

POLITICS AND THE PAYNE FUND

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One of the key issues regarding the formation of the group of studies which became known as the Payne Fund Studies, was the delicate political situation it created for the Bolton Family. The family had long been associated with the Republican Party of Ohio, and the funding of this research held potential dangers, of which those surrounding Mrs. Frances Bolton were only too aware. This paper examines how the Payne Fund attempted to neutralize the potential conflicts which might have arisen once the studies were finally made public, and to minimize the impact of any potential backlash from the motion picture industry.

After the two years of preliminary work was completed, and an agenda for a comprehensive research program had been established, Rev. W. H. Short, head of the Motion Picture Research Council (MPRC) applied for, and received, all of the funding for the major studies from The Payne Fund. However, during these years, 1927 to 1929, Short's relationship with the Payne Fund became more and more tentative, as his agenda for the eventual creation of a legislative form of "moral" control of the motion picture industry became increasingly obvious. The correspondence in the archival files reveals how Short initially sought to ingratiate himself with Mrs. Bolton and the Payne Fund officers by offering his assistance on a variety of issues; but in the long run his obstinate single-mindedness, and open hostility toward what was seen to be a powerful and politically dangerous industry lobby (the Hays Office), made him a dangerous ally, to be kept at a safe distance. Initially however, Short's energy, enthusiasm and also the impressive array of important political connections that he claimed to have, made him very much in favor with the Payne Fund group, and he was invited to participate in their ultimately futile efforts to find funding for a proposed boy's magazine.¹

Mrs. Bolton's personal relationship, and therefore that of the Payne Fund, with Short's Committee seemed to vacillate between cautious endorsement and political distancing. In a memo dated November 15, 1927, her thoughts were outlined:

Mrs. Bolton was emphatic in her belief that all of us must consider making it a vital and fundamental rule that the New Payne Fund shall be guarded scrupulously against attack or criticism from the motion picture interests or that portion of the public which approves the present motion picture leadership. For this reason the Payne Fund should not be mentioned as the donor of funds for the motion picture study. The statement that funds come from an anonymous donor is to be preferred.²

The nature of the relationship between the National Committee and the Payne Fund continued to be an issue of contention well into early 1928 as the exact program of action began to take shape. In a letter from Clymer to Mrs. Bolton in January, he suggested that he and Miss Crandall had been

thinking considerably more about the use of the name of the Payne Study and Experiment Fund by Mr. Short. . . . At first, with Mr. Seabury very much in the picture, with his reputation as a determined critic of the motion picture industry. . . and with the probability that Mr. Short's work would subject him and his committee to much enmity from the motion picture industry and sympathizers, it was then very necessary to protect the new Fund.

Since that time Mr. Seabury has come around to many of our views [this, as we now know, was not an accurate perception], and Mr. Short's study and planning has spread out and has so obviously taken the form of a non-partisan judicial effort that the Payne Fund may gain more than it would lose by a definite identification with the motion picture study.

. . . . an occasional letter by Mr. Short on the Payne Fund letterhead to prominent people whom he is approaching may be to our advantage.³

Clymer was able to convince Mrs. Bolton of the potentially positive aspects of this association, and on January 23, 1928 he sent a memo to Short indicating that Mrs. Bolton had written that: "I think it is all right for Mr. Short to say frankly to those who need information that he is being financed by the Fund."⁴ There-

fore, in this early stage of the development of the research program, Short was free to seek the support of individuals and organizations under the relatively prestigious auspices of the Payne Fund, and with the implication of Mrs. Bolton's patronage. This was an important achievement for this ambitious and socially-conscious would-be reformer of the movies.

Throughout the entire project, but especially in this early phase of organization, Short constantly feared the potential power of the motion picture industry to thwart his efforts. The bitter memories of the unleashed political clout exhibited by the Hays Office in the 1922 Massachusetts censorship referendum lingered among the movie reformers, and the massive public relations campaign that had been developed by the MPPDA, incorporating a wide variety of national groups, represented a formidable obstacle.⁵ Mr. and Mrs. Bolton, an important part of the Republican political organization in Ohio, were not eager to run head-on into Will Hays and the motion picture industry.⁶ For that reason the work of the National Committee was kept relatively quiet with little public fanfare of their early achievements.⁷

Short however, did keep a very close watch on the work of the public relations efforts of the motion picture industry. One of his prime targets for infiltration was the General Federation of Woman's Clubs, a large and influential organization whose relationship with the Hays Office tended to wax and wane. As an example, in July, 1928, he went to Evanston, Illinois specifically to meet (in three "conferences") with Mrs. A. C. Tyler, who was the Chairman of the Motion Picture Committee of the General Federation of Woman's Clubs. In a subsequent report, Short noted that she was "definite in her conviction that nothing can be accomplished without the results of the series of studies, as proposed." He also noted that Mrs. Tyler, "Urges that we hold entirely aloof from the Hays Organization and the motion picture industry. . . . Suggests that it should be understood that any member of our committee who wished to cooperate in any way with that group should first resign from ours." Short also noted that Mrs. Tyler voiced a concern that had disturbed many other national organizations working with the motion picture industry:

Told of ways in which the Hays group immediately cultivates the members of any committee appointed by the General Federation. Puts them on the Hays committees and otherwise destroys their value for the Federation. Very discouraged regarding the possibility of accomplishing anything along lines previously followed.⁸

This interview must have confirmed for Short that any form of association with the industry, especially through the Hays Office, was to be avoided. As is discussed in the next chapter, when Short discovered that a few of the researchers involved had been in contact or cooperated with the motion picture industry, this almost led to their dismissal from the research program, and certainly tainted their subsequent work in Short's eyes. His somewhat justified paranoia about the "politics" of the motion picture industry, and especially the potential dangers to his efforts from the public relations arm of the Hays Office, would remain until his death.

The National Committee for the Study of Social Values in Motion Pictures was formally incorporated in late August, 1928. Short was elected as pro tem Chairman, but his appointment as Director of the motion picture project was made retroactive to September 20th, 1927, and was to continue for an indefinite period thereafter. It was at this meeting that Seabury was also appointed as Counsel to the Committee, and the budget was approved for the second year of operations.⁹ In a document detailing the history of the events leading up to this formal organizing meeting, Short reiterated the need for his research program when he pointedly noted: "Especially since the deceptive propaganda of the war does the public demand that facts be developed by surveys and scientific study programs. Without these they distrust statements of alleged fact, from whatever sources they may come."¹⁰ It was this perspective that Short emphasized as he laid out the preliminary research program for the members of the Committee.

The formal establishment of the NCSSVMP, and Short's appointment as Director of the motion picture project, immediately raised questions about Short's personal relationship with the Payne Fund. Again these concerns seemed to stem from the fear of antagonizing the motion picture industry. In late September, Clymer wrote to Short suggesting that:

1. That the present small committee with a limited number of necessary accessions shall become a study committee of the Payne Fund and that this committee shall be renamed. This will save the title "The National Committee for the Study of Social Values in Motion Pictures" for your propaganda organization and period of work.

2. That this study group remain active as a Payne Fund Committee until such time as its findings have accrued and have been tested and your propaganda program is ready for inauguration. Then this committee to remain as a comparatively inactive body while your proposed great national propaganda group organizes and functions in that phase of your work, wholly independent of the Payne Fund.¹¹

Short immediately replied that this arrangement was "entirely practicable and natural at this time" and that it was "desirable that the Payne Study and Experimental Fund take charge at this stage and direct the work through the study period which is about to open." The strategy was obvious; the Payne Fund would gain some legitimate prestige as an important philanthropic foundation (like the Rockefeller or Carnegie Foundations) from its association with the largely academic research efforts, but it did not want to be connected with any of the subsequent "propaganda" and other legislative efforts that would result from the publication of the research findings. As Short noted, the plan was that "when the study period is ended and it has become desirable to carry on a campaign of public education and propaganda, to organize again a citizen's committee independent of The Payne Fund that would take the findings of the study period and make use of them in the interest of public welfare."¹² Thus the strategy was to separate the organizations underwriting and actually doing the studies from the apparently spontaneous citizen's group that would spring up to utilize the findings to affect social and legislative action.

The continued evolution of the relationship of the Payne Fund to the research program, and its projected aftermath, continued to occupy a considerable part of Short's time for the next six years, particularly in this early period when neither of the two parties were in total agreement as to what the correct course of action should be. On October 19, 1928, Clymer and Crandall jointly sent a memorandum to Short outlining, yet again, the nature of this relationship as they now saw it. They suggested to Short that at the upcoming meeting in Columbus, Ohio (in November) that the recommendations of "facts" to be studied should come from "people of practical experience" in dealing with the moral issues of the movies, and they specifically named such well-known industry critics and reformers as Mr. George A. Skinner, former President of Educational Films Corporation of America; Dora H. Stecker, a Cincinnati social worker and film exhibitor who had been a long time spokesperson in the anti-block-booking crusade; and Mrs. Robbins Gilman a prominent member of the General Federation of Woman's Clubs. Each of these individuals had long been a nemesis of the motion picture industry, and it is surprising that Clymer and Crandall would nominate them considering the Payne Fund's desire to avoid any confrontation with the Hays Office at this early stage.

In this same memo Clymer and Crandall finally come to the realization that they needed to correct some of Short's terminology and curb any discussion of how the final results of the studies would be applied. They noted:

we urge the complete and permanent elimination of the word "propaganda", and the substitution of "popular education". We would also eliminate from any statement of purpose at this time all reference to a possible legislative program, with the understanding that this will naturally develop in the course of time if an after all constructive efforts shall have failed. . . .

We would also urge that before any organized educational program is undertaken, the industry be given knowledge of your studies and their purposes, and urged to avail themselves of their opportunity to do the corrective work. This is not to be interpreted as indicating that we are too optimistic about the industry's response, but rather a desire that the Council [presumably the citizen's council that would spontaneously emerge after the studies had been published] shall have the advantage of having offered the industry its chance.¹³

The memo concluded with the reiteration that the committee doing the research, "if identified with the Payne Fund — will continue only as a research body and share no responsibility for the 'popular education' program." This suggestion to Short indicates that neither Clymer nor Crandall had any real conception of what Short and now Charters had in mind. Their nomination of those three specific individuals — Skinner, Stecker and Gilman — to be sources of the "facts" to be examined by the research program was completely antithetical to what Short had in mind, namely, a program of reliable social science research,

and not industry performance-based legislative research. A clash between these two perspectives was therefore inevitable, and this did occur at the first Columbus meeting of the interested parties in early October, 1928.

¹ A letter from H. M. Clymer, Director of the National Committee for the Study of Juvenile Reading (NCSJR) to Short reveals that Short had offered to contact Chief Justice William Howard Taft on behalf of the efforts of the Payne Fund to obtain backing for this endeavor. This letter also contains a fascinating paragraph in which Clymer asks Short: "Will you be thinking in any odd moments about a letter you might write to Colonel Lindbergh?" Apparently "a number of people . . . are endeavoring to show Lindbergh why he should not accept offers being made which would require a year and a half of his time in Hollywood on a motion picture. . . . The general idea is to show Lindbergh that he can serve the nation better by not affiliating with the motion pictures, which are not endorsed by 50% of our intelligent people, but rather keeping clear for a real service through youth." Clearly, at this stage the Payne Fund officers were as enthusiastic about challenging the morality in movies problem as was Short. Clymer to Short, November 3, 1927, MPRC Box 5: File Payne Fund.

² "Discussion with Mrs. Bolton" November 15, 1927, PFP, Carton 28: file 542.

³ Clymer to Bolton, January 12, 1928, MPRC, Box 5: Clymer file.

⁴ Clymer to Short, January 23, 1928, Ibid.

⁵ For more information on this aspect of the Hays Office's operations see, Herbert Shenton, The Public Relations of the Motion Picture Industry. (New York: Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America, 1931; reprint ed., New York: Jerome S. Ozer, 1971).

⁶ In a letter to Mrs. Bolton in December 1928, Short quoted Skinner as saying that "Mr. Bolton is very much afraid that your name will be brought in, in some way, as part of an attack on the motion picture industry with consequences to Mr. Bolton politically which would be ruinous." Short to Mrs. Bolton, December 15, 1928, PFP, Carton 1: file 24.

⁷ Of course, from the historian's point of view, this deliberate attempt to maintain secrecy surrounding the organization of the research program is precisely why we knew so little about the actual history of the Payne Fund Studies until the archival documents were made available.

⁸ Report from Short to file, July 6-9, 1928, PFP, Carton 28, file 542.

⁹ "Program of Business," August 22, 1928, PFP, Carton 28: file 555

¹⁰ Short, "Historical Sketch, August 16, 1928, Ibid.

¹¹ Clymer to Short, September 25, 1928, MPRC, Box 5: Clymer file.

¹² Short to Clymer, September 27, 1928, Ibid. It was also in this letter to Clymer, that Short indicated a potential for the production of films, presumably under the auspices of the Junior Extension University that Mrs. Bolton was trying to create. He noted: "If, however, this situation [the vertical integration of the motion picture industry] should be changed either by divorcing the producing and distributing agencies from theatre ownership, or by the growth in the homes in the country of a demand for pictures of a kind and grade that are not now in existence, production might be feasible." This discussion would periodically surface during the next four years. Mr. George A. Skinner, the former President of Educational Film Corporation of America, tried to enlist the Payne Fund in producing educational films, and there was obviously some discussion of this issue. See the memorandum from Crandall to Short, October 1, 1928, PFP, Carton, 28: file 555.

¹³ Clymer and Crandall to Short, October 19, 1928, MPRC, Box 5: Clymer file.