

Ray-Bell Films, Inc.

THE IMAGE OF several filmmakers and their cameras outside of a building at 817–823 University Avenue in St. Paul captures one moment in time for a notable Twin Cities film company. Several similar photos over a period of years show different names on the building, hinting at changes at the film company over time. The building is still standing after more than a hundred years; it was most recently an Ethiopian restaurant.

Incorporated in 1910, the company had a variety of names, including Ray-Bell Films, as shown in this image. The business continued until the 1970s. Reflecting changing personnel and ownership, it was known as Rath-Seavolt Film (1910), Rath, Mills & Bell (1921), Ray-Bell Films (1925), and Reid H. Ray Film Industries (1947). By then, the company had moved to a larger St. Paul location at 2269 Ford Parkway.

Although it existed for more than 60 years, the company's role in the film and photography field is not now widely recognized. It was known as the Twin Cities' largest film production company as well as one of the largest and oldest film producers in the United States. Throughout the company's long history, it made thousands of both still and film images for local and national companies, institutions, and municipalities. The company used more footage than most major Hollywood studios and produced a seemingly endless series of films on diverse subjects in widespread locations.

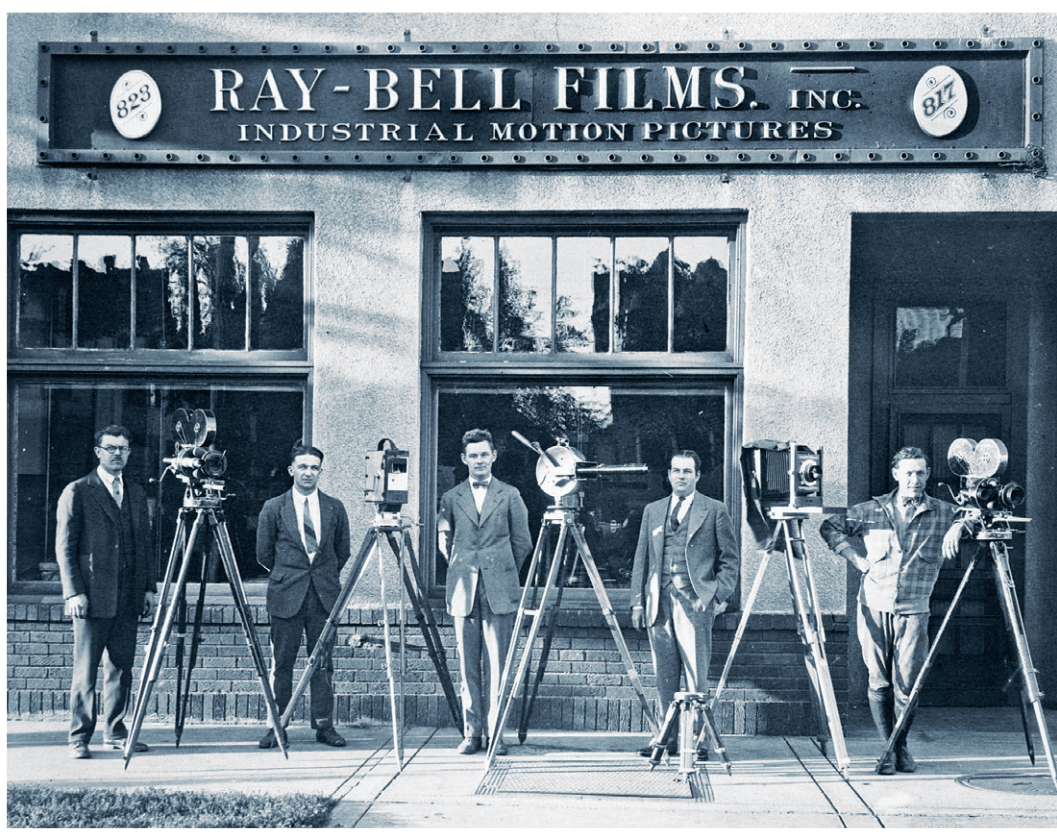
Among the many commercial clients of Ray-Bell and its predecessor and successor companies were Cargill, Northwest Airlines, Pillsbury Mills, Northrup King, and International Harvester. In its early years, it was a major producer for the Great Northern

Railroad and other railroad companies. Ray-Bell was also one of the largest producers of films for the United States government, including projects for the US Navy, US Air Force, US Office of Education, and Army Corps of Engineers. Many of the films were representative of their time, such as 1959's *Walt Builds a Family Fallout Shelter*.

The company would work on many projects at the same time. Although it started with a small staff, by 1947 the company listed 72 employees—20 of whom had been with the company from 5 to 22 years. By the mid-1950s the company had 114 employees. They even had an orchestra. Ray-Bell had offices in the Twin Cities, Washington, Chicago, Kansas City, and Hollywood.

Whatever name it may have carried during its storied history, Ray-Bell Films, Inc., was a major player in the national film industry. Fortunately for those who wish to learn more, many photographs and corporate papers are held in the collections of the Minnesota Historical Society.

—Linda James



Filmmakers and cameras in front of Ray-Bell Films, Inc., in St. Paul.

(MNHS COLLECTIONS)



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