“In the Interest of the Moral Life of Our City”: The Beginning of Motion Picture Censorship in Portland, Oregon

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“There is an attachment for the automobile called the shock-absorber, which does away with the sharp bumps. In the same way the moving picture censor board is the shock-absorber between the people and the film producers that does away with the bumps, but carries with it severe criticisms.”
– Eleanor Colwell, Executive Secretary, Portland Board of Motion Picture Censors, 1915.

In 1914, William Trufant Foster, President of Reed College in Portland, Oregon, and chair of the city’s Committee on Commercialized Pleasure Resorts, concluded that “the weekly capacity of motion picture theaters in Portland exceed[ed] the total population of the city.” Motion picture attendance around the country hit fantastically high numbers; in 1909, over 200,000 people attended movies in New York City every day, while the weekly seating capacity of Boston motion picture theaters was over 400,000. Roughly 90 per cent of schoolchildren in Portland, Oregon, attended movies on a weekly basis. It was this frequency and popularity of movie attendance as a leisure activity that, particularly during the medium’s infancy, spurred attention towards movie content and subsequent censorship of motion pictures.

Changing economic and social conditions during the Progressive era generated much concern over the general welfare of society, and Progressive governments introduced social reform to address those concerns. Cities like Portland, Oregon, scrutinized motion pictures, relatively new forms of public entertainment, for having deleterious effects on society. Their exploitation of criminal, sexual and other immoral themes served to titillate, and many thought to tempt, audiences. In many instances, motion pictures were thought to directly cause criminal behavior: “A woman in Denver in 1910 saw a film in which a person was murdered in his sleep. She soon after killed her husband while he slept.”

Motion picture censorship offered a way for governments to attempt to control these supposed effects on audiences; it was not, however, a formalized process that guaranteed the eradication of threats to a moral society. Rather, communities across the country had only begun to address the issue, shaping standards as they went along. Because there were no established guidelines or definitions of what constituted objectionable or immoral content, trial-by-error approaches shaped the bulk of motion picture censorship. Varying interests vied for control over who could best speak for the community.

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to determine an appropriate level of motion picture censorship.

The case of motion picture censorship in the 1910s in Portland, Oregon, is a good lens through which to examine this process in depth. Specifically, what factors shaped how movie censorship developed in Portland, and why did theater managers and the city struggle so intensely over local censorship of motion pictures? By analyzing the history of Portland’s motion picture Censor Board in its various iterations in the early 1910s, one can understand how a city undergoing vast changes in population, economics and social composition, as it shifted from a frontier setting to an urban center, struggled to define its moral underpinnings.

Portland during the progressive era

The United States experienced drastic changes in its social, economic and political makeup during the Progressive era, generally recognized as the years between 1890 and 1920. Millions of immigrants entered the U.S., settling across the country. Corporations dominated most industries as modernization and mass production altered industry structures, and big business became more firmly tied to government. Mass consumption and the leisure class took root with increased productivity, mass advertising, more leisure time, and disposable income. These radical changes were accompanied by anxieties about how to deal with them; many felt that American values and ideals were under threat, while others saw these changes as opportunities to shape and democratize society.

Portland, Oregon, was no exception in this movement, as political and social leaders reacted to the changing nature of the city’s economy and society. The Lewis and Clark Exposition in 1905 spurred an economic boom in Portland, as an estimated 2.5 million people, Portlanders and tourists alike, flooded into the park grounds in four and a half months.5 The years immediately following the Exposition were some of the most prosperous in Portland’s history, as the city’s population nearly doubled by 1915. This figure was typical of trends across the country as many shifted from rural to urban living. Much of this expansion occurred in the city’s east side; streetcar lines networked mostly east of the Willamette River, connecting new neighborhoods to downtown. This expansion also began to reflect the shifting socio-economic geography of the city. Much of the city’s upper class lived in homes in the west hills. About 71 per cent of Portland’s population, the majority of them the city’s emerging middle class, settled on the east side, while many of the city’s working class, minority, immigrant, and itinerant populations tended to remain in the west and north sides of Portland.6

During these boom years, leisure activities for Portland residents also developed. The same summer of 1905 that saw the Lewis and Clark Exposition also saw the opening of the Oaks Amusement Park, billed as the “Coney Island of the West”.7 The Oaks drew crowds who caught the trolley in downtown Portland for a fifteen-minute ride to the Sellwood district, southeast of the city on the banks of the Willamette River. An estimated 300,000 people visited the Oaks every year from 1905 to 1915, partaking in amusement rides, watching musical and vaudeville acts, and swimming in the Bathing Pavilion.8 The Oaks presented a new challenge to city authorities because it was the city’s first large-scale venue that “encouraged a casual mixing of men and women”, often among different classes and ethnicities.9

Other venues posed the same challenges; dance halls and nickelodeons became prevalent in the city around this time. Lower classes who once patronized saloons now spent their money at motion picture theaters. As The Oregon Sunday Journal noted,

Local business has fallen away 70 per cent since the advent of the motion picture … . Motion picture houses have been declared to be the poor man’s theatre and undoubtedly the saloons that soonest feel the picture patronage are those so situated that they derive their revenue from men of very moderate and even slender means.10

Nickelodeons, open to all populations, were quickly categorized as “borderline vice”, but as more reputable theaters opened in the 1910s motion pictures soon seeped into the leisure activities of middle classes.11

Corruption among business and government elites overtook much of the city, secretly funding many of the immoral establishments and practices in town. Portland’s emerging middle class, constituted primarily of professionals, merchants and clerks, began to set itself in opposition to ruling elites with strong ties to corporate capital in the East. This middle class tended to solidarity with the working class in a united effort to “generate a nearly successful political threat to the rule of Portland’s elite”12.
alignment against elites helped Allen Rushlight get elected as Portland’s mayor in 1911; he then filled city positions with representatives from small business and began to institute small-scale reforms. The same year, Mayor Rushlight created a Vice Commission to investigate the state of the community. It reported 431 of the 547 hotels, apartments, and rooming houses to be “immoral” to some degree; prominent citizens of the community owned most of these establishments.13 The Commission also made several recommendations to accommodate female employees who were subjected to a range of temptations caused by their inexperience, lack of competency, and the straining ten-hour workdays that “weaken[ed] the power of moral resistance”.14

Portland’s Lola Greene Baldwin, the first urban policewoman in the country, represented the interests of concerned women throughout the city of Portland, and was even known as the “Municipal Mother” because of her efforts to ensure the social welfare of the city and, in particular, young women. She targeted amusement venues like vaudeville houses and motion picture theaters, supporting efforts to show educational “moral warning” films like The Evils of the Dance Hall.15

Unsatisfied with the level of reforms, Portland switched from a city council to a city commission form of government in 1913, which allowed closer “monitor[ing] of city government”.16 Citizens elected Democrat H.R. Albee to a four-year term as mayor, and Albee is still considered by historians as one of only four Portland mayors to be “public spirited … who placed the people’s welfare foremost”.17 1913 also saw a depression in the Pacific Northwest and, as economic growth slowed considerably, itinerant workers in particular became unemployed workers, and Portlanders pressed upon government and social organizations for solutions to the problem of the “increasingly visible wandering poor”, who were often perceived as contributing to vice and the corruption of morals.18

Although the Vice Commission’s recommendations and Baldwin’s efforts sought to rectify many of the city’s social ills, they were by no means sufficient and the climate in Portland turned towards more Progressive efforts in dealing with vice and immorality. Motion picture theaters in Portland, numbering seventy by 1915, drew scrutiny as possible sources of corrupting influence, and were considered to be dangerous places due to their physical environment as well as the content of movies.19 Risk of fire, poorly lit rooms and exits and lack of ventilation posed physical dangers to moviegoers. Concerns arose over the personal safety of young women as they sat in partial darkness with members of the opposite sex. Children’s health was held in question as kids spent increasing numbers of hours in theaters each week. Perhaps most troubling to many of Portland’s residents, movies began to “invade the better class residence portions” of cities around the country, Portland included.20

The motion picture industry contributed over $1,000,000 annually to Portland’s overall commercial activity and employed 300 to 350 people. This level of economic impact might have helped create a sense among many Portlanders that theater owners valued their commercial interests over the city’s moral welfare.21 As a result, civic and women’s groups demanded action from the city. Mayor Albee spearheaded a concerted effort to create a censor board in order to minimize citizens’ exposure to immoral content.

The Advisory Censor Board

After a member of a local women’s group witnessed an “immoral act” involving “the singing of a certain song and by accompanying contortions” at a Portland vaudeville house, the Portland branch of the People’s Institute and various women’s groups called for action from the city.22 Public entertainment venues like vaudeville houses, motion picture theaters and dancehalls attracted so many people, especially children and young women (some theaters attracted 25,000 viewers each week), that these civic and women’s groups demanded that the city address the public’s exposure to potentially ruinous subject matter.23 Portland had only one cinema-related ordinance on the books thus far, passed in 1908: theaters were required to close by 10 p.m. so as to reduce temptation for children.24
In response to the women’s groups, in 1911 Portland City Council member and millionaire Pacific Grain Company president Gay Lombard proposed that a Censor Board be formed to review the content of any motion picture shown in Portland. Ten days later, Lombard retracted his support, contending that a censor board might concentrate “too much power in the hands of a few.”

Soon after, despite its hesitancy, the city created an advisory censorship board to operate on a trial basis for six months. The members of this five-person board were Eleanor Colwell, representing the Associated Charities; E.M. Newill of the Portland Women’s Club; Millie Trumbull of the Child Labor Commission; Flora Lippitt of the Council of Jewish Women; and Valentine Pritchard of the People’s Institute. The pilot Censor Board also allowed for a Board of Appeals, which consisted of Municipal Judge Stevens and a committee that he appointed.

Theater managers vocalized their concerns during the development of the advisory Censorship Board, hoping to find a middle ground on which they could meet community expectations of appropriate content, maintain the integrity of motion pictures, and generate ticket sales at satisfactory levels. They promised to work with the advisory Board to raise motion picture standards; if not achieved, “an ordinance calling for an official censoring board [would] receive not only the approval of the managers but their hearty support.”

British-born Eleanor Colwell, appointed executive secretary of the advisory Censor Board, immigrated with her parents to the United States in 1874 at the age of five. She moved with her husband, Elmer Colwell, to Portland in 1895, where they both held prominent positions in the community. Elmer was appointed U.S. Marshal for the State of Oregon under President Taft, and Eleanor joined various civic and women’s organizations, including the Oregon and Portland Leagues of Women Voters and the Oregon City League. Her affiliation with the Associated Charities in 1911 positioned her as someone with the reputation to speak on the community’s behalf regarding matters of public welfare.

She immediately dove into her work as head of the advisory Board, which lasted well beyond its prescribed six months. Theater and exchange managers generally considered, at least publicly, that Colwell and the rest of the Board were fair in their censorship judgments during the Board’s first two years of operation. Therefore, it came as a surprise when George Grombacher, manager of the Independent Western Film Exchange, publicly complained in January 1913 that “the persons appointed for such duties assume a great deal of authority and are rather abusive.” Other theater managers, perhaps trying to keep the issue of censorship as one of minimum concern, responded in the Board’s defense: “I am amazed that there should be any criticism of the local Board of Censors”, stated Melvin Winstock of the Peoples Amusement Company, who had found the Board to be “courteous, considerate, patient and broad-minded.”

Although this incident quickly faded from the
news and things remained relatively quiet for much of 1913, it signaled that Portland theater and exchange managers and the advisory Censor Board were beginning to diverge in their views on censorship and motion pictures. Exhibitors like Edwin James, proprietor of the Majestic Theatre, started to challenge the Censor Board’s authority, despite avowals of cooperation.

Edwin James opened the Majestic Theatre around 1911. The theater, at 351½ Washington Street in downtown Portland, was directly across the street from another movie theater, the Star, and by the beginning of 1914 neighbored at least nine other prominent movie theaters within a four-block radius. As James became more established, he married and moved his residence from the city’s working class north end to east of the Willamette River where most of the middle class resided. The 1,200-seat Majestic screened a wide array of films that were for the most part innocuous, as did most theaters. Yet the Majestic and Edwin James seemed to run into conflict with the Censor Board and Mayor Albee on a regular basis.

In September 1913 the Board prohibited the Majestic’s exhibition of *The Message to Headquarters* (Thanhouser, 1913), following a recommendation by the National Board of Censorship (NBC) that certain scenes of torture should be omitted. James ignored the ruling and continued to show it in his theater. Portland’s newly elected mayor, H.R. Albee, wrote a letter to James in response, expressing his disappointment: “I feel that you have broken faith and unless it has been through some misunderstanding, I think it is a great mistake on your part”. Albee had likely been operating under the assumption that theaters would, in effect, censor themselves and align with National Board of Censorship recommendations before the local Censor Board weighed in, so that few disputes would occur over content. As movie theaters became more numerous and competitive over audiences, theater owners were under pressure to offer increasingly sensationalist films to attract moviegoers. This business imperative conflicted sharply with the vision of society that the Censor Board, and Colwell particularly, held. Albee’s letter to James enunciated the mayoral position as to who should have the final word on motion picture content: “If it comes to a question of who is to decide on these moving pictures, the City will take steps to make the matter very clear and the request [to discontinue a film] will be replaced with an order.”

In preparation for the possibility of these steps, Albee began to examine the general effectiveness of his own Censor Board and looked to other Censor Boards to determine the most effective elements thereof for possible adoption in Portland. Mayor Albee first turned to the National Board of Censorship, which released weekly bulletins to over 150 cities around the country that advised “Mayors, License Bureaus or any civic department interested in motion picture regulation” of its censorship recommendations.

The NBC involved local governments in its recommendations, likely to situate itself in the minds of local authorities not just as a central censorship expert but also as a partner in censorship decisions. In late 1913, the NBC submitted a letter to Portland Mayor Albee advising him to prohibit the exhibition of *Harry Thaw’s Dash for Liberty* (Lubin, 1913), a true-story film about a contemporary love triangle that resulted in murder and the offender’s commitment to and escape from a mental institution; the film was deemed to have a “deteriorating effect on public morals.” Yet the NBC letter continued on to request that the mayor provide his opinion on whether he felt the film was objectionable. “We would be very glad to learn whether you have felt it advisable to take any action in the matter”, noted Frederic Howe, Chairman of the NBC. Albee’s response indicated that he would gladly comply with the NBC’s recommendations, likely seeking direction in dealing with an industry with which he was fairly unfamiliar.

The NBC made further recommendations to Albee, providing him with a pamphlet entitled “Suggestions for a Model Ordinance”, as well as guidelines that municipal Censorship Boards across the country employed:

> We would say that in several cities the mayor has instructed the police department to follow up pictures listed on our bulletins to see that the eliminations have been properly carried out and to prohibit the exhibition of such pictures as attempts may be made to circulate contrary to our rulings of the Board.  

By suggesting guidelines for appropriate levels of localized motion picture censorship that included ensuring that theaters observed NBC recommendations, the NBC further shaped its reputation as a partner in the fight against objectionable content. If the National Board of Censorship, sponsored by the film industry, gained the respect of local
governments as a reputable source on moral film content, then it might help the industry sidestep formal censorship. Many local governments perceived the NBC’s recommendations to stem primarily from the film industry’s self-interests, as the organization was financed in large part by the industry. Thus, local governments distrusted what they perceived as lenience in censoring immoral content.

The Committee on Commercialized Pleasure Resorts

The impetus for the installation of a legally binding censorship ordinance was the release of *Sapho* (Majestic, 1913). Previously approved by the National Board of Censorship, the film, an adaptation of Alphonse Daudet’s novel about a woman whose sorrows past tainted her relationships with various lovers, came to Portland in January 1914. After reviewing it, the advisory Censorship Board declared *Sapho* objectionable and prohibited its exhibition “in the interest of the moral life of our city.” Certain theater managers agreed to remove the show from their bills, but Edwin James of the Majestic Theater advertised the film’s run in *The Oregonian* and *The Oregon Daily Journal*, and stated to authorities, “I contracted to produce these pictures before the city authorities took action and I expect to produce the film as advertised.” The city council passed an emergency ordinance to confer authority on the chief of police to act as official censor, thereby forcing James to remove *Sapho* from his theater. While James publicly announced that he respected the decision of the censor to declare *Sapho* objectionable, he replaced *Sapho*’s run with *The Betrothed* (Ambrosio, 1913), which featured “gruesome and depressing” scenes taking place in a plague-ridden Milan, likely a statement that the Board’s desire for innocuous content would not necessarily be fulfilled at the Majestic.

This emergency ordinance did not create a new Censorship Board, nor did it impart legal authority to the existing Advisory Board. As the City Attorney reminded Albee, under the present ordinance, the city had no legal authority to “require film exchanges to submit their films to the Censorship Board before showing them.” Rather, only the police chief had authority of censorship. The Board’s recommendations thus worked only so long as theater managers cooperated, but as they were often left out of the censorship decision process, theatre managers’ resentment against the city and the Board continued to build.

In January 1914, Mayor Albee created the Committee on Commercialized Pleasure Resorts, which would “investigate vaudeville, motion pictures, and other theatrical offerings and forms of pleasure and recreation, to see that the welfare of children is conserved.” William Trufant Foster, the President of Reed College, acted as committee chair; he had recently spearheaded a report produced by the Oregon Social Hygiene Society to address the social and health conditions of the city and was therefore regarded as an expert of sorts in the area of social hygiene. The ten-member committee included prominent citizens of the community, including the Secretary of the State Board of Health, the President of the Chamber of Commerce, and Eleanor Colwell of the advisory Censor Board. None of these included representatives of commercial amusement, despite Albee’s invitation to the “vaudeville and motion picture people” to “work with the committee in providing ways and means for the prevention of any performances which will prove obnoxious to the morals of the community.” The Committee gathered evidence to provide a balanced picture of moviegoin in Portland, enlisting the services of sixty investigators of varying occupations to visit movie houses around the city and report their conditions. In 1914, Portland had sixty-three theaters (motion picture and vaudeville), nearly double the number it hosted just three years earlier. The Committee’s report, *Vaudeville and Motion Picture Shows: A Study of Theaters in Portland, Oregon*, paid particular attention to the welfare of children. Generally, the Committee found that children attended movies with startling frequency, with over 90 per cent of the 2,647 children surveyed from Portland public schools reporting that they attended movies. Over a third reported going to the movies at least once a week, with a small number attending every day.

The report recommended that the advisory Censor Board’s executive secretary be paid, as the duties were so many that they necessitated full-time employment. The National Board of Censorship was deemed an inadequate judge of film content; it was also considered incapable of enforcing its censorship decisions. The report also suggested that the local Censorship Board should include both men and women, and should “include at least one person familiar with the motion-picture business.” This recommendation might have stemmed from criticism that appeared in *The Oregonian* whereby some theat-
ter managers challenged the makeup of the Committee; its members were representatives of the community who had admittedly limited knowledge about film and vaudeville. "[M]embers of the committee said that they rarely if ever went to the shows." Even Foster admitted that his appointment as Committee Chair might have been a "mistake." In order to build his credibility as someone who might knowledgeably evaluate motion pictures and vaudeville shows, "he intended to attend some performances before the next meeting." It seems, however, that the advisory Censor Board did not extend an invitation to any representatives of the motion picture industry. They did add one male to the Board: Will H. Warren, Mayor Albee's secretary.

Theater managers grew more discontented with the Censor Board's actions due to their lack of representation. They sought support through the formation of a local chapter of the Motion Picture Exhibitors' League, with Melvin Winstock of the Peoples Amusement Company acting as President. The issue of censorship was strongly debated in the movie exhibition trade magazine, The Moving Picture World, which served as a clearinghouse to help mobilize local contingents of the film industry.

The city, too, turned to outside sources to garner pro-censorship support and direction. Although Portland was beginning to become known for its "high standards" in motion picture theater content (for example, the Rhode Island State Congress of Mothers, acting under the auspices of the Mayor of Providence, wrote to Mayor Albee requesting information about Portland's Censor Board), Mayor Albee continued to seek assistance in addressing certain issues, particularly the potential impact of slapstick comedies.49

**Questionably objectionable: Keystone comedies**

Like most communities across the country, Portland experienced challenges over the exhibition of "white slave trade" films like Traffic in Souls (Independent Moving Pictures Company of America, 1913) and The Inside of the White Slave Trade (Moral Feature Film Company, 1913). Portland's encounters over these films mirrored many of those around the country, which have been discussed elsewhere. But Portland also experienced problems with other genres of films. One of the advisory Censor Board's central concerns regarded comedies produced by the Keystone Film Company, which were often perceived to be "immoral, indecent, or repulsive".51 According to Rob King, Mack Sennett commented that Keystone's films were so popular because "there can be nothing funnier than 'the reduction of authority to absurdity'".52 Keystone films' popularity can be further attributed to evidence that they appealed to working classes and especially immigrant classes. However, it became apparent that at least some of the middle classes found some redeeming value in Keystone films, as theaters across the country like New York's Strand Theater and the Des Moines Palace booked Keystone comedies. "Keystone's brand of slapstick", writes King, "thus became a remarkable example of a hybridizing mass culture in which diverse groups could find genuine, if partial, representations of their own experiences and outlooks."53 But some members of Portland's Advisory Board still found the comedy to be offensive, and the Board felt compelled to judge the films as purveyors of poor taste and cheap moral content. For example, the Board reviewed the 1914 Keystone film, Rebekah's Wedding Day and noted, "This film has been objected to by the Jewish people all over the country." It was prohibited "on the grounds that it is replete with vulgar features and it certainly is offensive, not only to the Jews, but to any person with any decency".54

The Keystone films presented problems for the Censor Board, which wrote a letter to the exchange responsible for distributing Keystone films, "asking about manufacturing better films and criticizing those then being made".55 The exchange did not reply, causing Albee to send a telegram to the company. Still no reply was made. This raised significant concerns about exchanges' resistance to cooperating with local censors, and Albee's concerns were pressing enough to warrant a telegram to Chicago's Superintendent of Police. By comparison, Chicago had a lengthy history with motion picture censorship at the local level, which it was able to establish in a relatively vice-ridden city.

With no response from the exchange or from the city of Chicago, Albee then sent letters to various mayors around the country, asking how motion picture censorship was "handled, by whom and whether or not you are having any trouble in regulating films".56 He expressed specific concern about films produced by the Keystone Film Company, requesting recommendations as to their censorship. Responses were quick, as mayors such as Seattle's Hiram C. Gill provided advice and copies of their own motion picture censorship ordinances. These cities...
generally did not, however, share Albee’s concerns about Keystone comedies; Spokane’s mayor did admit to problems with Keystone films, but did not dwell on those concerns much “because [the films] are employed as a rule in the houses of the second or third class and in the houses displaying these films we seldom hear a complaint”. The logic here was that lower classes were less likely to complain about (or even recognize) immoral film content. As James Labosier points out, only as motion picture attendance became a preferred leisure activity of the middle and upper classes did motion picture censorship become an issue in the city government. It was these segments of the population that were most vocal about the morality of motion pictures and to whom the politicians of Portland were arguably most beholden.

As Albee collected different methods of how to operate a Censor Board, the city’s existing censor Board continued to have problems with theater and exchange managers. For instance, Eleanor Colwell alerted the Portland manager of the Mutual Film Company exchange that two eliminations were required, both scenes of bodily exposure, before the Board would approve *The Battle of the Sexes* (Majestic, 1914). Later, Millie Trumbull complained to Mayor Albee about the failure of the Mutual Film Company to make the required cuts, instead allowing theaters to run the film as originally produced. “I am instructed to request [on behalf of the Advisory Committee on Censorship of Motion Pictures]”, wrote Trumbull, “that something be done to secure closer co-operation with the Board on the part of the motion picture exchanges”.

Albee responded by calling a meeting of the Motion Picture Exhibitors’ League and the Censor Board, in which it was determined that all efforts would be made to allow viewers from the Censor Board to review films, and that eliminations requested would be made. “I have asked for the re-establishment of co-operation between the theater managers”, Albee stated to The Oregonian. “If it is not forthcoming I will proceed in another way”, effectively threatening to institute a formal ordinance. Albee’s statement elicited support from the community, as indicated in a letter that was signed “A Mother”:

> It was a relief to my mind, that I read in this morning’s paper, your intention of putting a damper on the obscene and unfit films shown in some moving pictures shows. There is one show called the “Echo”… . [The film] was an outrage to women and demoralizing to the youth … . Please, for the welfare of our boys and girls hasten your action in the direction you have started.

Portland’s theater managers continued to grow less cooperative as they became more convinced that the Board made arbitrary decisions. This discontent likely snowballed thanks to consistent media coverage of Portland censorship in *The Mov-
ing Picture World: “We certainly do admire the splendid courage of conviction displayed by our [Portland] exhibitor”, the publication wrote in reference to a theater manager’s arrest over a case of censorship. “Censorship places the exhibitor at the mercy of irresponsible and narrow-minded cranks”. The magazine’s strongly worded editorials tried to mobilize readers:

We still have time to get together and fight the evil, and if an intelligent campaign based on fairness and justice is conducted with vigor and persistence, all this agitation stimulated by fanatics and busybodies and politicians will die a natural death .... Ideal censors are scarcer than hens’ teeth. The ordinary official censor board in action suggests the calm deliberation and the strict logic which is found in the ordinary psychopathic ward.

Theater and exchange managers did not sway the Censor Board’s opinions, for the city drafted a new motion picture censorship ordinance. Mrs. Colwell distrusted the men, stating that the “theater men had committed acts of bad faith on several occasions.” Mayor Albee agreed. “Voluntary censorship has not justified itself, in my opinion”, announced Albee, “for the reason that the men engaged in the motion-picture business have not cooperated with the city as they should. Every move looking toward the creation of law on the subject here has been forced by them”. A newly drafted ordinance deemed it unlawful for any person, firm or corporation to cause or permit to exhibited any picture, illustration or delineation of any nude human figure or of any lewd or lascivious act, or of any other matter or thing of an obscene, indecent or immoral nature, or offensive to the moral sense, or (in such manner as to offend public morality and decency) any murder, suicide, robbery, holdup, stabbing, assaulting or beating of any human being.

To a certain extent, theater managers were agreeable to the proposed strengthening of censorship, but they demanded the right to trial by jury if they chose to challenge decisions with which they did not agree. The Censor Board felt that the current system, appealing to the municipal judge, was sufficient. Theater managers also felt that it was unfair to allow a handful of people to fully determine the selection of motion pictures in the city. Albee invited exchange manager and Exhibitors’ League President Winstock to join the Board of Censors, in an effort to assuage the opposition from theater men, but Winstock refused the invitation on the basis that he would not support the ordinance as presently proposed. Another exhibitor called for a joint committee of censors and exhibitors to design a censorship ordinance that would be satisfactory to all concerned. “That is impossible”, declared Albee. The interested parties could not agree upon an ordinance, therefore, and the matter was delayed indefinitely. In the months following the debate, theater managers openly cooperated with the advisory Censor Board, compelling Albee to drop his censor ordinance. The matter was not closed for long, however, as theater bookings continued to present challenges for the censors.

Discord within the Censor Board arose during this time, threatening its stability as a cohesive organization. Because of a disagreement over the fate of another Board member, Mrs. A.C. Newill, both Eleanor Colwell and Millie Trumbull threatened resignation if the other did not resign first. The petty dispute seems to have erupted after Trumbull recorded Colwell’s stance in the official meeting minutes, much to Colwell’s dislike. It seems that Colwell was intent on shaping the direction of the Censor Board to reflect well on her public reputation, as well as to reflect her own personal sense of morality. Her strong opinions and active personal involvement in the Board’s activities forced censorship, a cause for which she seemed to feel personally responsible, to the forefront of the city’s agenda.

The Board of Motion Picture Censors

1915 heralded renewed efforts to clean up entertainment in Portland and protect the city’s moral safety. Mayor Albee wrote a letter in December 1914 to Governor Hiram Johnson of California, expressing concern “for moral welfare of the young people of Portland who might be visiting the [San Francisco] Exposition in 1915”. Mayor Albee’s secretary, Will H. Warren, instigated a campaign in February 1915 to uncover vendors of obscene pictures, personally gathering a selection of “particularly vile” photographs and drawings in Portland’s North End. It also became apparent that the city’s theater men would continue to challenge the advisory Censor Board, and Colwell and Albee both pushed for a legally binding motion picture censor ordinance.
As approval of the censor ordinance became imminent, theater managers loudly decried censorship. "The most potent censorship in the world is the demand of the public", said John F. Cordray of the Peoples Amusement Company, which ran the Peoples and Star Theaters. "If the public demands the salacious in pictures, censorship would have, in time, to bow before it." However, Cordray promised that of course his theaters would not violate the "canons of decency" and therefore should not be subject to censorship.73

The most pressing problem for theater managers was not actual censorship, but the Censor Board. There appeared to be little rhyme or reason in the methods used to censor films, and the bulk of the decisions seem to have been made by Colwell herself. Perhaps it was this unpredictability of censor decisions that caused some theater managers to continue booking films with questionable content. Edwin James in particular pushed the censors, booking sensational films, promoting them heavily, and even selling advance tickets to the show, as he could not necessarily predict which films the censors would prohibit (he also likely wanted to see what he could get away with). He booked Kreutzer Sonata (William Fox Vaudeville Company, 1914), a film adaptation of Tolstoy's novel that featured themes of infidelity, mixed marriage and illegitimate children. Colwell declared its moral tone to be "low and bad" and restricted it from showing in Portland theaters. James had screened another film, A Fool There Was (William Fox Vaudeville Company, 1915), just prior to booking Kreutzer Sonata, which "got by" censors despite its similar content.74

Colwell not only continued clashing with theater managers, but continued to do so with other members of the Board as well. Disagreements escalated between Colwell and Millie Trumbull since their initial falling-out the previous autumn, and Trumbull eventually resigned from the Board in March 1915. Although she did not officially blame Colwell for her resignation, speculation pointed to Colwell’s remarks to Trumbull’s during a meeting in which Trumbull stated she would be absent from a film viewing. "Mrs. Colwell, it is said", reported The Oregonian, "suggested that perhaps Mrs. Trumbull should quit the Board if she could not attend the meetings. This is said to have been the direct cause of the resignation."75

Portland not only faced internal problems with its Censor Board structure; it also dealt with external pressure. The city of Seattle, 170 miles north of Portland and comparable in population size, instituted its own Censor Board in 1911.76 This unsalaried advisory committee was permitted to inspect films for censorable content and to enter theaters for inspection. As mentioned earlier, Mayor Albee had solicited information on the organization of Seattle’s censor Board to incorporate into his own handling of motion picture censorship. The Seattle Censor Board requested cooperation from Portland’s Board in early 1915, “but the local members [in Portland] decided that it would be best to have each city conduct its censorship independently of the other”.77
Censorship ordinance
Draft of Ordinance No. 30154 (final version not available). CP, SPARC, Mayor’s Office, Correspondence, A2000-003, 2/54 “Motion Picture Ordinance”, 1914

An Ordinance regulating the exhibition of motion pictures, providing a penalty for the violation thereof, and repealing all ordinances or parts of ordinance in conflict therewith.

The City of Portland does ordain as follows:

Section 1. The Board of Motion Picture Censors hereinafter called the Board, is hereby created and shall be composed of seven (7) members. The Commissioner of Public Safety shall appoint the members of the Board and he may at any time remove any member. The Board may appoint viewers to act under its authority and in its behalf. Members of the Board, except the Secretary as hereinafter provided, and viewers shall serve without pay.

Section 2. The Commissioner of Public Safety shall appoint a member of the Board to serve as Secretary of the Board, who shall be paid a salary of not to exceed $100 per month, and who shall perform such duties as the Board may direct.

Section 3. No person, firm or corporation shall exhibit, sell, rent or loan any motion picture unless the film shall have been approved in writing by a majority of the members of the Board.

Section 4. The Board may refuse to approve any film which:

1. Shows anything of an obscene, indecent or immoral nature.
2. Presents any gruesome, revolting or disgusting scene or subject.
3. Portrays (in such manner as to offend public decency or morality) any murder, suicide, robbery, hold-up, stabbing, assaulting, clubbing or beating.
4. Depicts any cruelty to human beings or animals.
5. Exhibits methods of committing crimes.
6. Tends to disturb the public peace.

Section 5. The Board shall approve all films except those enumerated in Section 4 by a certificate of approval, the form of which shall be adopted by the Board, but approval may be made subject to such excisions or alterations as the Board may direct and require and the Board may, by unanimous vote withdraw its approval of any film for cause shown.

Section 6. The exhibitor of any film shall show to any police officer of the City of Portland upon request, the Board’s certificate of approval of such film, and in case of failure to produce and show such certificate, the police officer make take charge of the film which shall be delivered to the Chief of Police and kept in his custody until acted upon by the Board.

Section 7. Ordinance no. (illegible), entitled, “An Ordinance Providing for the Censoring of Motion Pictures”, passed on 9 January 1914, is hereby repealed.

Section 8. Any person violating any of the provisions of this ordinance shall, upon conviction thereof, be punished by a fine not exceeding Five Hundred ($500.00) Dollars, or by imprisonment for a period not exceeding six months or by such both fine and imprisonment.

Passed by the Council
Mayor of the City of Portland
Attest:
Auditor of the City of Portland
Thus, despite the concerns of the motion picture men, the internal struggles of the Board, and Seattle’s request for cooperation, the Portland city council approved its own ordinance in February, and the Board of Motion Picture Censors, Ordinance No. 30154, took effect on 22 March 1915.78
The new ordinance placed stronger authority and discretion in the Board’s hands. Official volunteer viewers would watch and approve all motion pictures before they could be exhibited in Portland; the Board could request the elimination of any scene found objectionable. If films that the Board had condemned were shown, the offending theater manager would be arrested. Furthermore, there would be no right to appeal the Board’s decisions, as had been the case with the advisory Board. Eleanor Colwell was declared Secretary of the Board and finally given a generous monthly salary of $100. The other Board members, expanded now from five to seven members, as well as film viewers, would continue to operate on a volunteer basis.79 Copies of the ordinance were sent to each manager or owner of Portland’s theaters and exchanges, explaining that “it is the earnest desire of the Board so to conduct its work as to be of assistance to, and not an antagonist of, those engaged in the business”.80 All films exhibited in Portland were to be either preceded by a reel that ran the Board of Motion Picture Censors approval seal, or to be accompanied by a written confirmation of approval from the Board Secretary herself.
In its newly authorized capacity, the censorship Board began to look to expand its reach. Colwell personally visited many locations to scout out ordinance violations; members of the police force often accompanied her on visits to certain locations such as north end saloons that also showed movies. She determined that “the motion picture territory is so extensive [that] it is difficult for the Secretary to adequately supervise”, and therefore proposed that the police themselves begin to monitor movie theaters.81 She also tried to establish a central viewing place for the Board to carry out its work, as well as a fee for each reel of film viewed. Exhibitors strongly disagreed with this proposed ordinance, citing it as an “unnecessary expense”.82
Motion picture advertising was also targeted. Mrs. A.C. Newill, chairman of the Board, claimed that motion picture advertising often included “lurid scenes, often barred in the films or in some cases not forming any part of the films”, and even proposed such censorship to the city council for approval. “[I]t is time something was being done to censor those posters.”83 While this application did not pass, it indicated the Board’s attentiveness to theater activities.
Increased publicity and the attempted extension of the Board’s censorship authority led to a spate of inquiries about viewing scenes that had been eliminated from films. Colwell suggested that the city council would likely be the only viewers of the 100-foot reel of cobbled scenes, although Mayor Albee, most likely in a joking manner, “ventured the possibility that the city might be able to wipe out its bonded debt by engaging a theater for a two or three weeks’ run of the film”.84

**Challenges to Ordinance No. 30154**
Theater and exchange managers did not easily accept the newfound authority of the Board of Motion Picture Censors. Despite the low number of films being fully condemned (one to five each month, or around one percent of films reviewed), scenes were routinely eliminated from pictures, and managers like Edwin James continued to be a thorn in the side of the Censor Board.85 His experiences with The Message from Headquarters, Sapho and Kreutzer Sonata in the previous two years had not deterred him from challenging the Board, and neither would the Board’s newly official capacity. In fact, the Board itself expected the challenge. “Mr. James refused to cooperate with us when we were a voluntary board”, stated Mrs. A.C. Newill, chairman of the Board. When James filed a lawsuit against Mayor Albee, the Board and the City Council in April 1915, demanding that the Board be abolished, Newill announced, “We have no reason to be surprised that he should attack the ordinance now”.
In the lawsuit, James declared that the Council had no legal right to delegate “matters of morality” to anyone but the Council and police. Furthermore, James’ lawyers called the ordinance unconstitutional because it “tends to deprive a citizen of his property without due process of law” if censors physically seize films from theaters. Newill was dismissive of James’ lawsuit and defended the Board by referring to the Mutual Film Corporation v. Industrial Commission of Ohio case, the Supreme Court decision that upheld censorship, which was decided two months earlier.86
Censor viewers of The Valley of the Missing (Fox Film Corporation, 1915), scheduled to run at the Majestic, condemned the film because “there was so
much crime, shooting and revenge in it that it wasn’t good for public morals.” James contended that the National Board of Review, whose members were appointed by upstanding organizations like the Young Men’s Christian Association and the Children’s Welfare League, had approved the film, attesting to the acceptability of the film’s content. Circuit Judge Davis decided in favor of the Board, upholding its authority and reinforced the legal basis for motion picture censorship in the city of Portland.

The Sunset Theater also challenged the Board’s authority. Its manager and operator were arrested soon after for showing the condemned film Gussle Rivals Jonah (1915), a Keystone comedy. The film featured a scene in which the main character nearly drowns in the ocean, is pulled out of the water, and is resuscitated by helpful citizens. At this point, “a constant stream of brine seems to issue from his mouth”. Although the main character “convulsed his audiences, the censors thought he was too funny and withdrew the play”. Colwell declared the film “revolting and disgusting”. This action spurred community reaction, as the film starred a local Portland actor, Frank Alexander. Alexander’s friends circulated petitions to challenge the Board’s decision, while his family made personal appeals to Mayor Albee:

If it would be possible or proper for you to go to the Mutual Film Company, where the Keystone Films are exhibited, and have them run through the film “Gussle Rivals Jonah”, you will do much good to the fun-loving people of Portland; people that love freedom; people that love to hear the birds sing and enjoy the laugh of little children; people that love to hear the babbling-brook sing sweet lullabies to the for-get-me-nots; people that love freedom and breadth of mind. I think the holding up of that film and the arresting of the Sunset Management, was very unjust. I am operator on the Morrison Bridge and brother to the “fat-man” in the film, so you see I am personally interested.

Despite these eloquent pleas, the Board did not reverse its decision and Gussle Rivals Jonah and Frank Alexander were left to find audiences elsewhere in the country.

There also was confusion about how long the Board’s approval lasted with a given film. George Harris of the Burnside Theater screened The Folly of a Life of Crime (U.S. Feature Film Company, 1915) in early 1915, and when the film took a second circuit through Portland in July, he screened it again. When Colwell saw advertisements for the film, she decreed it on the basis that the film had not been approved under the new censor ordinance. “Mrs. Colwell created a disturbance on the sidewalk in front of [Harris’s] theater, in the lobby and in the house itself, in her efforts to stop the picture which was then about half run through.” About forty people in the audience “left their names in the box office” as witnesses to Mrs. Colwell’s actions.

The Birth of a Nation in Portland

In 1915, one particular film caused a major stir among Censor Boards around the country. D.W. Griffith’s The Birth of a Nation (1915) challenged authorities at municipal, state and industry levels to acknowledge the film’s inherently racist subject matter, although Censor Boards came to different conclusions based on their own perceptions of the film as well as perceptions of the role of the censors in their respective communities. Portland’s Censor Board was by no means exempt from this discussion and, over several years, faced an indefatigable fight in whether the film should be banned.

The film officially opened in New York on 3 March 1915. Its popularity with audiences and glowing reviews from critics caught the attention of the Los Angeles branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, which had opposed the film very early on. The national NAACP office had hoped to launch a campaign against the film, although its resources were already stretched thin with fights against discriminatory legislation; essentially, it was up to local offices to convey disapproval of the film.

Beatrice Morrow Cannady, secretary of the Portland branch of the NAACP, publicly railed against the film: “As citizens of Portland we must protest against this play because the peace and harmony that has existed between the two races may be destroyed. Portland cannot promote progress when 2500 citizens are held up to public shame and ridicule.” Cannady appealed to Mayor Albee in July 1915 with a petition to ban the film, signed by 326 individuals. Oregon Governor James Withycombe also sent Albee a letter around the same time requesting that Albee consider banning the film. “It is not my desire to more than offer the suggestion to you…[but] we certainly owe protection and recogni-
Fig. 4. Full page ad announcing the arrival of The Birth of a Nation at Portland’s Heilig Theater. The Sunday Oregonian, 29 August 1915.
to an independent body.99 Demanded the right to appeal the Board’s decisions. James spearheaded this committee after the Board prohibited another film scheduled to play at the Majestic, a theater that had the only access to the film. The manager of the film, Bart Bertelson, commented on the rigorous standards of Portland’s Censor Board: “What reason [the protesters] can find for objecting to a film passed by a board that is known to be more painstaking than the average censor board, neither I nor anyone else can see.”96 The Censor Board’s decision on The Birth of a Nation represented one of the few times that theatre managers appreciated and supported the Board; otherwise, the Board and theatre managers had conflicting and generally irreconcilable motivations.

Storm at the Censor Board

Many of the Censor Board’s actions provided further fodder for theater managers’ assertion that Colwell’s decisions were “both arbitrary and capricious”, a charge later levied by a committee of theater representatives formed to address the Board’s unfair decisions. James spearheaded this committee after the Board prohibited another film scheduled to play at the Majestic, Cup of Chance (Knickerbocker Star Features, 1915). “Mrs. Colwell has been both narrow-minded and vindictive in her treatment of our films”, declared one representative of the committee, who found the Board’s authority increasingly illogical and demanded the right to appeal the Board’s decisions to an independent body.99

As Colwell assumed more authority over the Board’s actions, the Board again began to show signs of discord and exploded into a full-blown storm during a meeting in August 1915. The quarrel, primarily between Colwell and W.S. Wessling, the Board’s film industry representative and manager of the Pathé Film Exchange, stemmed from theater managers’ remarks reported in the local press attesting to Colwell’s arbitrary decisions, which Colwell rejected as “falsehoods.”100 As she declared to The Moving Picture World’s local correspondent, “The agitation seems to be directed entirely toward me … and I am accused of dominating the board because a great deal of the censorship work has fallen to me”.101 Board members began to take sides: “Mrs. Colwell brought upon herself the criticism of being the moving spirit in the board because of her readiness in shoulder ing all responsibility and acting without having inquired the wishes of the board”, stated Board member Sol Baum.102

As a result of the meeting, Wessling resigned from the Board, believing that “on vital matters of policy the opinion of minority members is given but little consideration”. As he told The Oregon Daily Journal, “Under these circumstances I feel that my efforts in behalf of those whom I represent are useless.”103 With infighting disrupting the Board, the theater people’s movement to establish a right to appeal intensified. “Under the present system”, noted one theater manager, “we have no means of appealing from the decision of a board of seven members who are dominated by one person and whose decisions are based on personal likes and dislikes rather than on the merits of the pictures” 104. G.A. Metzger of the Film Supply Company of Oregon wrote an editorial published in The Oregonian and The Oregon Daily Journal, noting that theater managers were not opposed to censorship. “What they want”, he wrote, “is a square deal, and in their opinion the only way this can be had is by the Commissioners of our city appointing a board of appeal”.105 They even adopted a slogan to represent their fight: “A sane censorship with the right of appeal.”106

Mayor Albee opposed an appeals Board, maintaining that the present Censor Board acted as an appeals Board. The Board used volunteer viewers to review films; it was upon their recommendation that films were condemned or eliminations were requested. The Board itself did not actually view most films and thus, “[i]f a dispute arises regarding the decision of the viewers”, Albee stated, “the theater people have the right to appeal to the board as a whole”.107

Edwin James opened up the issue to public debate. “What we want to learn is the sentiment of the people … we desire to let the people know what
they are getting for the $1000 paid to the secretary of the censorship board\textsuperscript{106}. Albee tried to shape public opinion concerning the matter, contending that this “agitation” was “incited by two or three individuals ... I do not think it is such a public issue that should be entitled to the support of our commercial bodies\textsuperscript{109}, namely, the Portland Chamber of Commerce.\textsuperscript{109} He did receive some community support; in letters to the Mayor, the secretary of the Employers Association of Oregon, as well as A.F. Flegel, an attorney who had formerly served as an investigator for the Committee on Commercialized Pleasure Resorts, applauded the Censor Board’s pledge to “see that no films except those that were educational and clean from a moral standpoint should be presented in our theatres\textsuperscript{110}.

Albee met opposition, however, as community members beyond those directly affiliated with the film theaters and exchanges began to rally for a Board of Appeals – a compromise if the Censor Board was not abolished altogether. These individuals included C.C. Colt of the Chamber of Commerce, W. P. Strandborg of the Portland Railway, Light & Power Company, and P.E. Sullivan of the Portland Press Club, who stated, “There are too many persons anxious to censor things for the public. Why should we have our motion pictures censored any more than our food, or our clothes, or the kind of toothbrush we use? I, for one, am against censorship\textsuperscript{111}.

This increasing community interest, coupled with enough pressure from theater and exchange managers, induced Albee to ask, in December 1915, that the Censor Board pass a resolution “that no member of the Board shall act as a viewer”.\textsuperscript{112} The Board would instead act strictly in a capacity to determine appealed decisions. It did, however, release revised censorship guidelines, known as the “57 varieties”, in order to continue defining appropriate content.\textsuperscript{113}

The theater people continued to voice their opposition to the Board’s system of appeals, and actively sought the moviegoing public’s support in establishing a true Appeals Board. The local branch of the Exhibitors’ League, the Oregon Motion Picture Men’s Association, organized a petition drive in July 1916, citing in part the motion picture industry’s contribution to Oregon’s economy. The Association rapidly gathered signatures, garnering approximately 30,000 in two weeks, 5,000 more than their target number. The Board and Mayor Albee, however, questioned the legitimacy of these signatures, alleging that many were collected under misleading pretenses or were duplications.\textsuperscript{114} Of the five city council members, Commissioner George Baker, formerly a theater owner himself, was the theater managers’ sole supporter, strongly defending the need for an appeals Board: “The worst criminal in the world has the right of appeal”, he stated at a council meeting, “yet the picture men under our ordinance have no right of appeal”.\textsuperscript{115} Despite his and other pleas, the City Council rejected the proposed appeals Board in a 3-1 vote on 6 September 1916; Commissioner Baker, who would succeed Albee as Mayor of Portland the following year, cast the only vote in favor of the measure.\textsuperscript{116}

Theater and exchange managers found Colwell and Mayor Albee to be formidable forces with regards to motion picture censorship, and the rejection of an appeals Board was a devastating loss. Shortly after this decision, the legitimacy of Colwell’s appointment to Secretary of the Board of Motion Picture Censors was called into question, seemingly one final effort to strike a major blow to Portland’s Censor Board. Portland’s Municipal Civil Service Board conducted an investigation into whether the appointment was a violation of the city charter in that the Secretary was not required to take a civil service examination. The Civil Service Board found that the position should be open to anyone taking the exam, the scope of which covered personal experience and
knowledge of motion picture ordinances, censorship, production and marketing. However, City Attorney W.P. LaRoche determined that the city council could in fact appoint an individual to the position, and the tests were called off after three people had applied to take the exam. In March 1917, the examination was reinstated, and Colwell maintained her position as Secretary after taking the exam.117

George Baker was elected mayor of Portland in June 1917, and with his administration came a new Board of Censors, although Colwell continued on as Secretary. Only sporadic information exists in the historical record about the Censor Board after this point, but one might speculate that Baker’s prior experience in theater ownership may have contributed to muting the hostilities between theater managers and the Censor Board.

“A Chance to Assert Itself”
The case of motion picture censorship in Portland, Oregon, was by no means unique. Although the films being censored and the individuals involved varied from community to community, the overall trends during the 1910s revealed uncertainty and power struggles over how to define new forms of public amusement. As George Potamianos wrote in his examination of the motion picture industry in two small California communities, censorship often came about because “the structure of the industry increasingly prevented local civic authorities, benevolent societies, and film exhibitors from exercising local autonomy over the kinds of leisure town residents were apt to consume”.118 Thus, a struggle was born in which Mayor Albee and the Censor Board on the one hand, and theater and exchange managers on the other hand, wrestled over who had the right to determine morally appropriate film content.

Industry parties resisted the local Censor Board because they felt that it was uninformed, provincial and paternalistic. One Portland exhibitor felt that the Censor Board would visit the film exchanges or theaters to view the films with the idea uppermost in their minds that the actor, producer and exhibitor are “trying to put over” something immoral and suggestive…If they viewed films from the sane standpoint of the average movie fan, and not so much from the angle of the pervert, the situation would easily adjust itself.119

As a result, theater and exchange managers did not respect the Board’s decisions and tended to resist ones they considered unfair.

As the Censor Board used the Mayor’s support and then legal authority to control the public’s exposure to certain kinds of film content, theater and exchange managers sought out ways to loosen the Board’s grip. They found solidarity in each other, forming the local chapter of the Exhibitors’ League. They also found support in the editorial content of The Moving Picture World, which published stories about similar goings-on in communities across the country. Portland was not the only city to lie at the mercy of a single individual like Eleanor Colwell. Indeed, “censoring autocrats” resided in every community. Mrs. Maude Murray Miller of Ohio was another. “The rest of the population might think a picture harmless, but if Mrs. Miller thinks otherwise, the picture goes back to the reel and stays there as far as Ohio is concerned”.120 Likewise, theater managers in Chicago charged that its city censors made decisions “based on nothing but the whims and fancies of individuals. An elderly lady in Chicago refused to pass a film because the hero or the villain or somebody fell from a height of twenty-five feet. The lady refuses to allow any plunge over fifteen feet”.121

Despite the theater managers’ assertion that public demand (or lack thereof) would effectively censor films from circulation in Portland theaters, the public was largely absent from these debates, at least as represented in the historical record, save for sporadic letters to Mayor Albee from Portland citizens. Even the local newspapers failed to measure public opinion of motion picture censorship, relying instead on statements from Mayor Albee, Colwell and the Censor Board, and theater and exchange managers to define the issue. Only when Edwin James turned his pleas to the public in August 1915, a full four years after the Censor Board was first instated in an advisory capacity, did the public actually enter into the debate in any real sense.

Edwin James’ foray into the motion picture exhibition business, at least in Portland, appears to have been relatively short-lived, as he relinquished ownership of the Majestic Theatre in 1918.122 Yet the Censor Board’s members continued to take it upon themselves to speak for the public by demanding morally clean motion pictures. Indeed, members turned this into their life’s work; Eleanor Colwell, who was appointed to the Board at its inception, spent a lengthy career with the Board of Motion Picture Cen-
sors. Her strong personality continued to disrupt harmony on the Board, resulting in yet another Board member’s resignation. In 1940, Mrs. Thomas Joyce left the Board because she had demanded that then-Mayor Joseph Carson should remove Colwell, who had been the “storm center” at several meetings. But Carson refused to remove Colwell from service, and Joyce resigned. Colwell herself retired from the Board in 1941 after thirty years of service. The Board itself was not abolished until the Oregon Supreme Court declared it unconstitutional in 1961.123

G.A. Metzger, General Manager of the Film Supply Company of Oregon, rightly summarized the ways in which the Censor Board and social and political organizations in Portland, just like those around the rest of the country, approached new forms of commercial amusement: “There is no particular reason for censoring motion pictures more than anything else, except that they are new and their unsettled status gives the censorious instinct a chance to assert itself.”124

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Notes

11. Labosier, 35.
20. Alison M. Parker, Purifying America: Women, Cultural Reform, and Pro-Censorship Activism, 1873-1933 (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 137.
25. Labosier, 35.
27. Municipal-level motion picture censorship such as Portland’s was only one type among many approaches to censorship. Chicago, New York, and other cities created censorship ordinances as early as 1907, and Pennsylvania’s state legislature passed a bill in 1913 that instituted state-level censorship. Ohio, Kansas and Maryland passed similar laws. A legal challenge to the authority of Ohio’s state censor board, The Mutual Film Corporation v. Ohio, resulted in confirmation of that authority, denying the application of First Amendment rights to motion pictures. In 1915, Congressional leaders introduced the Smith-Hughes bill, proposing the creation of a federal motion picture censor board; this bill did not pass into law. The film industry also participated in censorship decisions; it created the National Board of Censorship (known after 1916 as the National Board of Review). Financed primarily by the film industry, this institution was often criticized for being too industry-friendly. By 1921, nearly one hundred measures related to motion picture censorship had been introduced in thirty-seven state legislatures, while over one hundred and fifty cities employed a range of censorship ordinances, from police seizing objectionable films to official boards of censorship with powers of review.
31. “Censors are Stirred by Charge”, The Oregonian (26 March 1911): 11.
33. Labosier, 61.
34. Letter to Edwin F. James from Mayor H.R. Albee, 23 September 1913. City of Portland (Oregon), Stanley Parr Archives and Records Center (hereinafter CP, SPARC), Mayor’s Office, Correspondence, A2000-003, 2/27 “J – Motion Pictures”, 1913.
37. Letter to Albee from National Board of Censorship, 3 November 1913. CP, SPARC, Mayor’s Office, Correspondence, A2000-003, 1/20 “N – National Board of Censorship”, 1913.
41. “Films Excellent but Subject is Gruesome”, The Oregonian (10 January 1914): 4.
42. Letter to Albee from City Attorney W. P. LaRoche, 21 January 1914. CP, SPARC, Portland City Attorney, A2000-003, 6/29 “Censorship of Motion Pictures”, 1914.
46. Foster, 18.
47. Ibid., 33.
49. Letter to Albee from Rhode Island State Congress of Mothers, 27 January 1914. CP, SPARC, Mayor’s Office, Correspondence, A2000-003, 5/15 “B – Censoring”, 1914.
50. See, for example, Grieveson, pp. 151-191.
53. Ibid., 104.
54. Letter to Albee from W.H. Warren, 13 March 1914.
55. Letter to Albee from W.H. Warren, 1 February 1915. CP, SPARC, Mayor’s Office, Correspondence, A2000-003, 2/54 “Motion Picture Ordinance No. 30154”, 1915.


57. Letter to Albee from Mayor Hindley of Spokane, 24 May 1914. CP, SPARC, Mayor’s Office, Correspondence, A2000-003, 5/2 “A – Censoring”, 1914.

58. See Labosier, 74-88.

59. Letter to Mr. W.T. Binford of the Mutual Film Company from Secretary of Board of Motion Picture Censors, 4 May 1914. CP, SPARC, Mayor’s Office, Correspondence, A2000-003, 8/49 “T – Censorship”, 1914.

60. Letter to Albee from Millie Trumbull, 2 June 1914. CP, SPARC, Mayor’s Office, Correspondence, A2000-003, 8/49 “T – Censorship”, 1914.

61. Minutes of 5 June 1914 meeting called by the Advisory Committee on Censorship of Motion Pictures at request of the Mayor. CP, SPARC, Mayor’s Office, Correspondence, A2000-003, 8/49 “T – Censorship”, 1914.


68. Ibid.


70. Letter to Governor Hiram Johnson (California) from Albee, 14 December 1914. CP, SPARC, Mayor’s Office, Correspondence, A2000-003, 6/73 “J – Censoring”, 1914.

71. After Warren had collected these obscene pictures he asked the dealer if there were more. “We’re going to get in some dandies next week”, he replied. “Come around then and we can fix you up with some peaches.” “Bad-Picture War Begun”, The Oregonian (21 February 1915): 13.


73. “Tolstoi Film is Barred by Censor”, The Oregonian (8 March 1915): 1, 8.


75. Ordinance No. 28467 was “an ordinance relating to and regulating theatres and public performances therein, penny arcades, exhibitions or entertainments at which moving or motion pictures are displayed or exhibited, and other places of amusement, and creating an advisory committee, and providing penalties for violation”. Seattle City Council Ordinance Number 28467 (1911), City of Seattle Legislative Information Service, http://clerk.ci.seattle.wa.us/~public/CBOR1.htm (accessed 15 December 2009).

76. One can only speculate as to why Portland decided not to follow Seattle’s lead; perhaps Seattle’s lenient reputation with respect to vice overrode Portland’s desire to use Seattle’s censorship guidelines. During his first term as mayor of Seattle in 1910-1911 (the election was recalled after only 11 months), Hiram C. Gill believed in regulating vice such as gambling and prostitution rather than banning it outright. This “open-city” policy attracted unsavory businesses and individuals from around the country, which heightened Seattle’s reputation as vice-ridden. In addition, Gill was known for corruption, encouraging it among other city officials, and even spurred coinage of the term “Gillism.” “Gillism has allowed the enforcers of law and order to enter into lewd partnership with breakers of the law”, stated the editor of the Seattle Post-Intelligencer. Two months after Portland passed its ordinance, Seattle revised and passed Ordinance No. 34790, which expanded the powers of its Censor Board and instituted penalties for violators of censorship policy. “Film Censors Elect”, The Oregonian (24 March 1915); Richard C. Berner, Seattle 1900-1921: From Boomtown, Urban Turbulence, to Restoration (Seattle: Charles Press, 1991), 71-74; Seattle City Council Ordinance Number 34790 (1915), City of Seattle Legislative Information Service, http://clerk.ci.seattle.wa.us/~public/CBOR1.htm (accessed 15 December 2009).


79. Form letter to theater and exchange managers from the Secretary of the Board of Motion Picture Censors,

81. Board of Motion Picture Censors monthly report for October 1915. CP, SPARC, Monthly Reports, A2000-002, 12/12 “Motion Picture Censorship”, 1915.


84. “Naughty Film Attracts”, The Oregonian (26 June 1915): 10.

85. On average, between 300 and 400 films were reviewed each month, but only one to five were usually condemned (this number, however, skyrocketed to twenty condemnations in January 1916). Scene eliminations were more common, with roughly twenty-five to thirty-five eliminations requested each month for all films reviewed. Board of Motion Picture Censors monthly reports for May 1915 – July 1916. CP, SPARC, Monthly Reports, A2000-002, 12/12 “Motion Picture Censorship”, 1915; CP, SPARC, Council Documents, 137/14 “Administration”, 1915.

86. “Attack is Made on Censor Board”, The Oregonian (23 April 1915): 7.

87. Ibid.


89. “The Comeback is at Sunset”, The Oregonian (22 May 1915): 16.


93. For a lengthy discussion of the fight over censorship of this film, see Melvyn Stokes, D.W. Griffith’s The Birth of a Nation: A History of the Most Controversial Motion Picture of All Time (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 129-170.

94. “Film is Protested”, The Oregonian (4 July 1915): 1, 3.

95. NAACP petition to ban The Birth of a Nation, 12 July 1915. CP, SPARC, Correspondence, A2000-003, 3/72 “NAACP – Mayor’s Office”, 1915.


97. Telegram sent from Mayor Fawcett to Albee, 23 August 1915. CP, SPARC, Correspondence, A2000-003, 3/72 “National Association for the Advancement of Colored People”, 1915.

98. “Film Protest Made”, The Oregonian (1 September 1915): 6. Cannady continued to fight against The Birth of a Nation each time it was scheduled to appear in Portland theatres, but Portland’s Censor Board continued to approve the film in 1918, 1922, and 1931. For a discussion of Cannady’s fight, see Kim Mangun, “As Citizens of Portland We Must Protest”: Beatrice Morrow Cannady and the African American Response to D.W. Griffith’s ‘Masterpiece’, Oregon Historical Quarterly 107(3) 2006: 372-399.


103. “Censor Hands in his Resignation as Member of Board”, The Oregon Daily Journal (6 August 1915): 5.


112. Letter to Albee from Eleanor Colwell, 30 December 1915. CP, SPARC, Mayor’s Office, Correspondence, A2000-003, 9/56 “C – Motion Pictures”, 1915.


116. George Baker participated in Portland’s theatre community prior to his years in city government. He managed local theater owner Calvin Heilig’s vaudeville theatre starting in 1897, and purchased his own vaudeville theatre, which he named the Baker Theatre, in 1902. Vaudeville shows didn’t last long there, and Baker presented a stock company in 1903 and again in 1905. See James Labosier, “From the Kinetoscope to the Nickelodeon: Motion Picture Presentation and Production in Portland, Oregon from 1894 to 1906”, Film History 16(3): 306, 311-312; “Movie Act is Killed”, The Oregonian (7 September 1916): 9.


Abstract: “In the Interest of the Moral Life of Our City”: The Beginning of Motion Picture Censorship in Portland, Oregon, by Mary P. Erickson

This paper explores how movie censorship developed in Portland, Oregon, and why theater managers and the city struggled so intensely over local censorship of motion pictures. It does so through an analysis of the history of Portland’s motion picture censor board in its various iterations in the early 1910s. Primary evidence is derived from a selection of archival documents from the mayoral papers of H.R. Albee, who served the city of Portland from 1913 to 1917, and other documents from the City of Portland archives, including City Council documents and monthly reports. The paper also consults various local newspapers from the same era, as well as compilations of theater, vice, and social hygiene reports from prominent civic and government groups at the time. This examination will serve to illustrate factors that affected the legitimacy and effectiveness of Portland’s censor board, which in turn will contribute to a broader understanding of the birth of motion picture censorship within the unique social and political conditions of the 1910s. In addition, a case study of Portland’s censor board provides much-needed analysis of censorship processes in area of the country that was, during this period, shedding its identity as a frontier setting and beginning to define itself as an urban center.

Key words: Motion Picture Censorship; Portland, Oregon; Motion Picture Exhibition; The Birth of a Nation.