

Appendix A

Founding the Society

Over the decades since its founding, many *Transactions* and *Journal* papers have recounted the motivation behind the founding and early years of the Society. Most were written by SMPTE officials and other Society members, and while they all generally agree, there have been notable exceptions.

The documentable narrative is that, after the failure of two industry associations to establish Standards Committees, both of which were Chaired by C. Francis Jenkins, and with the rising recognition by motion picture industry stakeholders of the need for technical standards that would enable industry growth, Jenkins took steps to fill the void and invited colleagues to Washington DC, where, in the summer of 1916, the Society of Motion Picture and Engineers – “SMPE” – was incorporated.*

However, concerns about conflicting information in *SMPTE Journal* articles, on-line copy, and other Society public relations materials regarding the circumstances leading to the founding of the Society came to the fore as information was gathered in preparation for the Centennial Celebration in 2016, in particular, for the production of a commemorative coffee table book.

The core issue is the role of the US government and armed services, if any, in the establishment of the Society. For example:

The Society was chartered to develop standards and provide training to streamline the U.S. government's burgeoning use of motion picture products.¹

Assertions state that Jenkins was responding to increasing pressure from the army, or at the behest of the government, or was under pressure and felt threatened. Unfortunately, any evidence that might exist in official Society records is not available. The Home Office has bound volumes of all Board of

¹ In 1950 SMPE would embrace television to become the Society of Motion Picture and Television Engineers – “SMPTE.”

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Governors meeting minutes from 1920 to the present; however, the 1916-1919 volume is not present.[†]

Jenkins' description of his "motivation to act" was that it was his response to a second failed attempt to establish a Standards Committee in 1916 under the National Board of Trade.

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. (ST 1918 V2 N7 7)

Concerning the "inspiration" that prompted Jenkins to form an independent standards development organization, Past-Chairman of the SMPTE Historical and Museum Committee Glenn E. Mathews reported in the April 1967 *Journal* (SJ 1947 V76 N4 369) that:²

In my paper, "Some Historic Aspects of the SMPTE," (Jour. SMPTE, 75: 856-867, Sept. 1966) reference is made in a footnote on page 856 to a private communication of Aug. 24, 1965, from Nat. I. Brown, ... In his letter to me, Mr. Brown described how the idea of founding the SMPE occurred during a conversation between him, C. F. Jenkins and E. K. Gillett on the Boardwalk at Atlantic City, N.J., during the summer of 1915, while they were attending the annual convention of the Motion Picture Theater Exhibitors...

There is additional evidence that shows that Jenkins was not alone in his belief in the need for an organization that would develop and issue technical standards for the motion picture industry. Besides the Jenkins' conversation with Nat I. Brown of The Minusa Cine Products Company, and E. Kendell Gillett of the *Motion Picture News*, others within the industry were vocal public advocates of the need for standardization of motion picture technology. Most notably, Frank Richardson, an editor with *Moving Picture World* and various associated trade publications, repeatedly published comments on the need for standardization.

[†] Alex Alden, in his 1987 Historical Note "Our Society - Its Beginning, Its Growth" (SJ 1987 V96 N7 687), claims to have read all "all 265 reports of the Board, from the beginning through 1986," implying that minutes from the 1916 – 1919 meetings existed. Glenn E. Mathews' 1966 *Journal* paper "Historic Aspects of the SMPTE" (SJ 1966 N75 N9 857) contains an image of the first page of the Minutes of Organization Meeting, July 24, 1916.

Articles penned by equipment manufacturer Nicholas Powers also advocated for the standardization of technical specifications.

Janet Staiger, emeritus professor at the University of Texas, who wrote about the origins of SMPTE in an Historical Note, "Standardization and Independence: The Founding Objectives of the SMPTE" in the June 1987 *SMPTE Journal* (SJ 1987 V96 N6 532), never mentioned any government pressure or role.

... the movement toward standardization was a broad trend in the 1910s. The failure of earlier trade organizations also hindered standards taking hold... which also appears to be why Jenkins judged organizing a separate (Engineers) society would avoid all of the company and trade organization politics. And all of this was over half a year before the US entered WWI.

In his writings, Jenkins never mentions the Army or US Government pressure anywhere, save for an allusion to a "forced" standardization in his 1931 autobiography *Boyhood of an Inventor*, which differs somewhat from his account in the *Transactions*. (see ST 1918 V2 N7 6)

When the United States joined the defenders of the peace of the world, the new society of motion picture engineers found that its standardization had anticipated a forced standardization, and was, therefore, more useful because it was ready with standardizing service. (Boyhood pg 113)

In a 2016 email correspondence, Stager posited:

Considering the influence of standards, even when they are voluntary, on business development and governmental oversight and regulation (i.e. anti-trust) it is important to understand the motive forces leading to the founding of the Society.

The US government could not "force" standards on the private sector... "The US Bureau of Standards in 1916 did not have any authority to set industry-product standards (so it wasn't any threat anyway)."

Papers about SMPE's 25th anniversary in the July 1941 *Journal* (SJ 1941 V37 N7) do not mention the government or military. In 1943, SMPE President Herbert Griffin's prepared address for the Fifty-Fourth Semi-Annual Meeting was not presented at the conference but was later published in the *Journal* in April 1944 (SJ 1944 V42 N4 199). Griffin compared SMPE in WWII to SMPE in WWI He

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described papers contributed by the Army, the Navy, and the Air Force to the *Journal* and the devotion of an entire issue of the *Journal* to the U. S. Army Motion Picture Service. Despite all of that and multiple mentions of Jenkins and the founding of the Society, however, he makes no mention of an army or government role in that founding.

A paper called "The Role of the American Standards Association in War Standardization" by J. W. McNair, Secretary, ASA War Committee on Photography and Cinematography Z52, in the July 1944 *Journal* (SJ 1944 V43 N15) begins "It may be a surprise to many of today's SMPE members that standardization was probably the most important reason for the founding of the Society," but, despite mentioning then-current military standardization and 16-mm film, never alludes to any military role in SMPE's creation.

Professor Staiger's paper had 23 references but mentioned no government or military influence.

The US did not enter WWI until 6 April 1917 so the US government wouldn't be worried about cameras in the trenches 9 months earlier. None of my notes suggests that the US government was encouraging the formation of SMPE in 1916; everything suggests it was engineering culture and industry needs.

Mark Schubert reported his initial findings about SMPE origins on 02/06/2016:

[In] Godfrey's own book *C. Francis Jenkins, Pioneer of Film and Television*, on page 72, he has Hubbard tell Jenkins, "[W]rite the specifications for the war service motion picture camera for the Army and Navy, or they would mandate them." "To accomplish the task, he [Jenkins] called upon the new members of SMPE, who were studying cameras and perforation." That means SMPE already existed at the time before Jenkins was given the Army and Navy specification task.

At the July 1917 Chicago Meeting, in his President's Address (ST 1917 V2 N4 5), Jenkins brought up Army and Navy specs he was asked [Jenkins states "appointed"] to write and sought help from SMPE members to accomplish.

Jenkins announced that the US government had approached SMPE with an "invite" [Staiger's paraphrase in her notes] to do "specifications for a Government camera to be employed in the trenches." He and Bell did this in the name of

SMPE and the members approved and thanked him. (see "Motion Picture Engineers Meet," MPW Aug 4, 1917 pg 801)

Regarding comments by Jenkins in his July 1917 Meeting Presidential Address (ST 1917 V2 N4 5), Schublin reports:

... only towards the end of his address (third page), just for "the credit being given our Society for the added prestige, and to publish the fact that there is now an authoritative body to whom one may apply for information of this very kind." Nothing in that address suggests an ultimatum.

I looked up the founding of the Society in two Washington newspapers the day after the first meeting. The Herald wrote "The new organization ... will have as its object the standardization of all the mechanical equipment used in the manufacture and projection of motion pictures," and noted that Hubbard "addressed the meeting yesterday on 'Standardization.'" The Evening Star, after also noting that Hubbard addressed the group on "Standardization," mentioned two other speakers (from George Washington University and the patent office) and then offered this: "The objects of the society are advancement in the theory and practice of picture engineering and the allied arts and sciences, and the maintenance of a high professional standing among its members."

Hubbard's July 24, 1916 address was published in the Transactions (ST 1916 V1 N2 16). He does not mention the war or military even once. Instead, when he gets to SMPE-related standards efforts, he begins with cinema seating. "You have the problem, for instance, of seating for comfort, for space economy, and for effective seeing." After a discussion of seating, he turns to nomenclature, and, after that, "Optical standardization would include light sources in the studio and the theater--their quality, steadiness, brightness, and distribution; also the optical systems of lenses, reflectors, screens, and the question of eye comfort."

Was there, then, a secret deal between Hubbard and Jenkins? If so, why would Jenkins publicly describe his Army-Navy specification task and have it published in the Transactions during the war?

Staiger said in a February 2016 email correspondence that she would:

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... be surprised that the Secretary of the US Bureau of Standards did NOT encourage Jenkins to organize a society and/or set standards. However, encouraging/"giving a push" is very different from "threatening."

Staiger also noted that:

I am sure that Jenkins and the other SMPE engineers would want to cooperate with the US Govt and army, but any collaboration can have its ups and downs. Yet, a distinction surely must be made as to the forces propelling the initial creation of the SMPE and subsequent exchanges amongst various institutions. As well, "memories" or casual writing in memoirs might be slightly less accurate than records produced much closer to events (such as newspaper reporting of meetings and announcements). Still Jenkins's report that you attached is very consistent with the contemporary newspaper reports. The article I referenced appears to be prior to Bell and Gregory's (apparently unsuccessful) attempt to agree on camera specifications for the war work.

Might the Army have started earlier on the use of training films to be prepared for possible entry into the war?

In a paper, "Motion Picture Activities in the United States Army," published in the *Transactions* in May 1929 (ST 1929 V13 N38 355), Lieutenant Colonel Walter E. Prosser of the Signal Corps explicitly wrote, "The first interest displayed by the United States Army in motion pictures was in the field which, at the time, it shared in common with the rest of the world, the field of amusement" i.e., entertaining the troops. He notes that "There is no record of the Army realizing the instructional value of film prior to the entry of the United States into the World War." He continued, "This is easily explained."

The military arm of the country during the days I am discussing was a small, compact, highly trained body of regular soldiers. The most efficient method of instruction, that of actual practice, drill and maneuver, was in vogue. The results produced by this method were entirely satisfactory. There was no need for intensive high speed training of large bodies of untrained men, such as became imperative when once [sic] the World War broke upon us, and, therefore, no necessity existed for increasing the methods of instruction employed in the Army at that time.

The Signal Corps of the United States Army made its first contract for a training picture with the Lee Film Company of San Antonio, Texas, in the spring of 1917. The contract was signed April 5, 1917, and the United States declared war on Germany April 6, 1917.

Perhaps this contract was the reason that Jenkins was approached and asked to rapidly (in 48 hours, see ST 1917 V2 N4 7) produce standard specifications?

The Society of Motion Picture Engineers was founded, however, in July 1916, and incorporated a month later, both dates long before the Army made any training films. Prosser also explained that any Army uses of motion pictures for scientific research or record keeping came after the Army's use of it for training. Prosser stated that "Three principal problems arose in connection with the tremendous photographic duty thrust upon the Signal Corps by the war," but notably absent was any mention of standards.

Some are of the opinion that some form of government influence on Jenkins could not be totally ruled out. SMPTE President (2015-2016) Robert Siedel commented that: "Sometimes the government will use the verbal threat of regulation in order to get the industry to self-regulate. How to prove or disprove a conversation took place is near impossible. The government could have encouraged him to solve the standards issue without the threat of anti-trust inquires." Executive Director, Barbara Lange had a feeling that: "It was probably a bit of government pressure as well as the industry wanting standards to gain greater efficiencies."

The question was reviewed at the SMPTE Board of Governors meeting in Indian Wells, California on February 13, 2016. The consensus conclusion reached was that without corroborating evidence, it is not possible to make the assertion that SMPE was founded at the behest of the US Army or any government entity.

Based on just a little research, however, it appears to me that there is a great deal of evidence that the idea that the U.S. government pushed the creation of SMPTE so that military cinematography in World War I could be standardized is incorrect.

Professor Staiger summarized that:

I do not say that our research is necessarily definitive, However, we have not been able to find any reference to support the idea that the founding of SMPE

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had anything to do with the U.S. government (other than two government speakers at the first meeting, neither of whom mentioned any government needs; there was at least one more external speaker not associated with the government).

¹ SMPTE Innovation, Fact Sheet, SMPTE, September 2015 v8

² N. I. Brown via Matthews, Letter to Editor SJ April 1967, pg. 369

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