

President McKinley Inauguration

By Charles "Buckey" Grimm

The two films that make up the President McKinley Inauguration Footage ("President McKinley Taking the Oath" and "President McKinley and Escort Going to the Capitol") present a unique look at one of the seminal events of turn-of-the-20th-century political history. The 1901 inauguration was McKinley's second term and it was indeed a time to celebrate. The economic conditions that led to the depression had been reversed during his first term; the country was experiencing a time of rapid economic growth; a swift victory had been achieved in the Spanish American War; and the country had added to its territories by annexing Hawaii. Vice President Theodore Roosevelt was a well-known war hero and was starting his rise among United States political figures. It was a time of great nationalistic fervor. McKinley defeated the Democratic candidate, William Jennings Bryan, by running a "Front Porch" campaign, instead of going town to town on a whistle stop tour as Bryan did, McKinley opted to stay at home and campaign from the front porch of his home. The railroads helped by subsidizing some of the railroad travel to allow more access by the prospective voters. It turned out to be a stroke of genius in campaign operations and was one of the factors leading to his second victory over Bryan.

In the earliest days of the motion picture, much of the filmed material came from either everyday life or special events. Thomas Edison's crew of cameramen was constantly being sent across the country to record many of the famous events at the beginning of the 20th Century. Two of his most experienced operators, Edwin S. Porter and James H. White, were sent to Washington, D.C. to capture the pomp and circumstance of this day. The opening film in the series shows President McKinley's trip to the capitol to take the oath of office. As detailed in the Edison Film Catalog of 1901, the film opens with the camera at a vantage point at the intersection of Pennsylvania



President McKinley taking Oath of Office, March 4, 1901. Courtesy Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Online Collection.

Avenue and Fifteenth Street. The parade is led by a group of mounted police on horseback followed by the grand marshal, Major General Francis Green, and his staff. This is followed by various dignitaries and troops who are leading the president's carriage along the parade route. Some of the dignitaries shown are Senator Marcus Hanna, Admiral George Dewey, Postmaster General Charles Emory Smith as well as other members of McKinley's cabinet. Finally, McKinley's carriage appears as the president doffs his hat and acknowledges the crowd. The film closes as a detachment of the 23rd Ohio Volunteer Infantry and a platoon of West Point cadets follow the president's carriage as it turns onto Pennsylvania Avenue from Fifteenth Street.

The presidential oath film lasts only a mere 50 seconds or so, but it contains quite a number of interesting images. Cameramen White and Porter set up their equipment outside the East Portico of the Capitol in order to capture the activity of the first presidential inauguration of the 20th Century on March 4, 1901. The opening is a view of the set up on the inauguration platform, prior to the seating being filled. We then see the diplomatic corps and the president's cabinet enter, followed by Chief Justice Melville W. Fuller and President McKinley. The chief justice proceeds to hold out a small bible and McKinley takes the oath, whereupon he immediately turns to the crowd and begins his inaugural address. The weather was quite poor that day, and is evidenced

by the fact that umbrellas are prominent in the images. This is also noted in Edison's Film Catalog: "Note. Again the valuable and exclusive privileges granted us by the United States Government allowed us to place our camera within fifteen feet of the President when he took the oath of office. We regret that we were unable to secure a longer film than listed above, but the rain began falling in torrents with almost the first words of the President's speech, which of course prohibited our taking a greater length of film, but notwithstanding the fact that it began sprinkling before the President took the oath of office, the fifty feet of film which we did secure is good."¹

These images of McKinley and his cabinet are a reminder that the use of moving images in the political Arena is nothing new. Abner McKinley (the President's brother) was both a lawyer and investor, who reportedly had a stake in the American Mutoscope and Biograph Company. Abner had convinced William McKinley to be filmed by Biograph in 1896. This was a re-creation of his being notified of receiving the Republican Party's nomination, at his home in Canton, Ohio. An interesting side note is the fact the McKinley was also part of the last presidential inauguration of the 19th Century, filmed by the same American Mutoscope and Biograph Company in 1897. This also contained the only existing film view

of the outgoing president Grover Cleveland.

The resulting footage is also one of the cornerstones of the Library of Congress Paper Print Collection. This material was registered for copyright in 1901 using the accepted practice of providing a contact copy of the film on sensitized paper. The material was rediscovered in 1942 and beginning in 1943 the effort began to convert these "paper copies" back to celluloid projectable images. For more information about footage of President McKinley in the Library's Paper Print Collection and to see moving images from the collection, go to <https://www.loc.gov/collection/mckinley-and-the-pan-american-expo-films-1901/about-this-collection/>

¹ Edison Films Catalog, July 1901, P.8.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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