SULZER

Interview with Albert F. Sulzer, 2/ 22/ 4 0
Vice-President, Ass't General Manager,
Eastman Kodak Company

Mr. Sulzer was engaged as a chemist at Kodak Park in 1901. He was advanced in position at Kodak Park, and in 1936 he came to Kodak Office. He first met Mr. Eastman in the small, two-story building at Kodak Park which is now used by the Camera Club. In the early 'nineties this was used for a laboratory.

Mr. Eastman was slender at that time and wore a mustache. When he spoke of Mr. Eastman's appearance Mr. Sulzer drew the interviewer's attention to the profile photograph in his office of a bust which was made by a Swiss sculptor in Mr. Eastman's later days. Mr. Eastman, in 1929, promised the man he could model a bust of him but said he would not buy it. The sculptor, apparently, tried to make Mr. Eastman change his mind but George Eastman was not the sort to do that. The bust was sold to someone else, and several years ago the Eastman Kodak Company bought it from the then owner.

A nervous "vibration" ran through the plant when it was known at Kodak Park that Mr. Eastman was to visit, Mr. Sulzer said. Nothing escaped Mr. Eastman's keen eyes and, before he came, everyone was eager to see that everything was "ship-shape." He had a sharp manner of looking at a person in conversation which disarmed bluffers and encouraged honest dealing with him.

Sulzer, Albert F.

Eastman Kodak Company began attempts to produce Safety Film by the use of cellulose-acetate as far back as 1905. Samples of cellulose-acetate film were obtained from Germany which were soft and pliable. (That produced here lost its moisture in time and became brittle. Also, ~~the acid became fibrous as it aged~~.) ~~Dr~~. David Reed, formerly a pharmaceutical chemist, was assigned to Mr. Sulzer, who was then Superintendent of the Chemical Plant, to develop a better cellulose-acetate film. He obtained good results. Mr. Eastman was in Europe at the time and Kodak executives debated whether to start quantity production. Mr. Eastman, when he returned, took the sample Reed had produced, looked at it and felt it, and with the instant decisiveness, which was characteristic of him, said "Go ahead. Make it."

Nobody correct this

The path of photographic progress was strewn with discarded machinery Mr. Sulzer pointed out. Many machines were torn out to make room for new types to produce cellulose-acetate film. Safety Film did not work out as well as expected, and sometimes discarded machines were taken back from the yard, where they had been placed, and put back in the plant. There was a sort of "see-sawing" with machines for producing safety and regular film for a number of years.

When the United States became involved in the World War I, shipments of acetic anhydride and acetic acid, used in making cellulose-acetate, were cut off from the German supply sources. Fortunately, Eastman Kodak Company had a big stock of acetic anhydride, 250,000 pounds. The United States Government wanted Eastman Kodak Company to make cellulose-acetate lacquer for the canvas wings of airplanes.

Nitrocellulose had been used to shrink and waterproof the wings, but it was inflammable. Cellulose-acetate shrunk and waterproofed the wings and also protected them from fire caused by incendiary bullets.

Mr. Harry Haight, now Consultant on Industrial Relations for Eastman Kodak Company, was the company's emissary in Washington during the period the United States was in the World War. Mr. Eastman arranged, through Mr. Haight, to make the lacquer at cost ($2.50 a pound), plus 25¢ a pound profit, for the Government's use in aviation. The Government was to pay for the erection of a plant to manufacture in and also for the cost of the chemicals used. This was fair but the Government, which had grown to expect sharp dealing, thought there was "a hook" in it. The Government was cautious, and so was the Eastman Kodak Company. The Government representative in the Procurement Division said to Mr. Haight "Get started on the production of this and we'll sign the contract." Mr. Haight, on Mr. Eastman's advice, cautiously refused to recommend the starting of production until the contract was signed.

Mr. Eastman insisted that the company keep careful records of every matter connected with the production of cellulose-acetate lacquer. After the war, the Government sent accountants to check the industrial contracts made. The Government accountants "nicked off" inflated costs in the case of some companies but in the case of the Eastman Kodak Company they did not for there was no inflation and, besides, the Eastman records were so clear and systematic that any good accountant could see they were accurate and truthful.

Sulzer, Albert F.

Mr. Sulzer helped the Government to estimate its acetic acid requirements for wartime. A Government wartime plant was put up at Kingsport, Tennessee, for the dry distillation of wood to produce this material. (The plant was ~~taken over~~ purchased by the Eastman Kodak Company in 1920 and, as the Tennessee-Eastman Corporation, now produces acetate yarn, Tenite plastics and other products. About 4500 persons are now employed there.)

During the World War there was a scarcity of wood alcohol and of acetone needed in the manufacture of nitrate-base film. The Government allocated the use of chemicals from Washington. Eastman Kodak Company had a stock on hand but needed permission from the Government to buy more. Mr. Rudolph Speth, a Kodak accountant, went down to Kodak Park and compiled facts and figures to convince the Government the company should have enough of those chemicals to produce film on our usual production schedule. Mr. Speth, Mr. James S. Haste and Mr. Sulzer prepared a letter of two or three pages which stated the company's needs and they showed it to Mr. Eastman. He looked at it and grasped the gist quickly. His comment was disappointing after the hard work its framers had put upon it. "They'll never read this at Washington," he said, "There's too many things going on for them to put much time on any one letter." Mr. Eastman then dictated a letter to Miss Whitney of one two or three paragraphs which put the essentials of the matter on one page. The other men envied his power of succinct expression--through which permission was promptly obtained to buy the liquid solvents.

Mr. Sulzer remembered an accident which happened about 1910 when he was Superintendent of the Chemical Plant. A half dozen dishes of silver-nitrate, in process of cooling, fell through the wooden shelves upon which they stood and spilled 500 or 600 ounces of the valuable material on the asphalt floor. (Acid had been spilled on the wooden shelf, and weakened it.) Mr. Eastman called Mr. Sulzer to his office to ask how it had happened. Although Mr. Eastman was not disagreeable, he questioned Mr. Sulzer for about an hour about details of operation in the plant. He wanted to find out if anyone had been careless, and he wanted Mr. Sulzer to understand the silver-purification process was an important operation. Then he quietly said "Now go back and see that it doesn't happen again." There was no stainless steel in those days, and other metals would be eaten through by acid more quickly than wood. So Mr. Sulzer had a new wooden shelf put up and had it inspected more carefully than previously.

Mr. Sulzer was told many years ago that Mr. Eastman obtained his idea of large research laboratories for Eastman Kodak Company on a European visit in the early nineteen-hundreds. He was in Germany and talked to the head of a chemical industry there. The man asked Mr. Eastman how many researchers he had. There were many in the German plant and Mr. Eastman hated to admit he had only a handful in his own laboratories. So he determined that Eastman Kodak Company should have facilities which he, and America, could be proud of. In 1912 he obtained the services of Dr. C.E.K. Mees who founded and now heads the Eastman Kodak Company Research Laboratories located at Kodak Park.

Mees

Mr. Eastman had ideas about "social security" before it became a popular phrase, even though the problem of employment and wages in his own industry was not a serious one. His industry was new and expanding and so had always been able to pay wages equal to, or higher than, those prevailing. Eastman Kodak Company, with seventeen other Rochester concerns, in 1930, formulated a plan of unemployment insurance, which a number of concerns--including Eastman Kodak Company--have actually put in effect. Mr. Eastman was interested in Kodak employees, then in Rochester workers, and then in workers all over the nation. He thought if Rochester had a workable plan it might guide the legislators in Albany--and doubtless it had some effect.

George Eastman's ability to make rapid decisions saved time, and thereby hastened progress of the industry and increased stockholders' profits. At intervals of years when facilities became insufficient, Kodak Park undertook new building programs. The growth of motion-pictures, for example, was so rapid that facilities to supply that industry could not be gauged accurately for many years in advance. When a new building was proposed, Mr. Eastman made rapid decisions. These decisions were not rapid because he made guesses, but because--through his great experience--he grasped the facts of the situation more rapidly than other persons and then make a prompt decision. He might look over final plans and requisitions, ask for necessary explanations, and --within an hour--sign requisitions totaling five or ten million dollars.

Mr. Eastman did not have the visible traits of "glamour" in the sense of personal impressiveness or "magnetism." In fact, he was a shy person with little facility in "small talk" or easy sociability.

There was an air of great intelligence about Mr. Eastman. He seemed always level-headed and, in spite of active and diverse interests, he never "flew off at a tangent." Mr. Sulzer paid him a high tribute when he said "What Mr. Eastman had in his mind captured the imagination."