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Getting to Know C. Francis Jenkins

In anticipation of the reflective events coming up later this centennial year, it seems appropriate to look back on the formation of your Society. I will focus on the individual who was fundamentally responsible for the foundation of the Society of Motion Picture Engineers.

Like any organization that grows to be 100 years old, there must be a foundation built from a vision and strong leadership. In 1916, this manifested itself in the form of Charles Francis Jenkins. Jenkins was a curious individual and was fortunate to live in a period of great invention as the industrial age was maturing at the turn of the 20th century. Over the years, more than 400 patents are attributed to Jenkins, covering a great breadth of industries. From mechanical inventions for lawn mowers and aeroplanes to milk cartons and the spiral-wound paraffined paper containers, our lives have been enriched by Jenkins more than we ever knew.

As I was researching Jenkins, I came across a fascinating piece written in 1930 by William Hagre Fifer. Fifer prepared a thesis as part of his initiation into the Maryland Beta Chapter of the Tau Beta Pi Association, the Honorary

Engineering Fraternity of the University of Maryland. The subject of his thesis is Charles Francis Jenkins.

Rather than paraphrasing from Fifer's thesis, I will share with you some of what he wrote.

"Dr. Charles Francis Jenkins of Washington, DC, has produced some of the most remarkable discoveries of this mechanical age. He is the father of the motion picture industry, having invented the prototype of the motion picture projector now used in every theater in the world. He invented the apparatus which sent and received the first radio photographs and a short while later pro-

duced an apparatus for viewing distant scenes by radio directly, and radio movies for home entertainment. Developing the spiral-wound all-paper container used the world over for the transportation of liquids in small quantities is to be also credited to him. He has been granted over 400 patents and maintains a private laboratory in Washington. He owns and operates radio station W3XK where radio movies are broadcast at a regular schedule. He has made several important inventions pertaining to aviation. He truly is a man that the world can give its thanks to for many of the luxuries and comforts that people today enjoy."

Born in the Midwest U.S., Jenkins went to Washington, DC, in 1890 to work as Secretary for

Sumner I. Kimball at the U.S. Life Saving Service, today known as the U.S. Coast Guard. After five years on the job, Jenkins left to take up the profession of inventor, where he really found his calling. Through his Jenkins Laboratory, he was prolific as he amassed numerous patents for inventions such as an automobile with the engine in the front instead of under the seat (1898), designed an early sight-seeing bus (1901), created an early automobile self-starter (1911), and developed significant improvements to the internal combustion engine (1912).

In 1924, Jenkins experimented with sending radio photographs, a precursor to television. From Fifer's thesis, "After obtaining such wonderful results in radio photographs, Dr. Jenkins immediately began to develop some practical means of transmitting pictures of moving objects and motion pictures." "The Radio Vision receiving set as designed by Dr. Jenkins is very simple and all the apparatus may be placed in a small box beside the radio set and one may see a distant football game or inaugural ceremony or may see a motion picture transmitted from a film."

Jenkins' work directly resulted in the founding of the motion picture and television industries. As a chief pioneer, he should be considered the most important person to the inception of our industry, yet he is virtually unknown to many, including some of our SMPTE members. I hope that, through our efforts to recognize and celebrate SMPTE's significant milestone anniversary, we help spread the word about this remarkable visionary.

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