

## The Historical Monkeyshines of G. Sacco Albanese

4

G. Sacco Albanese, a Greek from the island of Malta, is the first human being ever to appear in motion pictures. While film historians are quite matter of fact about Albanese's unique role in the history of world cinema, I know of no Greek or Greek American account which even mentions the man, let alone provides any details of his activities. This omission is compounded by the undisputable fact that Greek immigrants – as performers, producers, writers and theater owners – were directly involved in American Cinema literally from the very moment it was created.

While G. Sacco Albanese's place in the history of cinema is today basically understood today, there was a time when his exact contributions were a subject of considerable controversy.

Thomas Edison and his financial backers realized that an untold fortune would follow the creation of a moving picture camera. Flurries of patents were applied for from all over the country on various aspects of such a moving picture machine. In the late 1890's, many claimed to have successfully constructed such a device. Facing conflicting claims, the United States Patent Office soon demanded that proof the device worked be included with the patent application form. The first individual or group to be able to secure dated and documented copyright patents on a moving picture camera would be in possession of literally millions of dollars.



*By 1895, Thomas Edison's company had developed kinetophonographs, which synchronized film projection with sound from a phonograph record. G. Sacco Albanese, a Greek from Malta, was the first subject caught on motion picture film with this device.*

It was nothing less than images of G. Sacco Albanese which eventually secured the Edison cartel key patent rights.  
WEST ORANGE GREEKS

Thomas Edison's laboratory and production factories were located in West Orange, New Jersey. It is commonplace in Greek American history that, beginning in the late 1880's, the newly arriving Hellenic immigrants, women as well as

men, found work in the mills of New England. By no later than 1903, the Greek immigrants were so numerous and so well organized, they negotiated all labor issues with the mill owners as a distinct and separate group. It should come as no surprise, then, to learn that Greek immigrants had long worked in varying capacities for Edison's various industries in West Orange.

In 1914, Edison's New Jersey factory complex burned to the ground. Along with the loss of the factories was the human catastrophe of thousands of jobless workers facing an unknown future. Edison stepped forward. Every worker stayed on the payroll during the six months it took to completely rebuild the factory complex. On New Year's Day 1915, the Greek workers presented Thomas Edison with a giant wreath. A photograph of that event hangs in the administrative offices of the Edison National Historical Site.

It was into this existing environment, both American and Greek, that G. Sacco Albanese enters into our story. A long complex lawsuit addressing who exactly invented the first motion picture machine provides us with the documented time, place, and role of Albanese in the development of this new technology. All the drawn out details of the lawsuit, and who may or may not have been falsifying their documents, can be seen in Gordon Hendricks' "Origins of the American Film" (Arno Press, New York City: 1972). Not all the details in this extended lawsuit are necessary – just those facts dealing with G. Sacco Albanese's role.

William Kennedy Laurie Dickson was an engineer working under the employment of Thomas Edison. From 1883 onwards, Dickson worked with Edison to perfect a motion picture machine. Albanese worked for the Edison Company as a laboratory assistant. Gordon Hendricks' research on Edison's archival files led him to discover the copy of a letter dated February 18, 1890. Some clerk in Edison's office had written back to Albanese's January 15, 1890 letter asking for a job. Then, Hendricks found a September 5, 1890 letter from Albanese's father, Vincenzo, thanking Edison for hiring his son.

#### THE KINETOPHONOGRAPH

Since everyone reading this account lives at a time when motion pictures, television and digital images are everyday items, it is perhaps difficult to imagine a time when inventors didn't even have an idea of how to go about projecting images.

The first device Edison and Dickson developed was called the Kinetophonograph (or Kinetophone), which synchronized film projection with sound from a phonograph record. The projector was connected to the phonograph with a pulley system, but it didn't work very well and was difficult to synchronize.

"Then followed," as Dickson was to describe in 1895, "some experiments with drums, over which sheets of sensitized celluloid film was drawn, the edges being pressed into a narrow slot in the surface, similar in construction to the old tinfoil phonographs... The pictures were then taken spirally to the number of 200 or so, but were limited in size, owing to the rotundity of the surface." This machine was dubbed the kinetograph.

In 1933, Dickson recalled his first experimental efforts: "To take these photographs or strips, our camera or kinetograph had to be carried down to a small improvised platform placed against our ore-milling outhouse. A bright sunny-natured Greek... Sacco Albanese by name, was one of the very early victims, figuring mostly in the 1/4-inch and later 1/2-inch pictures. Draped in white, he was made to go through some weird antics."

Albanese was forced to dress in all white because, even though the footage was taken outside in full sunlight, the lens used was still very primitive, and all the reflective light which could be acquired was needed.

Three short black and white silent movies were made with Albanese gesturing madly in all of them. Albanese received a bonus of \$1.50 per film for his mad gestures. These extremely brief 'films' are the only surviving footage from a cylinder kinetoscope. Gordon Hendricks dates the first of these films as taking place during "the week ending November 27" 1890 ( pg. 101). Eight months later, Albanese left Edison's employ with a letter of reference.

As Hendricks observes, "We thus have a first and last date for these "Monkeyshines."

These films survive only because they were attached to the copyright affidavit as proof that the new invention worked as claimed. Drawing directly from the National Archives, Gordon Hendricks published not only the original 1896 affidavit, but also all the several hundred stills from the cylinder film footage. Again, without going into extensive detail, all court cases surrounding the kinetoscope ultimately resolved in favor of the Edison cartel solely by virtue of Albanese's filmed image.

From 1888 to 1897, Edison applied for innumerable patents involving motion picture machines which eventually led to what we now know as the nickelodeon cabinet. Before films could be projected onto walls, viewers were forced to look down into floor-standing "peep show" cabinets. My article, "The Greek Diaspora and Early American Cinema (National Herald, December 10, 2005 edition)," outlined how Greek producers in the spring of 1894 were among the very first to purchase Thomas Edison's nickelodeon machines.

By February 1895, two French inventors, Louis and Auguste Lumiere, were given a patent for their cinematographe, which projected a 35mm film image onto a large screen. In December 1895, the Lumiere brothers exhibited a series of short films in Paris. In retrospect, the era of motion pictures displayed in theaters had arrived. But this form of entertainment most certainly did not overcome its visual rivals overnight.

By 1910, there were an estimated 10,000 nickelodeon parlors using kinetoscopes all across the United States. Touring "flicker shows" or moving picture shows were more gradually established than is now understood. In 1917, Alexander Pantages is said to have been the first promoter to use a moving picture show as part of his vaudeville theater programming.

Just how influential was all this early technology? At the 1939 New York World's Fair, it was necessary for John Vassos, the Greek immigrant industrial designer, to present a transparent version of his RCA Phantom Telereceiver. This specially constructed Lucite version of the production TRK-12 television comprised one of the most impressive exhibits for visitors to the RCA pavilion. The totally transparent, clear plastic cabinet removed any doubt regarding the authenticity, and provenance, of the images being televised. Such was the lingering memory of nickelodeon peep show boxes.

#### ENDURING CONFUSION

For the moment, public records offer us no clue as to whatever became of G. Sacco Albanese. It is an established fact of history that the Edison cartel – while it may have lost the long-term technological battle involved over exclusive rights on motion picture development – still made millions on their nickelodeon machines and films.

Regrettably, many accounts in print and posted on the Internet still deny G. Sacco Albanese his brief moment in the history of science.

Fred Ott, another Edison laboratory assistant, is still often mistakenly credited as the first on film. In January 1894, William Dickson filmed "Fred Ott's Sneeze" for publicity stills in Harper's Weekly. But as we have seen, Gordon Hendrick has documented that Dickson had already filmed the wild gestures of Albanese between 1890 and 1891. Since the three films with Albanese were experiments and never released to the general public, they have never had the broad exposure of Ott's sensational sneeze.

I'm not suggesting that without Sacco Albanese there would never have been a kinetoscope developed at Edison's laboratories. But let us reclaim our own history. No one denies that Greek immigrants were present at the very beginnings of the film industry. Yet no one is taking the time to systematically document their presence, let alone offer a balanced appraisal of their contributions to American Cinema.

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