

Sponsors and Sponsorship

A basic distinction when it came to the production, distribution, and exhibition of moving pictures in the United States in the 1910s (and beyond) was between unsponsored and sponsored film. On the one hand were the films that appeared day after day in permanent movie theaters from companies like Paramount and Keystone, whose taken-for-granted, regularized delivery of product might have seemed like the operation of a public utility. On the other hand, certain films, like the screening of *Extraction of a Shrapnel Ball from the Regions of the Heart* for physicians and surgeons attending the semiannual convention of the Third District Medical Society of North Carolina, arrived and were exhibited locally in various sites, often only once or twice, under the auspices of a particular group or organization with no direct connection to the film industry.

As was the case with other manufacturers of mass-marketed products designed to be readily available in familiar retail outlets, the companies engaged in the production, distribution, and exhibition of theatrical motion pictures were businesses operating for profit, catering to cinemagoers who purchased tickets fully expecting to see new (or not-yet-seen) movies. In this competitive commercial marketplace, theaters depended on advertising and promotional ballyhoo for product differentiation and keeping customers up to date on the constantly changing schedule of attractions. Exhibitors, like studios, often aimed to foster a recognizable, marketable identity, even something that resembled a brand. While it would have been readily apparent that movies were created by far-distant studios and presented by locally situated theaters, neither theaters nor studios could be said to have “sponsored” the steady stream of titles theatrically distributed.

Sponsorship, as I will be using the concept, covers much more than what we might associate with the familiar figure of the sponsor in the history of American broadcasting—that is, with what Erik Barnouw pilloried as the “modern potentate,” who flexed his influence and power in purchasing blocks of airtime for advertisements, making decisions about (even creating) programming, or underwriting

programs as a form of public service and corporate public relations.¹ During the 1910s, sponsors that made use of moving pictures included businesses and corporations, but also government agencies, churches, and trade associations, as well as any number of other groups, from the Knights of Pythias, the Chamber of Commerce, and the Daughters of the Confederacy to the Woman's Franchise League. Screening events could be sponsored for the purposes of fundraising, outreach, advertising, mobilization, instruction, uplift, Americanization, recruitment, community well-being, group solidarity, and/or entertainment. And the prerogatives of the sponsor could vary considerably, well beyond providing funding and having direct involvement with production.² Sponsorship could entail, for example, dictating certain terms and conditions of distribution, taking responsibility for advertising, hosting a screening, making available a screening site and projector, targeting a particular audience, providing a speaker to introduce or "lecture" with the film, and/or stipulating certain programming strategies.

The parameters of sponsorship thus bring to the fore not only the varieties of non-theatrical practices but also the role of agency, authority, and access in this period of American cinema. These factors became increasingly important as cinema expanded beyond the standard procedures of the commercial film industry—pointing, in fact, to issues that return again and again with media in the twentieth century. This chapter explores and historically situates sponsorship from three quite different vantage points: a single screening in San Leandro, California; the National American Woman Suffrage Association's involvement with the widely circulated feature film *Your Girl or Mine* (1914); and the sponsorship of non-theatrical cinema through the 1910s in America's fourth-largest city, St. Louis, Missouri.

UNDER THE AUSPICES OF

Here's an admittedly unremarkable example of a sponsored screening, described in a brief, likely self-reported item, entitled "Azores Views Shown," that ran on January 1, 1915, in the *Oakland [CA] Tribune*. This notice was grouped with other information concerning the city of San Leandro (population about 4,600 in 1915) on a page devoted to the "Latest News of Oakland's Neighbors": "Moving picture and stereopticon views of the Azores Island were the attraction at an entertainment in St. Joseph's hall this week given under the auspices of members of the Portuguese community. The object of the gathering was to gain more members for a hospital association. The views were exhibited by M. J. Cavreira of Melrose."³

Presented by one person who came from a nearby neighborhood in Oakland, this "entertainment" had a straightforward objective that had nothing to do with turning a profit from ticket sales. It aimed rather to recruit new members willing to pay one dollar per month for medical and hospital coverage from a group like the North American Hospital Association, then headquartered in Oakland and in the midst of a membership drive.⁴ Combining moving pictures and slides that

offered images of islands controlled by Portugal, this screening targeted the large number of Portuguese immigrants who resided in and around San Leandro. "Given under the auspices of members of the Portuguese community," this event was likely also sponsored in some manner by the hospital association seeking members, and was at least indirectly authorized by local authorities of the Catholic church, since St. Joseph's hall was adjacent to St. Mary's Convent (a school run by the Dominican Sisters) and was under the jurisdiction of the San Leandro parish. I have found no evidence that motion pictures had previously been screened at St. Joseph's, but this seven-hundred-seat hall was regularly used for a variety of events, including musical performances by students and commencement exercises at the convent school; recitals, amateur theatricals, dances, and other fundraisers for Catholic churches or organizations in the city; and large meetings of groups like the Portuguese Union, which drew its members from across central California.⁵

Unlike the films booked into the Best Theater in San Leandro or ten miles away in one of the many theaters in downtown Oakland, the moving picture and stereopticon entertainment offered at a church-run hall in San Leandro was one of countless events, performances, meetings, and activities in this period that were presented *under the auspices of* a specific group or organization and were publicly noted as such in newspapers. This type of sponsorship reflects a familiar means by which social life outside the home and workplace was organized, enhanced, and directed. *Under the auspices of* covered a range of situations, organizations, and aims, as the following handful of items culled from metropolitan and small-town newspapers on January 1, 1915, begins to suggest:

- "Under the auspices of the Social Service Commission, a meeting in the interest of the Church Temperance Society will be held in Trinity Church" (Boston, Massachusetts)
- "Mr. R. W. Lovett of Boston will be here January 9 and probably January 10 for the purpose of giving advice in cases of infantile paralysis. He comes here under the auspices of the State Board of Health" (Montpelier, Vermont)
- "The feature of today's observance among the colored people of the city will be the emancipation celebration this afternoon at 2 o'clock at Bethel A M E Church, under the auspices of the Pastors' Council" (Indianapolis, Indiana)
- "William A. McKeever, of the department of child welfare at Kansas University, will give an address at Central High School in Kansas City . . . this is the first of a series of eleven lectures that he will give there on Monday afternoons under the auspices of the Kansas City School of Social Service" (Lawrence, Kansas)
- "The stereopticon views and illustrated lecture [on the British Isles] by Rev. Preston, [was] given under the auspices of the Plymouth club at the Congregational church last night . . . a reading by Miss Susan Casterline, vocal solo by Miss Ruth Brant and a cornet solo by C. C. Wolsey were part of the first-class program" (Petaluma, California).⁶

What was entailed and what was signified in situations like these when a screening, lecture, musical recital, celebration, meeting, or entertainment took place under the auspices of a group or organization? Today, *under the auspices of* is a phrase most often associated with administrative oversight, institutional support, and the validation of a recognized academic, political, or religious authority. (A peace conference held under the auspices of the UN, for example.)⁷ A century ago the phrase had much wider currency. Sponsorship, as exemplified by the newspaper items listed earlier, was so ubiquitous as to be almost a given, indicative of a world where various affiliations—beyond family ties and political party membership—and a host of formal and informal groups, secular as well as religious, played or sought to play a role in filling and shaping leisure activities, disseminating information, advocating for certain values, and contributing to the public life of a community and even to the nation at large. The Emergency War Tax passed by the US Congress in October 1914 gave due weight to the significance of sponsored events by drawing a basic distinction between “theatres, museums, and concert halls,” which were taxed, and “Lecture lyceums, Chautauquas, agricultural or industrial fairs or exhibitions under the auspices of religious or charitable associations,” which were excluded from this new tax.⁸

The Emergency War Tax was especially telling for Protestant churches, since illustrated lectures, screenings, training sessions, social get-togethers, lyceum series, musical performances, and reports about missionary work were often held under the auspices of various clubs or groups within individual Protestant congregations—including African American congregations responsible for the many “church-sponsored film exhibitions” that Cara Caddoo has identified in her study of this period.⁹ This strategy was equally essential for the YMCA, as part of its non-sectarian commitment to fostering a certain form of citizenship, as well as for the outreach efforts of museums and educational institutions.¹⁰ On occasion, commercial theaters could devote an afternoon or evening to benefit amateur shows or lectures conducted under the auspices of local groups, ranging from the Socialist Party in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, to the First Church of Christ, Scientist, in Ithaca, New York.¹¹

While sponsorship frequently was undertaken in the name of public service, it could have any number of short- and long-term goals: attracting new recruits or converts, bolstering the commitment of believers, creating or reaffirming a sense of community, raising funds, advancing progressivist (or anti-progressivist) claims, selling products and services, encouraging best practices, and passing on useful information. Or the investment in sponsoring events could be aimed toward generating business and good public relations, as when chambers of commerce, merchant organizations, and commercial clubs sought to attract both local residents and non-resident visitors by sponsoring events like traveling street carnivals, special free screenings, and holiday festivities. Sponsored events were also a basic outreach strategy employed by public health and safety campaigns, relief

committees, and unions. Local 755 of the United Mine Workers of America, for example, actually owned and operated a commercial theater in Staunton, Illinois—the eight-hundred-seat Labor Temple. In March 1915, “under the auspices of the Illinois Miners and Mechanics Institute” (an initiative created and funded by the state of Illinois), the Labor Temple hosted a free screening of safety films from the US Bureau of Mines. In this instance, a single screening could be said to have had three sponsors: a federal agency, a state institute, and a labor union.¹²

Given the widespread practice of sponsoring lectures, recitals, and various types of entertainment, it is noteworthy—though perhaps not surprising—that, at best, a very small percentage of films in the 1910s arrived in local theaters under the auspices of specific groups or organizations. Consider in this respect, Little Rock, the capital and largest city in Arkansas, then with a population of about fifty-five thousand, one-third of whom were African American. The city’s two daily newspapers paid scant attention to the social and civic activities organized within the African American community, which unfortunately means that the following information covers only sponsored events aimed at white residents.¹³

During 1915, Little Rock’s most active sponsor of public events for the white community was the Musical Coterie, a women’s group formed in 1893 that had long held up the mantle of high culture and was in 1915 hosting concerts by touring musicians and staging free Sunday afternoon recitals.¹⁴ In addition, six times that year theaters in Little Rock were made available for amateur events, including a show involving a host of local performers arranged by the Chamber of Commerce to raise money for “flood sufferers” in nearby Newport, Arkansas, and a “society vaudeville” performance under the auspices of the City Federation of Women’s Clubs “for the benefit of the unemployed.”¹⁵ The problem of unemployment was likewise the focus of a meeting arranged by Little Rock’s Civic Forum, a self-styled “nonpolitical, nonreligious club” that had been created the year before with the aim of offering “free educational programs,” usually in the form of Sunday afternoon lectures in one of the city’s theaters.¹⁶ There is little evidence that state or federal agencies sponsored events in Little Rock during 1915, but explicitly political public lectures were presented under the auspices of organizations with ties well beyond the city, including the Arkansas Anti-Saloon League, the Socialist Club, the Anti-Capital Punishment Society, the United Daughters of the Confederacy, and the German-American Federation of Arkansas.¹⁷ No comparable aims at uplift, political action, or civic engagement drove the Young Men’s Democratic Club to sponsor boxing matches at Moose Hall or the Central Trades and Labor Council to bring under its auspices a traveling carnival company to Little Rock—attractions that pushed on the limits of what was then deemed to be acceptable amusement.¹⁸ Sponsorship in all these cases provided an occasion for people to gather in one place, and it enabled an organization, institution, or club to announce or underscore its presence in the city by advocating for a position and/or by making available events not provided by churches, schools, or state agencies.

Of the many sponsored performances and activities that helped to constitute white public life in 1915, Little Rock's newspapers paid most attention to the production and exhibition of *The History of David O. Dodd*, a five-reel film made under the auspices of the Little Rock chapter of the Sons and Daughters of the Confederacy.¹⁹ Shot in and around the city and directed by a local resident, this production featured a cast drawn largely from Little Rock's elite, who were costumed in period clothes borrowed from local closets. *The History of David O. Dodd* fully embraced the mythology of the "Lost Cause" as it dramatized the story of the "boy martyr of the Confederacy," who was captured and hanged by the Federal troops occupying Little Rock in 1864.²⁰ It played for three days at the Royal Theater in November 1915 (eight weeks before *The Birth of Nation* premiered in the city), with the proceeds earmarked for the David O. Dodd Memorial fund, and would return for one day in June 1917 after screening in a few other Arkansas cities.

Beyond the anomalous case of *The History of David O. Dodd*, exhibitors in Little Rock very rarely pitched their offerings as arriving "under auspices." With five movie theaters in operation six days a week (and some beginning to experiment with Sunday openings) and two multi-purpose theaters that regularly booked films, there was a constant stream of features, short films, and serial episodes cycling through the city usually for one- or two-day runs. During 1915, for example, only a handful of productions exhibited in Little Rock were identified as sponsored films: notably, *Inside of the White Slave Traffic*, which was described as being "endorsed and presented under the auspices of the Sociological Fund of the Medical Review of Reviews," an affiliation likely intended to legitimate the screening while foregrounding its sensational and potentially controversial subject matter;²¹ and the Selig Polyscope Company's *Your Girl and Mine*, advertised as a "dramatic feature photoplay in six acts" that was "[p]resented under the auspices of the National Woman's Suffrage Association by the World Film Corporation."²²

YOUR GIRL AND MINE

Shelley Stamp, Amy Shore, and other scholars have convincingly established the historical significance and ideological resonance of *Your Girl and Mine* in the context of the suffrage movement.²³ I am interested here in determining how this impassioned, melodramatic call to give women the right to vote was identified, distributed, marketed, and exhibited as a sponsored film. Bearing the imprimatur of the widely known and well-established National American Woman's Suffrage Association (NAWSA) likely signified for potential moviegoers the overt political orientation, timely relevance, and self-described "propagandistic" intent of *Your Girl and Mine*, but sponsorship in this case went well beyond NAWSA's stamp of approval.

Photoplay Magazine declared that *Your Girl and Mine* "makes our conviction all the more firm—the usefulness of the movies is practically limitless," yet this film clearly had nothing to do with what Yvonne Zimmermann calls the "industrial

Special New Year's Attraction.

PALACE THEATRE

FRIDAY AND SATURDAY.

Not only was she a woman wronged, but a woman whose very life was threatened, because she stood in the way of the man whose son she bore.

But—you must see this play to appreciate the drama, the tensivity of its story, to realize its argument on the suffrage question.

“Your Girl and Mine”

A Dramatic Feature Photoplay in 7 Acts.

Produced under the auspices of the National American Woman's Suffrage Associations.

Produced by World Film Corporation.



FIGURE 1.1. Ad for *Your Girl and Mine*, Arkansas [Little Rock] Democrat, December 31, 1914.

film as utility film,” a mainstay of corporate sponsored cinema, especially in Europe.²⁴ In fact, *Your Girl and Mine* was a fiction film performed by professional actors, produced at William Selig’s Chicago studio, and written by the author of Selig’s highly successful 1913 serial, *The Adventures of Kathryn*. It was distributed by Louis J. Selznick’s World Film Corporation to theaters across the United States where it was typically programmed like any other feature film. Beyond the claim in newspaper advertisements that *Your Girl and Mine* was “[p]resented under the auspices of the National Woman’s Suffrage Association,” what did the involvement of this organization entail and how was the sponsorship of this film designated and made manifest to audiences?

Your Girl and Mine was first screened on October 14, 1914, in Chicago before a commercial run that began on December 28, 1914, and continued into 1918. Syndicated newspaper feature articles in October 1914 emphasized the role of Mrs. Medill McCormick who, in her capacity as chair of NAWSA’s Congressional Committee, conceived of, initiated, and co-funded *Your Girl and Mine*, convincing Selig to produce the film. “Suffragettes Use Movies to Boost Cause” announced the *Arizona Daily Star*, quoting McCormick on the plan to create a “good smashing melodrama” that will spread the word far and wide, until “there will not be a spot in this country, from the mining camps of Alaska to the everglades of Florida, which will not understand, vividly, what women mean when they talk about ‘the right to vote.’”²⁵ McCormick herself authored (or at least put her name to) a newspaper article that provided a detailed plot summary as proof that *Your Girl and Mine* was designed to be “the *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* of the suffrage movement.”²⁶ (Since a print of the film has yet to be discovered, it is impossible to tell if the role of McCormick and NAWSA was actually referenced in the film’s titles or inter-titles.) In describing the film and her role vis-à-vis Selig, McCormick affirmed her authorship of this project and justified later claims that *Your Girl and Mine* was produced under the auspices of the NAWSA. A *Washington Times* advertisement, for instance, declared that the film “owes its inception to Mrs. Medill McCormick and it has the support and indorsement” of NAWSA.²⁷

Sponsorship in the case of *Your Girl and Mine* extended to the conditions of distribution as well as the process of production. It was McCormick, for example, who defended the integrity of the film by challenging the National Board of Censor’s call for certain cuts to *Your Girl and Mine*.²⁸ And the arrangement she struck with Selznick’s World Film Corporation likewise underscored the continuing role of NAWSA: one account had Selznick paying \$50,000 for rights to the film and agreeing to a “profit-sharing plan” with 25 percent of the “receipts of the show in every showhouse in the country” to “be turned back” to the organization’s National Committee.²⁹ McCormick explained in another syndicated article that in practice the profit-sharing arrangement meant that local suffragists would sell coupon booklets (each with two five-cent tickets and four ten-cent tickets) for the film, with 20 percent of the take earmarked for state suffrage associations and 5 percent for the national office of NAWSA.³⁰ I have found no evidence detailing how well


THE BRAINS OF TWO BIG ENTERPRISES HAVE COMBINED


LEWIS J. SELZNICK
 HAS ARRANGED TO HAVE THE
World Film Corporation



MRS. MEDILL McCORMICK



LEWIS J. SELZNICK

carry out the idea that originated with **MRS. MEDILL McCORMICK**, of Chicago, the executive head of the Woman's Suffrage Association, to extend the cause of woman's suffrage by means of the sensational melodramatic feature.

“Your Girl and Mine”

In 7 Reels, with Dr. Anna Howard Shaw and such noted Broadway players as Olive Wyndham, Katherine Kaelred and Sidney Booth. Read James S. McQuade's Review of “Your Girl and Mine” in the Last Issue of the *Moving Picture World*

400,000 Women, Members of the Suffrage Organization, Are Selling Tickets Now
 Your Audience Is Ready.
 Be the First to Take Advantage of This Tremendous Selling Force and Publicity

Phone or Wire Our Nearest Branch Office for Further Details

WORLD FILM CORPORATION

LEWIS J. SELZNICK, Vice-President and General Manager
 130 West 46th Street - New York City

26 Branches Throughout the United States and Canada, with 12 More to be Opened Within a Month

Be sure to mention “MOTION PICTURE NEWS” when writing to advertisers.

FIGURE 1.2. World Film Corporation ad for *Your Girl and Mine*, *Motion Picture News*, November 14, 1914.

this profit-sharing plan ended up working. But other financial arrangements were possible. In Bloomington, Indiana, for example, the sponsorship of *Your Girl and Mine* generated a profit of \$125 for the city's Women's Franchise League, which rented a movie theater for a single matinee and evening screening and paid the cost of the film (\$64.10) as well as for tickets and advertising (\$18.77).³¹

While *Your Girl and Mine* likely was not shown everywhere between the Everglades and Alaska, it did circulate widely across all regions of the continental United States and was still being exhibited in October 1917, when it was booked for the Idle Hour theater in the village of Paw Paw, Michigan (then with a population of about 1,500), with proceeds going in part to help cover the tax bill of a local women's group.³² Aside from special non-theatrical screenings at events like NAWSA's 1914 annual convention and state suffrage conventions in Nebraska, Wisconsin, and Alabama during 1915, *Your Girl and Mine* was exhibited in commercial theaters, beginning with the Casino Theatre in New York City on December 14, 1914.³³ For many of these theatrical bookings, NAWSA's connection to *Your Girl and Mine* was directly referenced in newspaper advertising: the Alamo Theater in Louisville, Kentucky, for example, identified *Your Girl and Mine* as being "[i]ndorsed [*sic*] by the National American Woman's Suffrage Association," while the Rolfe Theater in Albany, Oregon, billed the screening as "for the BENEFIT" of NAWSA.³⁴ Other advertisements for theatrical screenings of *Your Girl and Mine* claimed a more local connection, suggesting the flexibility of exhibitors in using sponsorship to help market the film as well as reflecting certain variations in how the suffrage campaign was conducted from place to place. In El Paso, Texas, *Your Girl and Mine* was offered "under the auspice and direction of the equal franchise league of El Paso"; in Muncie, Indiana, "[u]nder the Auspices of the Woman's Franchise League of Muncie"; in Santa Fe, New Mexico, under "Auspices [of the] Woman's Club."³⁵ According to the distribution strategy touted by McCormick, members of these organizations would have been encouraged to sell tickets as a way of raising funds for the cause.

Indorsed by, for the benefit of, under the auspices and direction of—while not synonymous, all these phrases from newspaper advertisements indicate a direct relationship between *Your Girl and Mine* and NAWSA and/or a local organization, clearly setting the film apart from the programs typically offered at American movie theaters. Perhaps most significant in this regard, the screening event itself could have underscored and made manifest sponsorship. In Louisville, "a committee of local suffragists was stationed in the lobby, distributing suffrage badges and literature," and "suffragists cheered at the skillful ways in which 'Votes for Women' was worked into the plot and related to every phase of woman's life."³⁶ At a theater in Buffalo, the local Woman's Suffrage Association en masse attended *Your Girl and Mine* at a theater "draped in suffrage colors" for what was billed as "Suffrage Night," featuring the film and a "special musical program."³⁷

One common strategy was for local supporters to address the audience between the reels of the film, offering in Richmond, Virginia, for example, "short and to-the-point suffrage speeches."³⁸ The *Camden [NJ] Daily Courier* estimated that more than one thousand people saw *Your Girl and Mine*, which appeared "under the auspices of the Camden Suffrage League," at the recently opened Grand Theatre. For this screening, League members "wearing votes for women sashes and

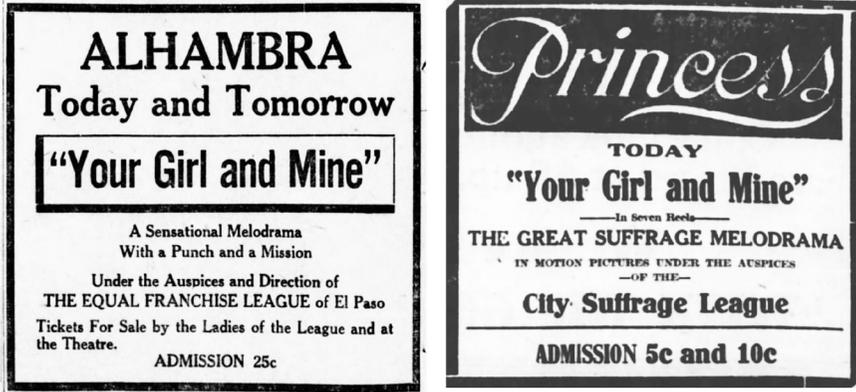


FIGURE 1.3. Local sponsorship of *Your Girl and Mine*, ads in *El Paso [TX] Times*, April 28, 1915; *Daily Illinois State Register [Springfield]*, August 15 1915.

buttons . . . sold tickets on the street and gave out literature and answered questions.” Both the matinee and evening shows included speeches on suffrage that “won the hearts of the audience.”³⁹

Washington, DC, not surprisingly, saw the most elaborate effort along these lines. *Your Girl and Mine* was booked for a week at the city’s Colonial Theater in February 1915, with a different local suffrage group taking responsibility for each day, including having members serve as ushers and ticket-takers. In addition to five-minute speeches between reels, slides provided information about the cause, and, according to a syndicated newspaper account, “two able lawyers were on hand to answer any questions concerning the legal points suggested” by the film. When the Congressional Union for Woman Suffrage took over the Colonial on its appointed day, the theater’s interior was “elaborately decorated with banners and streamers of gold, purple, and white bunting, the colors of the union, and the costumes of the ushers carried out the same color scheme.”⁴⁰ As these examples suggest, the sponsorship of *Your Girl and Mine* by suffrage organizations, highlighted in promotional material and newspaper coverage, could also be directly signaled at the screening event.

Your Girl and Mine’s press coverage and extensive theatrical distribution was matched by very few sponsored films of the period. NAWSA’s investment in and continuing affiliation with this film was linked to the expectation of certain benefits, notably, votes for suffrage, fundraising through ticket sales, and support for the cause as this organization defined it. Sponsorship in this case had parallels with what Pamela Walker Laird, in her history of print advertising and consumer marketing from 1870 to 1920, calls the “five basic steps” of “the advertising process”: “deciding to advertise, conceiving the message, producing it, distributing it, and paying for it.”⁴¹ But as the circulation of *Your Girl and Mine* demonstrates,

sponsors could also wield some measure of control over screenings, even when the site was an established moving picture theater. And when it came to the actual exhibition of any film (unlike, say, the placement of a print ad or a billboard), there was always a host of variables potentially in play, because each screening constituted a unique event. The sponsor's influence could extend not only to the choice of films to be screened, the arrangement of the program, and the use of certain speakers, but also to the physical preparation of the site and the presence of its representatives at the event.

The essential questions that Thomas Elsaesser identified as worth asking of any non-fiction "utility film" are equally relevant for all examples of sponsored cinema: "who commissioned the film . . . what was the occasion for which it was made . . . to what use was it put or to whom was it addressed?"⁴² Yet tracking the role of NAWSA in the production and distribution of *Your Girl and Mine* and the activities undertaken by local suffrage organizations in the exhibition of this film suggests that we should expand and reformulate Elsaesser's questions to address sponsorship more directly, as follows:

To what extent did the sponsor of a given film or screening event have some degree of involvement in and influence over

- the conception, commissioning, planning, and funding of the project?
- the production process?
- the strategies for distributing the film and allocating any income that it might generate?
- the promotion, including the prerogative to speak publicly for and about the film?
- the actual exhibition of the film, including decisions about programming, the role of commentary and speeches, and any live performances?
- the audience targeted?

These questions underscore that in making use of cinema, sponsors had various options for asserting control over the product and the process. In practice, the means and degree of control varied significantly—even from screening to screening of *Your Girl and Mine*—as did the aims of sponsors who sought to take advantage of the opportunities afforded by moving pictures.

That *Your Girl and Mine* appeared under the auspices of the Camden, New Jersey Suffrage League; the Congressional Union for Woman Suffrage in Washington, DC; the Woman's Franchise League in Bloomington, Indiana; and a bevy of other local organizations seems in keeping with what historian Elisabeth S. Clemens calls the "new forms of social solidarity" and the "massive diversification and diffusion of organizational structures, methods, and tactics" that characterized the "interest group politics" that had emerged in late nineteenth-century America.⁴³ Highly visible in this public arena were, as Maureen A. Flanagan puts it in her study of Progressive era political action, "myriad new organizations and institutions through

which millions of Americans participated in reform movements.”⁴⁴ Designed to generate public support, votes, legislation, and contributions, *Your Girl and Mine* offers a textbook example of how the circulation of a sponsored film could serve the purposes of social solidarity and participatory reform politics.

But the aims and the political implications were different when it came to the screening of moving pictures of the Azores to Portuguese immigrants in San Leandro or when *The History of David O. Dodd* appeared under the auspices of the Little Rock chapter of the Sons and Daughters of the Confederacy. Particularly if we take exhibition—including the screening site—as well as production into account, the opportunities for sponsored cinema in the US during the first decades of the twentieth century look to have been wide open for countless different groups, organizations, businesses, institutions, state agencies, and religious denominations. The rest of this chapter looks well beyond *Your Girl and Mine* to consider screenings arranged by municipalities and to track how sponsored cinema was put into practice over the 1910s in one major metropolitan area: St. Louis. These examples attest to the variety and extent of sponsorship while also making clear that access to the resources necessary for using moving pictures outside of theaters—funding, films, projectors, and screening spaces—was by no means readily and equally available.

MUNICIPAL MOVIES

Designed to encourage tourism, display prosperity, tout opportunity, market locally produced goods, attract manufacturers, and encourage growth, what were sometimes called “municipal movies” offered a different model of sponsorship than *Your Girl and Mine*.⁴⁵ Funded and utilized by government agencies, real estate interests, and business associations like the chamber of commerce, these straightforward booster films were often paired with lantern slides and presented by a professional lecturer in non-theatrical sites with no admission charge. This type of sponsored cinema would figure prominently at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition, as we will see in chapter 5.

But in the 1910s, *municipal movies* also referred to an exhibition practice in which screenings were made available to the public thanks to the efforts and resources of a local government body. This version of sponsorship prompted a significant court case when Toledo, Ohio (then with a population of approximately 175,000), enacted in November 1912 an ordinance to transfer \$1,000 in the city’s general funds to the Department of Public Service “for the purposes of establishing a municipal moving-picture theater.” After the plan was halted when the city auditor refused to transfer the funds, the city began legal proceedings. The case reached the Ohio Supreme Court, which announced in May 1913 that Toledo’s ordinance constituted an “unauthorized use of public money” and so was not allowable.⁴⁶

In large measure the court’s decision was based on the specifics of Ohio laws concerning municipalities. But the quite detailed majority, concurring, and

dissenting opinions offered by the judges address a number of highly charged issues concerning the purview of local self-government, the threat posed to free enterprise by municipalities expanding their activities and jurisdiction, the public service obligations of cities and villages, and the status of what the court called the “exhibitions of moving pictures for popular entertainment.” By attempting to create a *municipal* moving picture theater, Toledo was unintentionally testing the limits of government sponsorship and potentially blurring or realigning the distinction between theatrical and non-theatrical film exhibition as understood and deployed by the commercial motion picture industry in the early 1910s.

The court’s majority opinion held that operating a moving picture theater was a job for “impresarios,” not government officials: even if “the kinetoscope [*sic*] may be used at some time and in some way . . . for the public weal” and even if such “exhibitions might be made educational,” that is not their “natural object,” which is to be run as a “business for profit.”⁴⁷ Further, the municipal expenditure was not warranted as the exhibition of moving pictures did not constitute some sort of “public utility”—put bluntly, “theaters are not ‘utilities.’”⁴⁸ In fact, a municipally operated moving picture theater (even, presumably, a non-profit theater) could not be justified as contributing to “the public health, morals and well-being” and, furthermore, it potentially threatened to “destroy the business of private owners of picture shows.”⁴⁹ One of the judges went so far as to declare that Toledo’s overreaching ordinance raised the specter of “a change of the essential nature of government from the free American plan of individualism toward foreign cults of communism and paternalism.”⁵⁰ No doubt the Motion Picture Patents Company, then the subject of anti-trust action by the Department of Justice, would have been pleased to see the nickelodeon held out as a bulwark of American free enterprise capitalism.

One of the concurring opinions in this case conceded that “it is difficult, perhaps almost impossible, to prescribe a limit where governmental functions end and private enterprise begins,” citing the right of municipalities to provide and fund band concerts, public libraries, bathhouses, parks, and recreation centers.⁵¹ The problem with Toledo’s ordinance from this perspective was that it did not spell out the “public purpose” of the proposed municipal moving picture theater, leaving open the possibility that a non-profit theater run by the city that was not in competition with commercial shows would have been acceptable.⁵² (Exhibitors, it should be noted, felt as much if not more economically threatened by “free” shows as by non-theatrical sites that charged admission.) R. M. Wanamaker, the dissenting judge in this case, rhetorically asked: “What is a public use and who may determine whether or not a given project is a public use?” He concluded, on the basis of the broadest understanding of the prerogatives of local self-government, that Toledo, as a “modern-day municipality,” was fully within its rights in this case.⁵³ The fact that at issue was the creation of a municipal moving picture theater was, for Wanamaker, completely irrelevant, while for the court’s majority, one obvious

problem with the ordinance was precisely that Toledo had erroneously assumed that such a theater would in some way serve the public interest. In effect, none of the judges argued that the municipal sponsorship of moving pictures could be construed as public service.

The Ohio Supreme Court's decision in the Toledo case drew attention from trade periodicals like *Public Service* and *American Municipalities* as well as being covered in a nationally syndicated newspaper item—perhaps contributing to derailing similar initiatives.⁵⁴ In at least a few other localities, however, proposals for city-sponsored moving pictures hinged on the idea that a municipal moving picture theater relying in some manner on representatives of organizations like the Playground Association and the PTA could be self-supporting through ticket sales while providing an “educational” alternative to commercial theater fare.⁵⁵ The handful of successful municipal theaters that drew attention beyond the local press were likely to be fully commercial venues set up in small, theater-less towns, like Haven, Kansas, which had fewer than one thousand residents.⁵⁶

But self-styled moving picture shows that were not, strictly speaking, movie theaters, were found all over the US by the mid-1910s, particularly in privately run amusement sites located outside central business districts. Riverside Park in Phoenix, Arizona, and Chilowee Park in Chattanooga, Tennessee, for example, regularly offered moving picture shows as one among many attractions.⁵⁷ “Municipal movies,” in contrast, were free, outdoor, fair-weather screenings in public parks and playgrounds within metropolitan areas. Unlike in Toledo, these events were justified (and funded) as another service and benefit provided by the city, along with swing sets and swimming pools, organized athletic competitions and band concerts.

In Cincinnati, for example, city councilman Michael Mullen, a key player in the machine that dominated local politics, in 1909 provided a moving picture projector and arranged for Sunday evening screenings at Lytle Park, a downtown playground that he had helped create in the ward he represented. During the inaugural season, the *Cincinnati Enquirer* actually listed the films scheduled for what it called “Mullen’s free nickelodeon,” which included a mix of titles, predominately comedies, that had been commercially released that year.⁵⁸ Mullen pitched this plan to the city council, claiming that attendance at his free shows “easily numbered 3,000 a performance,” including adults as well as children.⁵⁹ In 1910, the Cincinnati Park Commission accepted the donation of Mullen’s projector and agreed to be responsible for its use.⁶⁰

A Cincinnati newspaper put the attendance at a Lytle Park screening in August 1911, “under the auspices of the Associated Charities,” at two thousand children and one to two thousand adults,⁶¹ with the actual costs for this and other screenings “provided through the generosity of a well-known citizen” (most likely Mullen).⁶² Although the screenings were halted in August 1913 by the building commissioner until “better arrangements have been made to take care of the spectators,”⁶³ by 1914,

the Annual Report of the Park Commission indicated that the city was providing \$218 to cover the costs of fifteen such screenings at Lytle Park and another eight at a different playground.⁶⁴ So far as I have been able to determine, Cincinnati's modest foray into municipal sponsorship of free moving picture exhibition did not face the legal challenge encountered by the Toledo plan. While the *Moving Picture World* reported that the "free pictures" exhibited "under the auspices of the city" in Cincinnati were "naturally somewhat distasteful to local exhibitors," theater owners mounted no organized protests, unlike, for instance, in Pittsburgh where the Motion Picture Exhibitors' Protective Association in 1914 filed a complaint with the city council that resulted in the suspension of free moving picture shows in local parks.⁶⁵

Limited in scope and not widely publicized, Cincinnati's effort at sponsoring free films at select city parks paled in comparison with the ambitious effort in St. Louis, which drew national attention and offered a possible blueprint for how progressives might put moving pictures to civic use in metropolitan areas that were facing the strains of rapid growth, crowded tenement districts, and radically changing demographics.⁶⁶ Thanks to the efforts of Park Commissioner Dwight Davis, who saw this initiative as being in line with the aims of the Playground and Recreation Association of America,⁶⁷ a city ordinance was approved in 1914 that invited bids to "furnish first-class moving picture machines, furnish an operator therefor, and provide the necessary films in such number and of such character as the commissioner of parks and recreation may designate," with the aim of providing "moving pictures of an educational, historical, or instructive nature, in the public parks, playgrounds and recreation buildings."⁶⁸ Beyond providing funding and access to public sites, the sponsor's role in this arrangement is quite specifically to wield control over the "character" and "nature" of the titles to be screened.

Davis's plan was part of an attempt to significantly expand what he called the "social utility" of St. Louis's park and playground space, an effort praised by the *Globe-Democrat* in a Sunday feature article as a successful strategy for the "making of good citizens" by offering the children of immigrant Jews and Italians an alternative to the "filth of the street and the squalor of a narrow home."⁶⁹ With a population well over seven hundred thousand, including large German, Italian, Jewish, and African American communities by the mid-1910s, St. Louis "should be taken out of the list of backward cities in recreation facilities," declared an editorial in the *Post-Dispatch*. "The fourth city in population should be far above the twenty-first in recreation provisions."⁷⁰

To fulfill its civic obligations and raise its status as a major metropolis, the municipal government organized amateur athletic leagues, public dances, and holiday festivities, operated swimming pools, and even staged a four-day "Pageant and Masque" depicting the history of the city, with seven thousand citizens taking part, an event which supposedly managed, "miraculously, almost over night" to transform St. Louis, the Park Commission claimed, "from a sleeping city made up

of hostile, discordant and suspicious groups and elements into an active, progressive community.⁷¹ Budgeted at \$2,000, the self-styled “municipal movies” were a low-cost but well-publicized feature of the city’s effort to deliver “the maximum social service to the community,” adults as well as children.⁷² To run the shows the city contracted with the St. Louis Motion Picture Company, whose primary business was producing local films and a limited number of theatrical releases.⁷³

St. Louis newspapers and the Division of Parks and Recreation’s official report extolled the success of these screenings, the first of which, projected on a ten-by-fifteen-foot screen at the Columbus Square playground, located downtown “in the heart of the Ghetto,” drew “a crowd of about 3,000 mothers and babies, fathers and small boys, Italians, Greeks, Poles, Jews, Irish, Germans and two-generation Americans.”⁷⁴ Notably missing from this celebratory account of the city’s immigrant masses gathered together for this free public event were St. Louis’s monied classes and other “native” citizens, including its African American community. Officials insisted that the screenings had an “educational” as well as an amusement purpose and were intended to be in “no way in competition with the usual commercial exhibition.” Programs occasionally included “safety first” films and footage shot in St. Louis, but typically the park shows opened with a news weekly, followed by a film showing “some well-known process of manufacture or industry,” a “Wild West” film (“as a concession to the small boy” in the audience), an “animal film,” and a scenic.⁷⁵

Adhering to the St. Louis ordinance that required “every picture machine installed, maintained, or operated in the city of St. Louis shall be inclosed in a booth,” the park screenings relied on a zinc-covered operator’s booth. Mounted on a horse-drawn wagon, the projector booth was easily transported—along with a portable screen and one thousand folding chairs—to fourteen other parks and playgrounds for biweekly screenings.⁷⁶ By the end of the season, the city’s total expenditure in 1914 for the municipal movies was \$2,050—about one-eighth of the salary of the band musicians who performed at the same parks. The fifty-six screenings attracted 304,000 people (while the 145 band concerts drew 570,590).⁷⁷ *Moving Picture World* likely stoked the anxiety of wary exhibitors when it reported that a single one of St. Louis’s free shows could draw as many as ten thousand people.⁷⁸

Reporting on the success of the 1914 season, the Division of Parks and Recreation took the progressive high ground, insisting “the educational purpose was always kept in mind” when putting together film programs for the parks. Municipal movies, from this sponsor’s perspective, were not movies at all, but a non-theatrical experiment in social utility that validated the uplifting promise of the medium. The official report concluded that “the comparative popularity of the more serious subjects indicated that the public taste is decidedly better than most commercial picture-show proprietors believe. The success of this initial experiment showed the great educational possibility of this use of the moving picture and this feature of the work will be enlarged and improved during the coming summer.”⁷⁹

“It always pays to do something new and of a progressive character,” declared an editorial in the *Globe-Democrat*, noting the “agreeable advertising” generated by St. Louis’s successful first season of municipal movies.⁸⁰ The initiative drew considerable national attention, with widely reprinted syndicated news items, articles in *Moving Picture World* and trade periodicals like *Municipal Journal* and *City Record*,⁸¹ and editorials, notably one that ran in Hearst papers, which judged that “St. Louis’ trial of ‘Municipal Movies’ bids fair to become an object lesson to all cities where the entertainment, education and safety of a great army of children has become a problem that must be solved . . . there, in the open spaces throughout the more densely populated sections, moving pictures are displayed on stated nights to serve as a diversion, as well as an uplift, to the throbbing minds of the little ones and thus rob the summer heat of some of its terrors.”⁸²

Summer heat was indeed an inescapable factor. High temperatures, humidity, and lack of cool nights in summertime St. Louis directly affected the city’s film exhibition business. During the 1910s, airdomes—roofless movie theaters, sometimes directly attached to hardtop theaters—occupied vacant lots in commercial districts and residential neighborhoods in mid-American cities like Kansas City and Louisville. But this type of theater was most prominent in St. Louis, making summertime attendance into a valued source of box-office revenue. “Have you an airdome on your nearest vacant lot?” asked the *Star and Times* in 1910. “If not, your neighborhood is neither chic nor up-to-date. Every neighborhood is getting an airdome, some are getting six or seven.”⁸³ A sales rep for a projector manufacturer reported that “St. Louis is going crazy over open air shows,” with 112 license applications in 1910 for “Airdomes” (the term still novel enough at this date to warrant quotation marks).⁸⁴ When the four-thousand-seat Hamilton Skydome opened in 1912, it was billed as the largest airdome in the country, equal in size to the open-sided theater that sometimes offered moving pictures at Forest Park, the city’s showcase recreation site.⁸⁵

In the summer of 1915, when there were, according to *Motion Picture News*, 100 airdomes operating in St. Louis, municipally sponsored movies continued to draw large crowds at public parks. It seemed to make no difference that the independently wealthy Davis had bowed out as park commissioner after the city failed to increase appropriations for “public recreation.”⁸⁶ Nelson Cunliff, chief construction engineer for the parks, was named the new commissioner and promised to carry on Davis’s “broad vision of the utility of the parks for the health and pleasure of all the people, rich and poor, young and old.”⁸⁷ Cunliff’s schedule for 1915 featured 140 concerts, regular “neighborhood dances,” and two evenings of moving pictures at fourteen different playgrounds and small parks.⁸⁸

As in 1914, the first screening of municipal movies in 1915 took place at Columbus Square, with an overflow crowd of eight thousand people. The social, civic, and political import of the occasion clearly registered for a *Post-Dispatch* reporter, who described the peaceful, fully engaged, mixed-age audience as composed of

“black and white persons of many nationalities,” all “joined by the invisible bonds of pleasure seeking”—clapping during a newsreel, laughing at a comedy, marveling at a “nature film.” And when a two-reel title about Joan of Arc (likely a Pathé film released earlier in 1914) began, “the audience, representing nearly every race upon the globe, was silent. Many on the edges of the crowd pushed farther in. Negroes stood near Russians; Sicilians were grouped with Greeks. Poles stood with Rumanians . . . the clicking of the picture machine could be heard a hundred feet away. The only other sounds were those of the deep-toned chimes in the church across the way at intervals, the rumble of a street car or the honking of a faraway automobile. Even the ice cream and peanut vendors were silent.”⁸⁹ The reporter’s insistence on the aural qualities of this event—the presence of ambient sound, the noise of the projector, and the absence of any musical accompaniment—accentuates its distance from theatrical exhibition.

This celebratory account is of a piece with contemporary paeans to cinemagoing as an inexpensive, inclusive, distinctly twentieth-century experience of particular power and relevance for a polyglot, diverse, multi-“raced,” urbanized America. Yet unlike the offerings at a neighborhood nickelodeon or center-city movie palace, this screening at the Columbus Square playground was municipally sponsored, out-of-doors, free, unsegregated, and readily accessible for thousands of people. If the owners of hard-top theaters and airdomes in St. Louis were not on the alert because of the *Post-Dispatch*’s utopian glimpse of what cinema could be and do as a civic tool, then the well-publicized numbers likely caught their attention: the eighty-four municipal movie events in 1915 attracted 438,000 people, a more than 20 percent increase over 1914.⁹⁰ Even before the season had ended, a delegation from the Theatre Managers and Motion Picture Exhibitors Protective Association of St. Louis urged the mayor to discontinue the municipal movies since these free screenings constituted unfair competition and cut into theater patronage, no matter how “educational” the programs purported to be.⁹¹ It also seems possible that publicly funding evening shows that allowed for or even encouraged the mingling of “black and white” spectators could have been deemed unacceptable in a city increasingly marked by Jim Crow policies.

The *Motion Picture News* reported that Cunliff promised exhibitors that the park screenings “would be held only in the really congested sections of the city, where there are few motion picture theatres, and where the people are too poor to go to the movies.”⁹² His stopgap concession did not mollify the exhibitors, who had been increasingly assertive in furthering their interests so far as municipal legislation was concerned, particularly when it came to the struggle over local censorship of moving pictures.⁹³ The Public Morals Committee of the St. Louis branch of the American Federation of Catholic Societies spearheaded the campaign for local censorship. Cunliff introduced a bill in October 1915 that would have made the park commissioner the head of the city’s censorship board, with exhibitors charged a modest annual fee and distributors paying fifty cents

per one-thousand-foot reel for each film reviewed.⁹⁴ Vesting such power in the park commissioner, an editorial in the *Post-Dispatch* declared, would make this appointed administrator “our mental and moral dictator.”⁹⁵ Exhibitors, supported by the city’s Business Men’s League, turned out in force to argue against the bill, which was not passed.

Exhibitors registered another victory in May, 1916 when the St. Louis Board of Estimates and Appropriations eliminated funding for moving picture screenings in the parks. *Motion Picture News* called this an end to the “municipal competition” faced by “exhibitors with theatres and airdomes near the parks and playgrounds where free motion pictures were shown last summer.”⁹⁶ In his official statement, Cunliff attributed the decision directly to “protests from the owners of moving picture shows throughout the City of St. Louis.” He described the defunding of municipal movies as the failure to support a successful, progressive initiative of important “educational value” that had served “the great many people who would otherwise be unable to see moving pictures.”⁹⁷ At issue, again, was determining the legitimate scope of municipal action and the status of non-theatrical cinema, which could be understood as being in competition with, as an alternative to, or as simply distinct from the workaday business of operating airdomes and movie theaters.

Cutting the city’s appropriation abruptly ended St. Louis’s municipal movies. The City Plan Commission’s official 1917 report, *Recreation in St. Louis*, covering the record of community centers, playgrounds, and parks in the city, contained no mention of what had been the quite successful, widely heralded sponsorship of municipal movies.⁹⁸ When St. Louis created that same year what it called a “municipal open-air theater” seating 9250 in Forest Park, spacious site of the 1904 World’s Fair and still the city’s showcase park, located some distance from the “ghetto,” the Board of Aldermen prohibited any screenings that might pose competition with “regular and legitimate entertainment enterprises which pay a license fee.” Cunliff, who was in charge of granting permits for the new civic venue, flatly declared: “the aim will be to keep the entertainment standard of the theater high”: rather than offering “commonplace things,” this municipal theater would privilege concerts or operas involving community talent.⁹⁹ Economic priorities were thus translated into cultural priorities, adding another set of criteria that could limit or at least influence the municipal sponsorship of non-theatrical cinema. Not surprisingly, one instance when moving pictures were deemed appropriate for the theater in Forest Park was as part of a spectacular, patriotic “naval pageant” on July 4, 1917, three months after the US had entered World War I.¹⁰⁰

The fate of St. Louis’s municipal movies demonstrated the collective power of the city’s exhibitors, underscoring that sponsorship could, when push came to shove, be enmeshed in the dynamics of local politics as well as being a straightforward matter of dollars and cents. To present municipal movies, the St. Louis Park Commission required an appropriation from the city to pay for equipment, operator, and films. Once this funding was in place, the practical work of the Park Commission could begin: authorizing the necessary access to certain parks and

playgrounds and selecting, scheduling, publicizing, and screening moving pictures as part of an ambitious, multifarious agenda designed to increase the “social utility” of these spaces. While the Park Commission was not directly involved with the production or distribution of films, it had an investment in offering diverse programs it could characterize at least in part as “educational.” It measured the success of this use of city funds in terms of attendance figures and less quantifiable benefits to audiences.

Tracking the experiment with municipal movies in St. Louis makes evident certain variables in play when it came to municipal, state, and federal government sponsorship of non-theatrical cinema. How much autonomy did the particular civil authorities have in spending appropriations, providing access to screening sites, and making decisions about programming and exhibition practices? Were moving pictures deployed as part of a more expansive civic initiative? How was the utility of supposedly useful cinema to be measured? These variables were not inconsequential. They underscore what I take to be an important basic point about the history of American cinema during the 1910s and beyond: except, perhaps, during World War I and World War II, the public deployment of moving pictures by a wide range of governmental agencies in the US was by no means a uniform practice, much less the result of centralized, systematically administered state policy.

Even in the case of screenings in municipal parks and playgrounds, the aims and the logistics of sponsorship could vary considerably from locality to locality. For example, screenings could be authorized when directly related to a public service health and safety campaign, as in Buffalo, where the park commissioner provided fifteen “motion picture lectures” at eleven different parks warning of the “ravages of tuberculosis.”¹⁰¹ Or a city could lease or assign the rights for park screenings to a commercial firm. The “free movies” at a city park in Chattanooga, Tennessee, for example, came with no pretense of progressive uplift, since they were exhibited “by a Main street picture show man who had worked out a scheme to have the advertising slides shown between the pictures. It was stated that the pictures would be interesting photographs and that travelogue stuff and the so-called educational pictures dealing with manufacture of this and that would be barred.”¹⁰² In Joplin, Missouri, the city commission saw a more direct way to profit from free movies by striking “a deal with a firm that is to put on a free picture show in the park every night and have all concession privileges in the park, giving the commission a small percentage of its receipts.”¹⁰³

SPONSORED CINEMA IN THE METROPOLIS

In St. Louis, as in Buffalo or Chattanooga, the exhibition of sponsored moving pictures extended well beyond screenings in parks and playgrounds. This activity was likely facilitated in St. Louis because projectors and operators for hire were available from Erker’s, a well-established equipment retailer, and the city served as a hub for commercial film exchanges, which allowed for ready access to certain

titles.¹⁰⁴ Given that these screenings were not regularly advertised and were rarely mentioned in the motion picture trade press, any information is likely to come from announcements or brief accounts in local newspapers. Fortunately, three of the city's major dailies, as well as the *Jewish Voice* and issues of the African American *St. Louis Argus* between 1915 and 1919, are available in digital archives. From these sources, while decidedly selective in their coverage, we can piece together an overview of how sponsored cinema was put into practice across the 1910s in what was then the fourth-largest American city, whose population grew over the decade from 687,000 to 772,000, with the number of African Americans increasing from 6 to 9 percent, while what the census called "foreign-born whites" declined from 18 to 13 percent.¹⁰⁵

St. Louis newspapers abound with references to screenings that took place under the auspices of sponsors other than the Park Commission. To note only a few of the more idiosyncratic instances, indicative of the range of this practice: "motion pictures of food conservation" shown at the St. Louis Patriotic Food Show in 1918, under the auspices of the Women's Central Committee on Food Preservation; the St. Louis Art League's presentation of a film about artists in Taos, New Mexico, as part of a gallery exhibit in 1919; the 1911 summer picnic of the Socialist Party, which featured a "free moving picture show," along with dancing, a band concert, and speeches; an advertising film produced by the Maxwell Motor Company projected in 1915 from the second floor of an automobile retailer across the street to an outdoor screen; and "bulletins" announcing 1912 election returns projected outdoors by various churches, political clubs, newspapers, department stores, and business associations, almost always as part of public events that also included moving pictures and sometimes band concerts.¹⁰⁶ There is no record of theater owners lodging complaints about any of these events. Nor was there protest when St. Louis department stores screened free films for shoppers or when projectors were installed at public or private institutional sites with captive audiences: the city's Insane Asylum (1909); Poor House (1910); Infirmary (1911); the Church of Our Lady of Perpetual Health parish school (1913); the Missouri Penitentiary (1913); the city Workhouse (1915); and the Jewish Home for Chronic Invalids (1916).¹⁰⁷ The St. Louis YWCA branch (with more than seven thousand members) also faced no organized opposition in 1911 after it acquired a projector donated by a local bank, offered Saturday evening screenings, and during the summer of 1912 featured moving pictures at a "roof garden" atop what was billed as its new, fully "modern" building.¹⁰⁸ What is not evident from the print record is how frequently and for how long projectors remained in use at the YWCA, city-run institutions, or large department stores, sponsors that may have had trouble procuring what they deemed to be suitable films or may have concluded that arranging screenings was not worth the trouble.

Similar questions arise for the many churches and the Jewish organizations in St. Louis that made use of moving pictures during the 1910s. For example, various churches between 1910 and 1912 hosted events that relied on moving

pictures: outdoor fundraisers, presentations of the Passion Play, appearances by visiting missionaries and evangelists, and lecture “tours” of the Panama Canal, the Holy Land, and Ireland.¹⁰⁹ After Fountain Park Congregational Church began incorporating “the moving picture as an adjunct to Sunday school work,” a 1912 editorial in the *Star and Times* observed that the “marvel is that churches have so long neglected this great educational aid and permitted it to be made an agent of wrong education, instead of right.”¹¹⁰ Any such neglect did not last long. By 1913, First Christian Church, the Methodist Kingdom House Mission Church, and the Presbyterian Markham Institutional Church, all serving high-density downtown neighborhoods, were making more regular use of moving pictures as part of religious services and community outreach.¹¹¹ Church-sponsored—and, therefore, church-authorized—screenings were still fairly common at the end of the decade, with Union Methodist Episcopal, for example, scheduling Sunday evening lectures on non-religious topics illustrated with moving pictures, St. Paul’s Episcopal beginning to screen what they billed as “censored movies” on Fridays, St. Rose’s Catholic church booking *The Victim* (a film “Catholic in thought, execution and purpose”), and Memorial Congregational offering moving pictures three times during the week as well as after Sunday evening services, a policy that “increased attendance and virtually paid off the congregation’s debts.”¹¹²

Events sponsored by Jewish organizations garnered regular coverage from the Jewish press, which noted, for example, the use of projectors at Temple Israel and at the Young Men’s Hebrew Association.¹¹³ The most sustained use of moving pictures highlighted in the *Jewish Voice* was by the Jewish Educational Alliance, which had been formed in 1905 and offered a night school, nursery, technical training, legal aid service, and social club activities aimed specifically at first-generation immigrants.¹¹⁴ In 1908, the Alliance introduced free moving pictures as another means of reaching out to and drawing in this community. Initially emphasizing “elevating” programs that included scenics and literary adaptations, “obtained through the courtesy” of a local firm, these screenings were designed as an alternative to neighborhood nickelodeons.¹¹⁵ Attendance reached 450 weekly by 1909, with regularly scheduled moving picture programs on Saturday evening (7:00 to 8:00 p.m.) before lectures and for the Sabbath school students on Sunday afternoon.¹¹⁶ These continued into the early 1910s, with programs shifting to Wednesday evenings, but the *Jewish Voice* does not mention screenings after 1913, perhaps indicating a change in the neighborhood demographics or a reorientation of the group’s priorities.

If the scheduling of weekly, open-to-the-public films by the Jewish Educational Alliance and certain churches look to have been attempts to compete in some fashion with commercial picture shows, sponsors in St. Louis by and large adopted a different strategy, presenting screenings aimed at a more narrowly defined—and often restricted—audience. In effect, how sponsored cinema was put into practice in St. Louis reflects and underscores the social contours of an urban America

in which formally organized, voluntarily joined groups had a prominent role—reflecting affiliations and shared interests that reached well beyond the family, the church, the neighborhood, or the workplace. Thus the 1914 annual business meeting of the Jewish Charitable and Educational Union, held for all donors at a posh private club, screened films “showing the work done by Jewish organizations in other cities” to supplement its standard committee reports.¹¹⁷ Here, as in many cases through the decade, moving pictures were readily incorporated into a planned, sanctioned event—a business meeting, special holiday party, banquet, or social gathering arranged specifically for the members of an organization. This degree of customization would have been unprofitable (and logistically impossible) as a regular policy for a theater that daily offered shows from afternoon through evening, week-in and week-out.

Apart from local branches of major commercial firms like Goodyear Tires, International Mack [truck], Oldsmobile, and Western Electric, which screened what most often were productions the parent company had commissioned,¹¹⁸ sponsors in St. Louis that relied on film as a means of delivering relevant information, reinforcing shared values, and/or providing entertainment rarely had any involvement in financing or producing the moving pictures they screened.¹¹⁹ This was true for the St. Louis Medical Society and lodges like the Knights of Columbus, as well as for lineage-based patriotic organizations, such as the Daughters of the American Revolution, the Society of Colonial Wars, and the United Daughters of the Confederacy, which all drew on available historical films.¹²⁰ The Automobile Club screened films that reflected its members’ common interests, as did the Aero Club, the United Irish Societies of St. Louis, and the Missouri Fish and Game League, which collaborated with the St. Louis Aquarium Society to offer a moving picture program on “the life of trout, salmon, and Alaskan seals.”¹²¹ Profession- and occupation-based organizations composed of bankers, dentists, lumbermen, sales managers, railway employees, chemists, advertisers, architects, and electricians likewise all held meetings that featured moving pictures.¹²²

The Engineers’ Club of St. Louis was a particularly active sponsor, scheduling films to be shown in the auditorium of its permanent quarters, which also included a library and reading room. Rather than draw from its regular budget, this club raised \$225 from individual members to purchase a projector in September 1915. The Club’s 1916 annual report claims that “the ‘movies’ have come to stay,” and are “of immense value to the Club” by helping to boost attendance at meetings and social events. Typically, these screenings relied on films produced by manufacturers, usually with a representative of the firm on hand. In December 1916, for example, a joint meeting with the Associated Engineering Societies of St. Louis “under auspices of the [Engineers’] Club” drew 126 engineers to hear the Commissioner of Safety for the Missouri, Kansas & Texas Railroad, “who read a paper on ‘Railroad Trespassing: Its Prevention a Public Duty,’ supplemented by a two-reel railroad safety-first photoplay entitled, ‘The House that Jack Built.’ This

was followed by a three-reel film furnished by the General Electric Co. entitled, 'King of the Rails,' showing the evolution of transportation and the electrification of the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul Railroad." Having a projector permanently installed on the premises also meant that the Engineers' Club could offer "comic motion pictures" as part of the "entertainment" for social occasions and conclude its annual business meeting with "scenic motion pictures of Bermuda."¹²³

Like the Engineer's Club or the Sales Managers' Association, the city's large Business Men's League (BML)—formed, historian Eric Sandweiss notes, "not specifically to transact business, but to look after the general concerns" of its members and the larger "business community"—occasionally hosted members-only social events that included screenings.¹²⁴ But the BML more often relied on moving pictures to reach audiences well beyond its own membership. In 1913, it funded *Seeing St. Louis*, a "publicity" film intended to "stimulate civic pride" and "advertise St. Louis as a city of big things" "all over the nation."¹²⁵ (In 1921, it announced plans for an even more elaborate film campaign to boost the city "from an industrial and recreational standpoint.")¹²⁶ While the BML actively supported theater owners (some of whom were members) in their resistance to proposed censorship ordinances,¹²⁷ this organization also agreed in 1915 to serve as the Missouri non-theatrical "distribution bureau" for sponsored industrial titles from the Bureau of Commercial Economics.¹²⁸ As Sean Savage explains, the non-profit Bureau of Commercial Economics was founded in Philadelphia in 1913 and soon relocated permanently to Washington, DC. Its name notwithstanding, the Bureau of Commercial Economics was not a federal government agency. With 260 films available as of 1915, its aim was to deliver what it called "a thorough industrial education by the graphic method of motion pictures" by distributing sponsored industrial motion pictures for free screenings, while promising not to circulate titles related to liquor or cigarettes as well any films deemed to be "untruthful or misleading" or—interestingly enough—any films that "awaken hope of opportunity where none exists."¹²⁹ Acting as a film distributor, the BML provided "industrial subjects" for weekly programs at the city workhouse as well as for groups like the Motor Accessory Trade Association and for screenings in other Missouri locations.¹³⁰

This arrangement with the Bureau of Commercial Economics continued after the BML had become the St. Louis Chamber of Commerce (CC) in 1917. The strategy was apparently quite cost-effective, since the CC's annual report for 1917 noted that film distribution comprised less than 1 percent of the organization's \$130,000 budget, and the same was true for 1918.¹³¹ The affiliation meant that the CC was able to set up in 1919 a series of free shows across the city by one of the bureau's traveling trucks, which arrived complete with a lecturer, projectors and a collapsible screen, floodlights capable of illuminating a ten-acre field, and a graphophone to attract crowds.¹³²

As it began to undertake more efforts in the name of public service, the CC found other ways to deploy moving pictures beyond working with the Bureau of

Commercial Economics, including establishing a "Safety First Committee" that arranged for illustrated lectures in schools and for five "safety conferences" in different sections of the city, using moving pictures that it had also screened to three hundred of its members at a hotel banquet.¹³³ Looking to enhance business conditions after World War I, the CC launched an ambitious plan to support what was called the "farm and city get-together movement" by sending speakers and moving pictures across Missouri to create "through lectures, pictures and publicity an increased enthusiasm among the people of the State" for greater economic cooperation and development.¹³⁴ Even more extensive was its wartime commitment to collaborate with "schools, labor unions, churches, civic and commercial organizations" in an Americanization campaign aimed at the city's "foreign elements."¹³⁵ To this patriotic end, the CC marshalled one hundred speakers to spread the word and sponsored evening meetings in factories that included "special motion pictures dealing with patriotic subjects."¹³⁶ The projector became a particularly important tool for the Junior Chamber of Commerce, which delivered the "message of Americanization" by presenting "moving picture shows in the public schools."¹³⁷ During the war, these efforts ran parallel to military recruitment drives, which also could use moving pictures, such as when the Navy, a month after the US entered the war, took advantage of its access to public spaces and, in one of the most unique public non-theatrical gestures seen in the city, sent through downtown St. Louis a truck "equipped . . . to look like a battleship," with a mounted screen on which were projected "scenes from navy life."¹³⁸

The Navy's roving truck/battleship/mobile projection apparatus is a notable example of how varied sponsored cinema was in St. Louis during the 1910s. By 1919 moving pictures continued to be put to quite different uses by, among other groups, the Children's Aid Society and the Women's Presbyterian Board of Home Missions, the Armenian and Syrian Relief Committee and the United States Grain Corporation (in collaboration with the US Department of Agriculture).¹³⁹ These examples attest to an ongoing belief in the utility of moving pictures, to a still-open array of possibilities, and to a range of sponsors. But particularly after the city's decision to defund the summertime screenings in parks and playgrounds, the Business Men's League/Chamber of Commerce was surely the most well publicized and likely the most active among the many groups that sponsored the non-commercial exhibition of moving pictures in St. Louis. This is not surprising given the size of this organization and its commitment to boosting the city and undertaking business-friendly public service in the form of safety and Americanization campaigns. In a 1916 editorial praising the BML's "widened scope of vision" and "broadened field of activity," the *Post-Dispatch* declared: "progress in democracies is accomplished mainly by organization. This is the democratic mode of getting things done by government. The organization informs and crystallizes public opinion and the government registers it."¹⁴⁰ If crystallizing public opinion was the goal, then sponsored cinema was potentially a valuable tool for groups

engaged in this version of “democratic” praxis. Earlier in the 1910s, the National American Woman’s Suffrage Association clearly thought as much when it invested in and promoted *Your Girl and Mine*, as did the St. Louis Women’s Suffrage League, when it offered screenings across the city in its 1912 and 1913 campaigns.¹⁴¹ The Central Trades and Labor Union likewise put on in 1912 “a free moving picture show, exhibiting conditions in factories and workshops throughout the country” as part of its organizing efforts in St. Louis.¹⁴² But in terms of the *public* use of moving pictures, one clear shift by the end of the 1910s was the local prominence of the Chamber of Commerce, which had access to films, equipment, and a range of different sites—schools, halls, hotel banquet rooms, private clubs, churches, factories, and theaters.

Finding ways to extend its presence in wartime America and fully embracing what the *Post-Dispatch* called the “democratic mode of getting things done,” the BML/CC was primed to aggressively take advantage of the utility of moving pictures, well beyond providing screen entertainment and informational content for its own membership. Yet even the most systematic and ambitious moving picture initiatives by this organization had obvious limits, some self-determined. There is little evidence, for instance, that the public screenings sponsored by the BML/CC—unlike the Park Commission—reached (or even intended to reach) the city’s African American residents, who were daily facing, in historian Joseph Heathcott’s words, a “continuous encounter with white supremacy, an ongoing struggle over the terms of life” in St. Louis, including access to commercial and non-commercial entertainment.¹⁴³

“Colored” theaters and airdomes provided African American moviegoers in the city with an alternative to the segregated, second-class seating conditions in certain of the city’s white theaters. A fully separate, community-aimed non-theatrical cinema potentially offered an important additional option. As Julie Lavelle ably demonstrates in her study of “movie culture” in St. Louis during the 1910s, the *Argus*, an African American weekly newspaper, through its advertisements, editorials, and reporting had a central role “both in building an audience for the movies and in defining what moviegoing meant” for this community.¹⁴⁴ The *Argus* vigorously—and unsuccessfully—opposed the exhibition of *The Birth of a Nation* in St. Louis, supported the efforts of the Park Commission to expand the playground system, and devoted regular coverage to the 513-seat Booker T. Washington, the city’s first vaudeville and moving picture theater owned and operated by an African American, built in 1913 by Charles Turpin on the site of a former airdome that he had been operating.¹⁴⁵ The Booker T. Washington primarily booked live performers and commercially produced films (often serials), but Turpin was able to expand and tailor his programming by including moving pictures featuring local events and personages, including what was billed as “authentic” footage of the “East St. Louis Riot” and a one-reel “remarkably clear” record of the African American community’s largest public event, the Knights of Pythias

military parade.¹⁴⁶ During the war Turpin was credited with “supervising” films of “Negro life in St. Louis,” including churches, businesses, and fraternal orders, and of African American “soldier boys” at a nearby camp, which were screened at the Booker T. Washington.¹⁴⁷ In 1919, he was still occasionally including moving pictures shot in St. Louis—for example, of the parade honoring returning soldiers.¹⁴⁸ Theatrically screening these highly topical, locally produced moving pictures was at once a civic-minded gesture and a smart business decision that distinguished Turpin’s theater from other “colored” venues in a competitive marketplace.

Even more active than Turpin in producing and exhibiting “scenes of interest to the Colored people of St. Louis” was Charles Allmon, whose multi-faceted efforts were aimed largely at providing moving pictures for various sponsors at non-theatrical sites. His activities in the later 1910s suggest what it took to make a living as an independent African American “movie man” even in a large metropolitan area. Allmon worked as a projector operator for churches, lodges, and the “colored” YWCA; presented screenings in towns in the surrounding area; opened the Royal Palm Airdome that promised to specialize in “Original Negro Movies” and welcome “all patrons, churches, lodges, clubs and societies”; and co-founded in 1916 the Allmon-Hudlin Film Company, which filmed schools, churches, a celebration at the St. Louis Colored Orphan Home, and a Masonic parade, and announced plans to film a baseball game involving the St. Louis Giants.¹⁴⁹ During June and July of 1916, this company screened at local churches a typical example of what we might call a race-booster film: “a beautiful pageant of picturesque scenes of Negro life in St. Louis in moving pictures,” highlighting homes, churches, and schools “occupied and owned by Negroes” in the city.¹⁵⁰ It is likely that this footage also figured in the moving pictures “depicting the progress of the Negro race in the middle west” that Allmon projected at a high school in East St. Louis before embarking on what he described as an extensive tour of Missouri and Illinois.¹⁵¹ In 1917, he advertised the availability of the “only complete moving pictures” of the Knights of Pythias biennial encampment, a major national event held in St. Louis during August 1917, and he began to operate a five-day, weekly film series scheduled in churches, a high school, and a lodge hall in and around St. Louis with subsequent plans to take his “race pictures” on an extended tour of the South.¹⁵²

Given the increasing hardening of Jim Crow policies, marked by the passage in St. Louis of a residential segregation law in 1916, and, especially, the devastating African American loss of life and property in the 1917 white-led race riot across the river in East St. Louis, Illinois, it is not surprising that Allmon specialized in moving pictures celebrating Negro progress. Similarly, the screenings sponsored by prominent Baptist and Methodist Episcopal “colored” churches in St. Louis during 1915 were almost always examples of what Allyson Nadia Field calls “uplift cinema.”¹⁵³ For example, programs celebrating the achievements of the Hampton Institute in Virginia and the Lincoln Institute in Kentucky blended spoken commentary, slides, and moving pictures, and St. Paul’s scheduled “an illustrated

lecture, with motion pictures, on ‘Race Progress’ as part of its the week-long Harvest Home Festival.¹⁵⁴ In 1916, memorials to Booker T. Washington (who had died in November 1915), featuring moving pictures of his life and funeral, were held at three different AME churches, as well at Lane Tabernacle and Pleasant Green Baptist.¹⁵⁵

Equally prominent, according to information in the *Argus*, were screenings directly connected with prominent entrepreneurs and philanthropists, supporting Cara Caddoo’s contention that “black cinema culture . . . had roots in two sacred areas of black life: enterprise and religion.”¹⁵⁶ Madam C. J. Walker, whose extraordinarily successful cosmetics and haircare business was based in Indianapolis, presented her “stereopticon lecture and moving pictures” in the chapel at St. Paul’s AME in February 1918. (She had delivered a “stereopticon lecture” at this church in 1915, but notices in the *Argus* made no mention of moving pictures.)¹⁵⁷ In so doing, Walker, who had lived in St. Louis when she migrated North as a young woman, was entering the home territory of her former employer and now major competitor, Annie M. Pope Turnbo-Malone, another exemplum of African American business success. Aided by her husband, A. E. Malone, Turnbo-Malone earned a fortune selling Poro Hair and Toilet Preparation products. In December 1918 the company opened Poro College, its new \$250,000 headquarters, with private apartments as well as facilities to train sales agents and to manufacture and ship products (fig. 1.4). This building, acclaimed the black press, was a “monument to Negro thrift and enterprise.”¹⁵⁸ Lester A. Walton, managing editor of the *New York Age*, went so far as to call it the “most imposing business structure ever owned by Negroes and operated in the interest of Negroes.” “What Tuskegee Institute is to Negro education,” Walton declared, “the Poro College is to Negro business.”¹⁵⁹

The opening of Poro College drew African American newspaper editors from across the country, who watched on the final night of the week-long festivities in the building’s 500-seat auditorium, “a moving picture exhibition . . . showing the progress of Poro and some interesting things racial.”¹⁶⁰ A later Poro publicity pamphlet emphasized that the auditorium played a significant role in the public life of St. Louis’s established African American community, as it was “frequently used by religious, fraternal, civic, and social organizations for meetings, entertainments, lectures, and recitals.”¹⁶¹ Well before the grand opening of the new building, Poro had acquired a projector, which by 1915 was being used in the company’s original location for Friday and Monday evening “amusements” for visitors and trainees that included “humorous” moving pictures and stereopticon views of the life of Lincoln.¹⁶² Poro soon became more actively engaged in film exhibition, conducting its own screenings at different St. Louis churches and the “colored” high school in East St. Louis. A Southern tour by Turnbo-Malone to Memphis, Birmingham, and Atlanta featured screenings in churches of 2,000 feet of what were called the “Poro movies,” which seem to have been expanded and perhaps reedited to both promote the company and also document the achievements of the race. A

Advertisement

"PORO COLLEGE," SAINT LOUIS, MISSOURI

This \$250,000 structure is 142ft. x 137 ft.—3 stories, Basement and Roof Garden. Fireproof and Steam-heated thruout. 95 Dormitories and Office Rooms—Ladies' Parlors—Emergency Hospital Rooms—latest model Refrigerating Plant with circulating	ice water—Local and Long Distance Outside Room due to 2 spacious Courts—Steam Laundry—Electric Passenger and Freight Elevators—Auditorium—Pneumatic Carriers. 31 Private Rooms for Shampooing,	Hairdressing, and Massaging—Manicuring and Chiropody. Opening Week Nov. 24th—Dec. 1, 1918. Each evening's program will feature some of the best Orators and Artists of the Race.
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FIGURE 1.4. Poro College ad, *Topeka [KS] Plaindealer*, November 18, 1918.

report from Atlanta noted that in addition to offering images of the College, the Poro movies included new footage of St. Louis events as well as “many interesting scenes of the activities of our race throughout the country.”¹⁶³ In February 1917, another tour took the Poro films to New Orleans and Jacksonville, Florida, as well as to the Tuskegee Institute.¹⁶⁴

CONCLUSION

The elaborate dedication ceremony for a new \$150,000 addition to Poro College that opened in 1920 did not include a screening, and there’s no evidence in the *Argus* and other African American newspapers that new iterations of the Poro movies appeared after 1918.¹⁶⁵ When and why did this prominent enterprise stop using moving pictures? This is just one of a host of open questions concerning sponsored cinema in St. Louis. For instance, how long were projectors in operation at the YWCA, the Engineer’s Club, or the Jewish Educational Alliance? How

regularly were films scheduled by authorities at the Workhouse or the Insane Asylum? How often did sponsored screenings cater to private, well-heeled audiences at country clubs, hotel ballrooms, or art galleries? These are not simply rhetorical questions, but an acknowledgement that there is much basic information that we don't and likely can't know about the history of non-theatrical cinema in St. Louis—many more gaps, blindspots, and absences than one would encounter in researching the history of this city's movie theaters, film exchanges, and debates over censorship.¹⁶⁶

However, what the available evidence from St. Louis newspapers does show is the widespread interest by a notably diverse range of groups and organizations in making use of moving pictures to entertain, inform, teach, convert, and/or inspire differently configured audiences, public and private. Looking backward, this city's non-theatrical playing field might seem to have been wide open, but it was never level. The fate of the Park Commission's municipal movies, the prominence of the Business Men's League/Chamber of Commerce, and the activities of Poro College indicate that the purview, presence, and power of sponsors in St. Louis varied considerably. Unequal access to resources, spaces, and opportunities meant that screening events were far more likely to be sponsored by management rather than employees, by nationally marketed brands rather than local products, by well-established churches rather than smaller congregations, by nativist rather than immigrant organizations, by groups of doctors, engineers, and advertisers rather than clerks, laborers, and service workers.

Yet even with this unbalance, sponsorship was not always directly undertaken in the service of maintaining the racial and class status quo, advancing progressive causes, fostering Americanization, training citizen-workers, or encouraging consumerism—all overarching imperatives promoted by powerful constituencies in early twentieth-century America. But in screening after screening, sponsored cinema did make tangible what Lee Grieveson calls the period's widespread interest in the "*social functioning* of cinema," that is, "how cinema should function in society, about the uses to which it might be put, and thus, effectively, about what it could or would be."¹⁶⁷ In a world where events, programs, campaigns, meetings, and performances so often took place "under auspices," sponsored cinema constituted an ongoing demonstration of the social functioning of cinema, which extended well beyond the aims of and the experiences afforded audiences by the commercial film industry.