

Technological History of Fox Movietone News

From Edison's attempts to incorporate the technologies of moving pictures and the phonograph to the synchronized sound in *Don Juan* (1926) and of course, *The Jazz Singer* (1927), the history of the development of sound in the cinema has been well documented.¹ The purpose here then is not to restate the history of sound, but rather to better illustrate the involvement of Theodore Case and E.I. Sponable and their sound-on-film invention lead to the formation of the Fox-Case Corporation in 1926. The reason this development is so significant in film history is because it allowed for the testing of sound on film. The reason this arrangement is so important for this paper is because the testing and practice was done largely through the newsreel.

In three 1947 issues of the *Journal of the Motion Picture Engineers*, Earl Sponable, not surprisingly, plays up the magnitude Theodore Case had on the history of sound in cinema.² Relying heavily on Case's own correspondence, Sponable gives a year-by-year account of the development of sound films, up to and including the success of Movietone News. Case began in 1911 to experiment on sound recording while still a student at Yale University. He and Sponable met and began to work together in 1916 (Figure 1a).³ Theirs was not the only collaboration. At times, Case and Sponable were involved with Dr. Lee de Forest, engineers at the Bell and Howell Company, as well as the Western Electric Company. The involvement with de Forest concerned the perfection of a photoelectric cell that could be used to capture sound without using up too much heat or power. This ultimately lead to what was termed the "Aeo-

¹ See, for example, Harry M. Geduld, *The Birth of the Talkies: From Edison to Jolson* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1975), Evan Willaim Cameron, ed. *Sound and the Cinma: The Coming of Sound to American Film* (Pleasantville: Redgrave, 1980), and Edward W. Kellogg's multiple installments, "History of Sound Motion Pictures," *Journal of the Society of Motion Picture and Television Engineers* 64 (1955): 291-302; 356-74; and 422-37.

² E.I. Sponable, "Development of Sound Films," in *Journal of the Society of Motion Picture Engineers* 48 (1947): 275-303; and 407-22.

³ Sponable, 284.

light," which "operated at between 200 and 400 v[olts]."⁴ Sponable, on the other hand, designed and had built by Bell and Howell, a new sound camera (Figure 2) in February 1923, which was tested "with good results."⁵ The collaboration with Western Electric Company was in regards to the use of amplifiers and was solidified in early December 1925.

It was not until the fall of 1925, after the working arrangements between Case and de Forest were, as Kellogg diplomatically phrases it "terminated" that "the Case laboratory efforts were directed largely to recording principles and apparatus".⁶ The results of these efforts were in the design and building of a projector attachment that would work with existing silent projectors. It was during this time that the decision was made "to place the soundhead under the projector, and the offset of 20 frames or 14 ½ in. between picture and sound was established."⁷

After undergoing numerous extensive tests of what was termed "the Case system," Case and the Fox Film Corporation entered into an agreement on July 23, 1926, and thus formed the Fox-Case Corporation.⁸ This date is noteworthy because, one of the first demonstrations of the Case system was done in May of that year, four months before the *Don Juan* premiere.⁹ In August 1926, Sponable moved to "New York to take part in commercializing the Case

⁴ Kellogg, 295.

⁵ Sponable, 289.

⁶ Kellogg, 295. Film historians have made much of the fact that de Forest never received full compensation for all that he did in the development of sound motion pictures. Sponable himself mentions that de Forest sued both Fox and Case in August 1926 for patent infringement. However, it never went to trial. In his article, Sponable does not defend himself or Case, but rather points out throughout that it was a mutual collaboration. Sponable, 407.

⁷ Kellogg, 295. De Forest's design had placed the attachment above the projection head. Sponable, 295.

⁸ Raymond Fielding, "The Technological Antecedents of the Coming of Sound: An Introduction," in Sound and the Cinema: The Coming of Sound to American Film, ed. Evan William Cameron (Pleasantville: Redgrave, 1980), 17.

Sponable relates that in this agreement, "Case turned over all patents and rights in his system of talking picture to the new company...agree[ing] to continue his laboratory for the purpose of making recording lights, photoelectric cells, and for general development purposes. Sponable, 302. Interestingly, on another matter, at least one film historian has cited William Fox's somewhat apathetic feelings toward the development of sound on film. Geduld, 146.

However, Sponable gives the impression was one of distrust rather than apathy, when he recalls that when shown the process at his home, "Mr. Fox was at first suspicious of the process; however, a close-up of a canary bird singing while perched on the top of its cage seemed to convince him that the sound was not a matter of trickery." 302.

⁹ Geduld, 155.

system."¹⁰ Courtland Smith¹¹ was made general manager, and "Movietone" was chosen as the commercialized name for the system. A few months later, on January 21, 1927, the "first public showing of Fox-Case 'Movietone' subjects [Racquel Meller and Harry Lauder, both popular singers] was given at the Sam Harris Theater in connection with the premiere of 'What Price Glory,' though not advertised".¹² This early public demonstration proved that not only was sound-on-film a viable probability for the future of film, but its future success was solidified in June when Charles Lindbergh's welcome to Washington after his transatlantic flight was recorded by the Fox-Case system.

While news subjects, such as Lindbergh's welcoming, along with a speech given by Mussolini, and several musical numbers had been shown, it was not until October 28, 1927 that the first Movietone News was exhibited. Not only did this first showing establish Movietone News as what would become a commonplace feature at first-run theaters, but it also cemented the procedure of showing several short and frequently unrelated subjects together.¹³

The popularity and success of Movietone cannot be overstated. Not only did the release of Movietone News increase from one to three issues per week in a little over a year, but within a span of two months in 1928, the total of West Coast recording units increased to a total of 24. Furthermore, an additional three European units were ordered as well, bringing the total of field newsreel units up to 19 by September 1928.¹⁴ In fact, the year 1928 saw not only the further progress in perfecting the Movietone technique, specifically the perfection of the Aeo lights, but by December, a total of "fifty-six field units were scheduled for assignment all over the world"

¹⁰ Sponable, 407.

¹¹ Sponable gives considerable credit to Smith who, he states "was instrumental in starting and developing Movietone News and later the Newsreel Theater." 407.

¹² This first public showing did not result in a "stampede...but neither was there an unfavorable audience reaction." Sponable, 408.

¹³ This first exhibition at the Roxy Theater in New York contained: "Niagara Falls," "Romance of the Iron Horse," "Army-Yale Football game at Yale bowl," and "Rodeo in New York." Sponable 409-410.

¹⁴ Sponable, 412.

along with “three special Aviation Units ...activated.”¹⁵ This then, was the situation in which “A Movietone Visit to Far Cairo”¹⁶ was filmed.¹⁷

Archival History of Fox Movietone News

Since at one time Fox Movietone released three Movietone newsreels a week, it is no wonder that it is one of the largest, if not the largest collections of all newsreels. Further, considering that, sadly few of the early newsreels exist (Pathe', Universal and Hearst for example, along with *Mutual Weekly*, *Gaumont Animated Weekly* and *Vitagraph Monthly* have several years missing or destroyed), the existence of Fox newsreels is even more impressive. According to William T. Murphy, “at one point the Fox newsreels measured more than 100 million feet of nitrate and safety film.”¹⁸ Or, put another way, “if the entire collection were spliced together and run at sound speed continuously, the film would not run out until after more than one year had passed.”¹⁹

Clearly, in addition to being of monumental historical importance, it is an impressive collection by its size alone. However, it is due in part to this size that creates difficulty in obtaining documented material on any of the edited newsreels or extant material. As Murphy reports, beginning in 1980, Twentieth Century Fox donated “the library, in increments, to the University of South Carolina....according to advantageous tax terms.”²⁰ However, while the University of South Carolina received all of the edited newsreels from September 1942 to

¹⁵ Sponable, 413.

¹⁶ Also known in source material as “Cairo Street Scenes” and “Cairo Streets.”

¹⁷ The history of Movietone News is not limited to this brief scope. In business well before sound on film, Fox continued to produce newsreels, the official years 1919-1963. Some of the few significant events in its later history are the uniting with Hearst in 1929 to form the Fox-Hearst Corporation, with Fox and Hearst agreeing that “each would release two [newsreels] per week.” Another is the eventual selling of shares by William Fox in 1930, a result of the stock market crash and pressure from his own company. Sponable, 413-4.

¹⁸ William T. Murphy, “The Preservation of Newsreels in the United States,” in Newsreels in Film Archives: A Survey Based on the FIAF Newsreel Symposium eds. Roger Smither and Wolfgang Klaue (Trowbridge: Flicks Books, 1996), 9.

¹⁹ Andred G. Setos, “The Fox Movietone News Preservation Project: An Introduction,” in Society of Motion Picture and Television Engineers Journal 105 (1996): 536. It should be made clear, however, that Setos does not specify if he is referring solely to Fox Movietone newsreels, all of Fox newsreels, or just those he is discussing. Regardless, though, it is an awesome amount of material.

²⁰ Murphy, 9.

August 1944, as well as “all extant nitrate out-takes from 1919 to 1934,” totaling eleven million feet, this transferring of material was halted by the new owners of Twentieth Century Fox.²¹ Therefore, while South Carolina has a great deal of material, there is also material in both Los Angeles and New York. The University of Los Angeles Archives²² holds much of Twentieth Century Fox collection, while the Fox-Movietone Newsreel Library is in New York, but now a part of Fox Television News. To further complicate matters, the Newsreel Library is effectively closed to the public while decisions over its future are being made.

Although it is evident that Fox attempted to preserve and archive its newsreel material, both by agreeing to transfer it to University of South Carolina, as well as transferring it to videotape, as laid out by much of the September 1996 issue of the *Society of Motion Picture and Television Engineers Journal*, the future of these collections remain uncertain. At the time of Murphy’s writing, South Carolina was storing the nitrate material in former ammunition bunkers, being financially able to store them according to temperature and relative humidity standards.²³ Furthermore, having not only the newsreels broken up, but all related and supporting material divided into three different locations makes research into the material that much more difficult.

Research Narrative

The library index card from the newsreel gave the names of the cameraman, sound recordist and a shot-by-shot layout of what was filmed. Unfortunately we were unable to track down any more information on either cameraman or sound recordist. In fact the specifics regarding the production history have been very difficult to research. Rather, the focus became on what was being filmed.

²¹ Murphy, 9.

²² Through a personal contact of Irene Taylor’s, a friend and current UCLA student, Tara Key, performed a cursory search for related ancillary material on the subject, but nothing was found. However, thanks are given for the effort.

²³ Murphy, 9.

Much of the newsreel is of a close-up of a man speaking Arabic. Thanks to Wilson Chacko Jacob, a PhD student in the Department of Middle Eastern Studies at New York University, we were able to roughly translate his speech. On the index card this man's name is given as Abdul Kadur, but no other indication of his identity is available. In essence what Kadur is saying can be broken into three different parts (it is interesting to point out that there are three obvious breaks in filming of his speech). The first part consists of Kadur trying to encourage some of the younger men to take the foreigners to the mosque and show them how to pray. The second part degenerates from this to Kadur insulting a woman off-camera. Wilson Jacob states that it is unclear as to why Kadur insults her, but says in essence: "A pox on your and your family." The third part is both more interesting and puzzling. As the younger men become more vocal, Kadur and other, unidentified men begin to swear and insult one another. While Jacob related that a lot of it was unclear, much of what was said was: "Up your ass" and similar language. Moreover, Jacob, a student of Egypt during this time period asserts that it was not uncommon then (or now) for such large groups of Egyptian men to talk and relate in such a way.

In addition to helping translate the dialogue in the film, Jacob also helped in identifying a location which was difficult to identify based on written material associated with the footage. On the index card, one of the locations is listed as "Bowar Gate." No such gate exists. While one such gate, "Bab Al-Bahr," was thought, by similar spelling to be the gate. However, upon further research, it was discovered that Bab Al-Bahr was demolished in 1847 in order to make way for the railway station in Cairo.²⁴

Stymied by this dead-end, research was done both on other gates in Cairo (a great number), and the bazaar area that is featured throughout the footage. There is a definite

²⁴ Veronica Seton-William and Peter Stocks. Blue Guide: Egypt (London: A & C Black, 1993) 211.

probability that this area is known as Khan el-Khalili Bazaar, known by many simply as the “Khan.” Molefi Asante describes this area as a “massive shopping area consisting of hundreds of small shops along numerous winding alleyways....The huge market was established in 1292 and has been in service since that time with craftsmen still plying their traditional crafts in the narrow streets.”²⁵ Jacob further confirmed that he believes the bazaar to be the Khan. With this knowledge, investigation was done on gates in this area, bordered by Al-Azhar and Muski Streets. For a brief while it was thought that the Bab Zwayla was the gate. However, upon comparing the gate (not fully visible due to the framing) with current photographs from <http://archnet.org>, the two were not the same. It was believed that the structure would have to remain unidentified until Jacob casually declared that it was an entryway into Al-Azhar, one of the world’s oldest universities, as well as a mosque.²⁶ The Khan and Al-Azhar are in the same area of Cairo, thereby confirming the location, and discrediting the information on the index card (Map 1).

There was not much more that could be researched in regards to verifying the information on the index card, so the focus shifted to that of the exhibition and reception of the newsreel. In addition to a photocopy of the library index card, the footage also came with a release sheet. Labeled “Fox Movietone News, Volume II, Release #22A - March 2nd, 1929,” it is a typed description of the various subjects that were shown that week in theatres across the country. “A Movietone Visit to Far Cairo” is listed second of the five subjects released that week. The others include a Daytona beach speed record trial, the Boston Braves, the San Bernardino Festival and the inauguration of Herbert Hoover as 31st President of the United States. After the title of each newsreel, a short description is given.

²⁵ Molefi Kete Asante, Culture and Customs of Egypt (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2002), 47.

²⁶ <http://www.islamfortoday.com/alazhar.htm>.

While no reviews of these newsreels exist, Fox Movietone News was advertised along with the features. On March 2, 1929, Fox Movietone is advertised twice in the *New York Times* (Figure 3). The first time in conjunction with the Fox film *Hearts of Dixie*, as “Fox Movietone’s All-Talking – All Singing – All-Comedy Triumph.”²⁷ The second mention of Fox Movietone on the same page is in a much smaller ad for a Universal film *The Rescue*, this time advertising the Fox Movietone News.²⁸

An even larger ad for *Hearts in Dixie* appeared two days later. In corresponding to the larger ad, the advertising for Fox Movietone news is also increased. In a box on the lower right-hand corner of the page reads: “An Accompanying FOX MOVIETONE Program that is the TALK of the Town.”²⁹ Listed on the program are: “1 – ‘Friendship.’ A Dramatic Novelty written and directed by EUGENE WALTER. 2 – Dr. SIGMUND SPAETH in ‘Old Tunes for New.’ 3 – FOX MOVIETONE NEWS ‘It Speaks for Itself.’ 4 – Movietone Medley of Dr. SYLVIA BROWN and HENDERSON’S latest Song Successes.” (Figure 4)³⁰ This clearly shows how much time, effort and money was put into making Fox Movietone a success--not only on the production side, but the exhibition side as well.

Finally, the most interesting ads, although not related directly to “Cairo Street Scenes,” is the full-page ad for another Movietone subject released the same week: Herbert Hoover’s inauguration (Figure 5). While playing up the historical importance of this event, the ad also describes how the speech was recorded for the benefit of future generations; or, as stated in the ad to “constitute a living record of current history.”³¹ Clearly then, by emphasizing the historical importance of this newsreel, Fox was also implying that its other newsreel subjects, no matter how seemingly mundane, were also of historical significance. Therefore, it is

²⁷ Ad for *Hearts in Dixie*. *New York Times* 2 March 1929, 21.

²⁸ Ad for *The Rescue*. *New York Times* 2 March 1929, 21.

²⁹ Ad for Fox Movietone Program. *New York Times* 4 March 1929, 30.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 30.

³¹ Ad for Fox Movietone News. *New York Times* 16 March 1929, 11.

recommended that research into these newsreels be continued by current and future archivists, but with a recommendation that sharing of knowledge between the institutions in possession of Fox Movietone News materials be strongly encouraged.

Sources for **Figures 1a, 2** and **Map 1**:

Figure 1a: R. Evans Westmore, "The Fox Movietone News Preservation Project: Engineering Overview," in Society of Motion Picture and Television Engineers Journal 105 (1996): 538.

Figure 2: E.I. Sponable, "Development of Sound Films," in Journal of the Society of Motion Picture Engineers 48 (1947): 289.

Map 1: Close-up of Cairo, Egypt. <http://lexicorinet.com/e.o/atlas/c-cairo.htm>