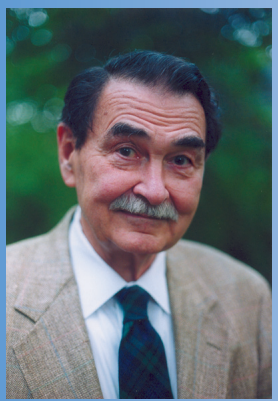

The Theatrical Newsreel Cameraman: Part 1

By D. Karl Malkames

A Project of the Archival Papers and Historical Committee

The mission of the SMPTE Archival Papers and Historical Committee is partially stated as follows: To collect facts and assemble data related to the historic development of the motion picture and television industries (and) to encourage pioneers to place their work on record in the form of papers for publication in the Journal. This paper, by a pioneer in the fields of motion picture cameras, printers, and projectors, is a contribution from the Committee.—Edgar A. Schuller, Chairman

As one of the last Pathe News staff cameramen, this writer had the unique opportunity to know most of the aging breed of newsreel cameramen. They had witnessed and recorded outstanding world events during the three decades preceding the final newsreel issue that was released by Universal News in 1967. This paper, in two parts, is an overview of that era when the theatrical newsreel was at its zenith. Part 1 deals with the theatrical newsreel companies, their organization, personalities, and historical anecdotes. Part 2 will cover technological aspects of the theatrical newsreel operations.

Received from D. Karl Malkames, April 2003.

Television news programs of today bear little resemblance to the ten-minute compilations of news and other events seen twice weekly in movie theaters, before the full-length feature, along with other "shorts" such as travelogues, serials, and cartoons.

Exhibitors found that no theater program was complete without a newsreel. In the days before the universal use of television, the theatrical newsreel was the main source of pictorial, national, and world news for moviegoers. At the time, newspapers carried relatively few photos. In the newsreel industry, companies were commonly referred to as "reels." Another meaning for the term is derived from the fact that, in the early days of motion pictures, 1000 ft of 35mm film was the maximum available length. The projection and editing reels were manufactured to mount this much footage. Consequently, most shorts were edited to this length. As the subjects became longer, they were called "two-reelers," "three reelers," and so on.

From Hollywood, a number of films featured the theatrical newsreel cameraman as a daring and necessarily enterprising craftsman who, in most cases, single-handedly covered a given event. As early as 1928, MGM released *The (newsreel) Cameraman,* featuring Buster Keaton. Great license was taken by MGM in the 1938 feature film *Too Hot to Handle,* with Clark Gable as the hero newsreel cameraman. Aside from the story line however, they did capture the prevailing personality

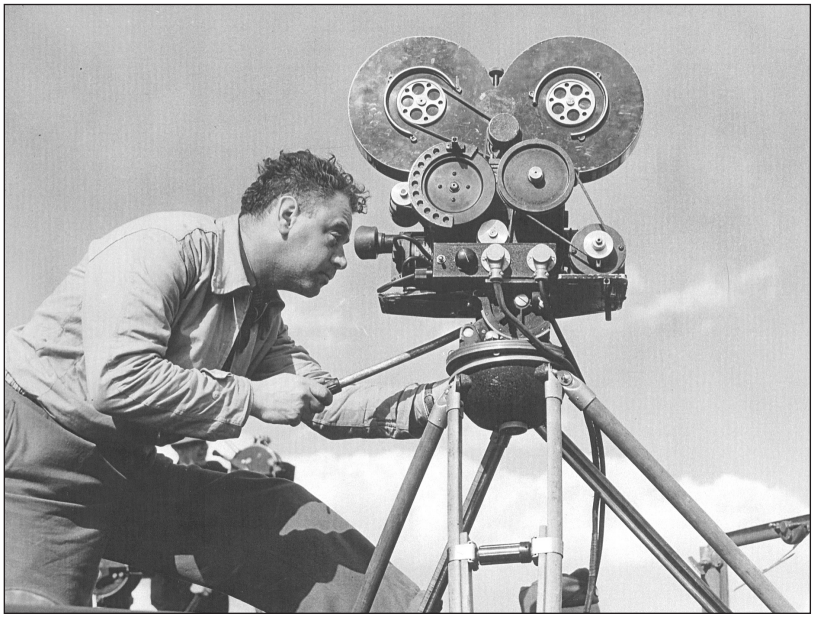

Figure 1. Albert Mingalone with Paramount Single System modified Bell & Howell camera (1929).

of the staff man and the exciting itinerary he enjoyed. Also, a popular series of short subjects produced by Fox reflected the public perception of this profession. "Adventures of the Newsreel Cameraman" featured a breed of cameramen/directors who traveled to the far corners of the globe to bring back rare scenes that entertained and amazed audiences in the 1930s.

Some of the most distinguished directors of cinematography who filmed great Hollywood classics began as newsreel cameramen. Arthur Miller, ASC (American Society of Cinematographers), who won an Oscar for *How Green Was My Valley,* and Charles Rosher, Sr., ASC (*Kismet*), are outstanding examples.

Among the many extraordinary anecdotes relating to the inventiveness of this fraternity is one that occurred in 1937 when Albert Mingalone of Paramount tethered a number of weather balloons to his body for the positive buoyancy needed to leap over the just completed section of the Merritt Parkway in Connecticut. He planned a spectacular shot with his handheld Eyemo camera, but an inadvertent drop of some ballast lifted him into the air and prevailing winds threatened to take him out over the Atlantic. A sharpshooter brought in to deflate some of the balloons saved him. Later that same year, on May 6, Mingalone was destined to photograph some of the most dramatic scenes of the *Hindenburg* disaster at the Lakehurst Naval Air Station in New Jersey (Fig. 1). He was joined on that fateful day by Jim Seeley from Hearst, Al Gold from Fox, and Bill Deeke covering for Pathe. The event was also heard on radio in the now famous live radio broadcast, voiced by NBC's appalled Herbert Morrison ("Oh, the humanity..."). Another typical innovator was Robert Donahue, Sr., who accompanied the Byrd Polar Expedition for Pathe News in 1926 (Fig. 2).

In 1942, when the burning French liner *Normandie* lay on its side in the Hudson River, he devised a time-lapse camera rig to film the month-long righting of the behemoth to be seen in 10 seconds on the screen. Those 10 seconds were made up of 240 frames of "stop-motion" footage. A friend of Wiley Post and other contemporary aviators, he filmed most of the newsworthy milestones in aviation history over three decades, including the famed flights of Charles Lindbergh and Amelia Earhart. In 1946, Donahue represented all five newsreel companies as the pool cameraman covering the atomic bomb tests at Bikini Atoll. Most staff men with the five major newsreels, together with many so-called stringers, or freelance men, were truly photojournalists. (Stringers were news cameramen who were not on staff, but were listed at the news desks as backup lens men scattered throughout the world, to be contacted when staff personnel were unavailable. They often provided their own equipment

Figure 2. Robert Donahue, Sr., at South Pole with Byrd Expedition, operating his "Pancake" Akeley camera for Pathe News (1926).

Figure 3. Title frames from Fox Movietone, featuring chief commentator Lowell Thomas. (From Fox Movietone, Inc.)

and were usually paid by the length of footage used.) Of necessity, all these cameramen were resourceful and imaginative in the extreme, providing their editors with the minimum footage required to cover a given event and tell the story. Establishing shots, close-ups, and cut-aways were all filmed with a practiced eye and editorial judgment. A paucity of newsworthy events often found them devising filler stories of public interest or entertainment.

The five theatrical newsreel companies operating through the '30s, '40s, and '50s were RKO Pathe News (becoming Warner Pathe News in 1947), Fox Movietone News, Paramount's "Eyes and Ears of the World," MGM/Hearst's "Metrotone News of the Day," and Universal News (last of the five to survive).

In July 1924, Theodore Case and Earl Sponable (later president of SMPE) produced a sound newsreel interview with President Calvin Coolidge and Senator Robert M. La Follette. Their system was used for the first completely all-sound newsreel released by Fox in October 1927, which predated the exhibition of feature "all-talking pictures" in theaters. Two years later, Fox Movietone News became the first to offer twice-weekly sound-on-film issues. Theatergoers became familiar with the stentorian voices of Lowell Thomas at Fox Movietone News, Clem McCarthy and Andre Baruch at Pathe News, and Ed Herlihy at Universal News. Jean Paul King spoke for

Figure 4. (a) Paramount News camera and sound crew with modified Bell & Howell single system camera and sound truck (1929).

Figure 4. (b) Pathe News newsreel crews with Wall single system cameras and specially modified camera cars (1953).

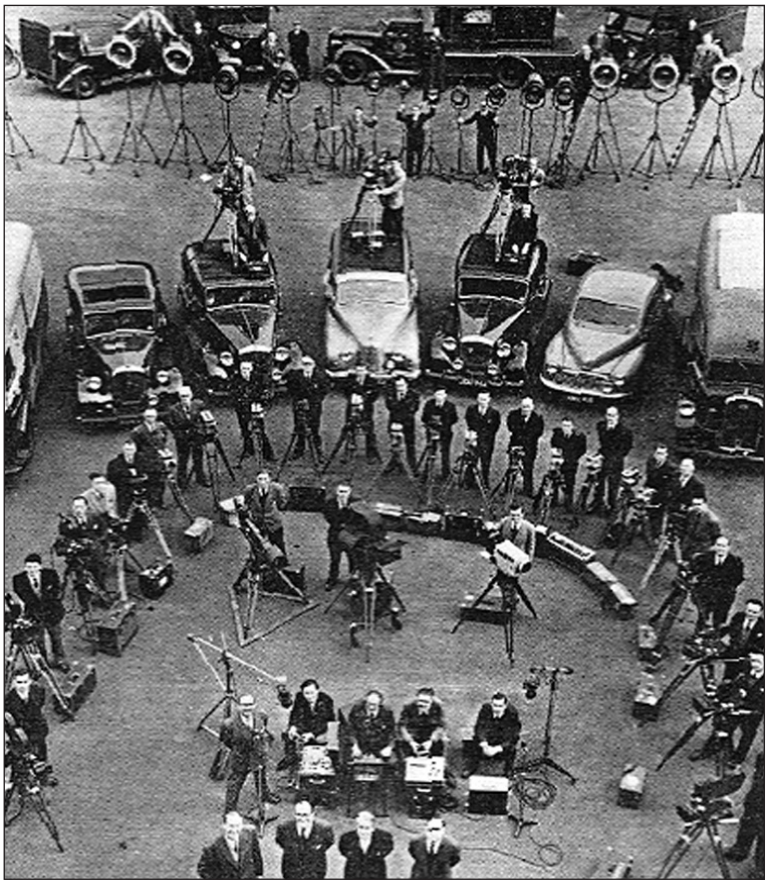

Figure 5. British Pathe News crews and equipment assembled for filming coronation of Elizabeth II of England in 1953. (From the British Film Institute.)

with camera platforms mounted on the roof (Figs. 4(a) and (b)). Figure 5 is a view of all the equipment from just Pathe News that was used to film the coronation of Elizabeth II of England in 1953. The all-male crews were constantly on standby, prepared to respond to a phone call from the news desk stateside or via cable overseas. These men were usually seen in business suits and neckties, because they were expected to represent the parent company in proper attire (Fig. 6). Certain situations in those early days even required camera crews to appear in tuxedos (Fig. 7).

The intense competition among newsreel cameramen to "scoop" the other reels in the early years was discouraged by the pooling of event coverage by all companies in the mid-30s. This so-called Roto-pool arrangement was meant to reduce overhead expenses due to increasingly poor exhibition receipts. The World War II era to follow saw the practice firmly entrenched as the government imposed strict guidelines for content, and all overseas assignments in battle areas were divided among the newsreels. The five companies were directed to provide two cameramen for

"Metrotone News of the Day," and Graham McNamee narrated for Universal News.

Beginning with the signature fanfare and logo, the theatrical newsreel was an ever-present part of the program, bringing the latest visuals of current events to expectant audiences throughout the world (Fig. 3). Pathe News always featured the rooster crowing on the main title, and Paramount's "Eyes and Ears of the World" began with a full frame of its sound camera panning to face the theater audience. Headquarters for these five companies were all located in New York City, although they had branch offices in every major city throughout the world. News tickers of the wire services, UPI and API (United Press International and Associated Press International), provided the main source of information for assignment editors, who dispatched the appropriate camera crews. Most staff cameramen were issued "camera cars" or sedans

Figure 6. Newsreel and still photographers in suits and ties filming the Queen Mother of Britain aboard the Cunard Queen Mary in 1954. (From the Directory of the Radio-Newsreel-TV Working Press Association of N.Y. Inc., 1956, p.22.)

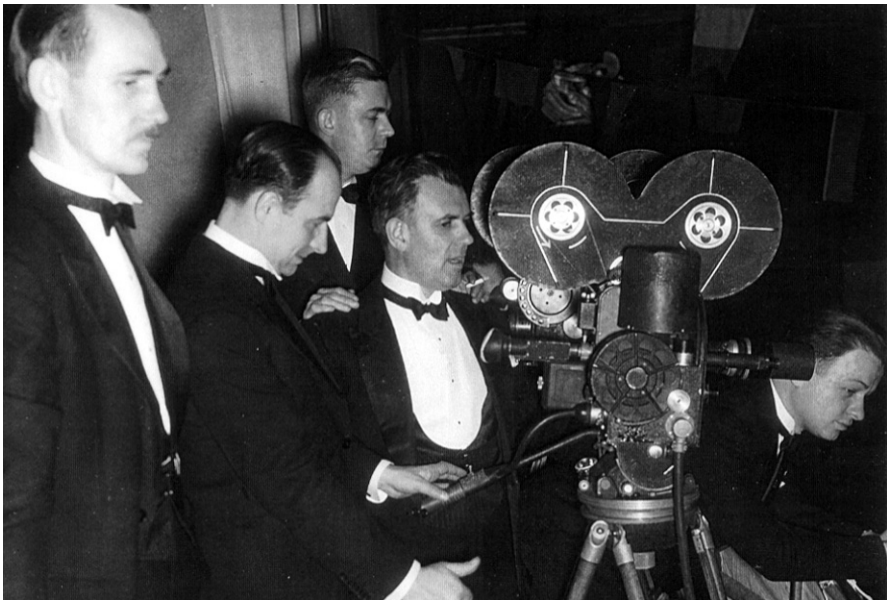

Figure 7. Newsreel cameramen in "appropriate" attire with Audio Akeley camera (1933).

each war theater of operation. Footage from all sources was censored by the government and then combined for duplicate distribution to newsreel companies.

Newsreel theaters such as the Embassy and the Translux in New York City thrived from 1929 to the 1950s. By screening the latest reels exclusively 24 hours a day, they were a testament to the public's appetite for news. Many such small theaters at railroad terminals in major cities catered to passengers waiting for trains.

The viewing public today takes for granted the immediacy of sights and sounds from every corner of the globe. One might compare the 1937 Hindenburg disaster, seen in edited form on theater screens several days after that event, with the Columbia Space Shuttle disaster in February 2003, seen live by millions on their television screens.

Warner Pathe News released its final issue in August 1956 and the famous rooster was seen and heard no more. Paramount's "Eyes and Ears of the World" ceased operation in February 1957; Fox's "Movietone News" finished in September 1963; Hearst's "Metrotone News of the Day," in November 1967; and finally, Universal News, in December 1967.

The millions of feet of film that recorded world events by these companies are found in libraries today, and supply stock shots for television productions and documentaries. They remain perhaps the most valuable source of visual information extant.

Notes/Acknowledgment

All specifics are from the notes, memory, and library of the author. Unless otherwise noted, photos are from the author's collection. Also, Edgar A. Schuller generously provided extraordinary editorial assistance.

THE AUTHOR

Karl Malkames has been active in the design and construction of equipment and techniques to solve specialized photographic problems, and has contributed in the development of custom-designed optical printers for the reproduction of archival motion pictures for the Museum of Modern Art, the American Film Institute, and the George Eastman House. He is currently president of Karl Malkames, Inc., a company he formed in 1966 to produce a variety of films to solve numerous technical problems in the camera and film industry. Malkames has worked as a cameraman and director of photography for Warner Bros., Pathe News, Pathe Pictures, Inc., and as a freelance cinematographer and director of photography for numerous feature productions, commercials, and documentaries. A Life Fellow of SMPTE and an active member of ASC, Malkames has presented several papers concerning camera technology to both organizations. He is an active historian and preserver of the artifacts of the motion picture industry. An entire floor of his home is devoted to historical motion picture equipment.