

WHERE WE CAME FROM

During the Great Depression, when as many as 25 percent of American workers were unemployed, writers in Hollywood found their power. The movie business was in turmoil. In March 1933, studio leaders announced a short-term wage cut of 50 percent for anyone earning more than \$50 a week and a 25 percent cut for anyone earning less than that.

But a few weeks earlier, 10 writers had begun laying the groundwork for the Screen Writers Guild, which would eventually become what has been called “the most politically conscious and active trade union in Hollywood.”*

The salary cuts made them even more determined to organize other writers and make themselves into a force to which the studios would have to pay attention.



Hollywood Boulevard at Cherokee (1998). The location of the first Guild headquarters in 1933. PHOTO BY SCOTT ROEBEN

1912

The prehistory of the Writers Guild of America can be traced back to 1912. At that time, the Authors Guild was first organized as a protective association for writers of books, short stories, articles, etc. Subsequently, writers of drama formed a Dramatists Guild and joined forces with the Authors Guild, which then became the Authors League. In 1921, the development of another medium of expression for writers—the motion picture industry—brought about the formation of the Screen Writers Guild, which also became a branch of the Authors League.

From 1921 to 1933, the Screen Writers Guild operated more as a club than a guild.



Frances Marion (seated on sofa with dog), the most prolific writer in Hollywood history, hosts a party for stars and writers, 1920s.

It included a clubhouse for social activities, mounted plays, and exchanged professional information. However, the need for some kind of action for the protection of writers' rights and economic conditions became apparent during this period.

* From *The Inquisition of Hollywood* by Larry Ceplair and Steven Englund. The book goes on to say: “It served as the prototype for other talent guilds; its members were the backbone of every other political and social organization in the film community and three times within the first decade and a half of its existence it seriously shook the studio front offices.”

1933

Writers got organized in 1933, and they got serious. Within a few months, membership grew from just a handful to several hundred screenwriters. In 1937 the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the National Labor Relations Act, and the Screen Writers Guild called for an election. By 1939, they began collective bargaining with motion picture producers. The first contract, signed in 1941, brought protection for writers' onscreen credits.



Screenwriter John Lee Mahin (left) working with star Jean Harlow and director Victor Fleming on the set of *Red Dust*, 1933.

WORLD WAR II

Most organizational efforts were postponed during World War II. At the same time the Screen Writers Guild went through a period of internal political struggle. By 1949, the disparate factions of the Guild—screenwriters, television writers, radio writers, and others—began to unite.



Creator-writer Carl Reiner (seated) and "writing staff" of *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, 1960s.

1954

Finally, in 1954, the factions came together in the Writers Guild of America, west and East headquartered in Los Angeles and New York, respectively.

GUILD STRUCTURE

WGAwest is run by a Board of Directors of 16 members under a president, a vice president, and a secretary-treasurer.



Current WGA West headquarters at 7000 West Third Street in Los Angeles.

PHOTO BY PATRICIA ELIOT TOBIAS