Transactions*, the forerunner of the *Journal*.

As the size and influence of the Society grew, in 1924, members on the West Coast voted to form a Pacific Coast Section. This actually was the first official section, or chapter, since the original New York or East Coast area was not formally designated a section until six years later. Branching out into international territory, the Society formed a Canadian Section in 1928, and in the same year a London Section was established. Unfortunately this first overseas chapter proved unworkable at that time, and the London Section broke away to form what is now the British Kinematograph, Sound and Television Society (BKSTS).

The year 1930 was a remarkable period of growth for the Society as a whole; it expanded to the point where various geographical areas needed to have their own chapters. In May the New York Section was formally approved, and the Chicago Section was established. In 1946 the membership was organized into three geographic

---

Joyce Hurwitz is Associate Editor of the *Journal*. Copyright © 1991 by the Society of Motion Picture and Television Engineers, Inc.