

Walter J. Klein Company, Ltd. ^[1]

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by Kristina Bell, 2012

The Walter J. Klein Company Ltd. was an award-winning [advertising](#) ^[2] agency in [Charlotte](#) ^[3], N.C. They created over 1000 sponsored films and advertisements over 50 years for various branches of federal and state governments, a large number of professional and trade associations, and such industry giants as AT&T, Chevron, GE, Cargill, IBM, Sony, P&G, Pfizer, Johnson & Johnson, Aetna, Pepsico, Ford Motor, Merck, Johnson Controls, Delta Airlines, Caterpillar and DuPont. The company also worked with Governor [Kerr Scott](#) ^[4] and writer Harry Golden.

Walter Klein, born October 25, 1923 in Newark, New Jersey, began his career in advertising as a staff member at [The Charlotte Observer](#) ^[5] in 1946, after serving in [World War II](#) ^[6]. In August of 1948, Klein founded the Walter J. Klein Company Ltd., becoming one of the state's largest full-service advertising agencies with \$1 million in annual billings. Walter Klein, who was self-taught in film, switched entirely to TV production and distribution.

Under Klein's direction, the company excelled at commercial production for some of America's most prominent industries and organizations during a pivotal time for broadcast media. They completed over 1000 films for large national corporations and won numerous awards. Walter Klein commented on the reasons for their success: "TV wasn't even live then--no cameras, no studios, no production staffs. Stations were popping up on the air without original material. They leaned on industrial, school and old Hollywood films to fill the long hours given them by the FCC. We gave stations all over the U.S. exactly what they wanted and they ate it up. They showed our films at prime time and borderline time, as fast as we could produce them." The company produced the first commercial that was shown in Charlotte, broadcast on WBTV the night before the station officially signed on. The company took a unique approach to sponsorship: instead of gathering sponsors before a film is conceptualized, often it would pitch a film to several companies and let them sponsor the film on a first-serve basis. Walter Klein stated, "Our success came from our legal guarantees of millions of dollars in free [television](#) ^[7] time that went with our one-time production fees. Once we proved we could do just that, giant corporations lined up to buy our services. ... Competitive production houses blossomed but only our firm gave away the television time guarantee. Our competitors thought we were out of our minds and would not touch our specialty."

Walter Klein pointed out they should be called "sponsored films." Klein's 1976 book, *The Sponsored Film*, defines sponsored films as "a motion picture paid for by an industry or person." In 1994, The Walter J. Klein Company, Ltd. was sold to former baseball star Denny McLain. Klein remained an influential figure in the worlds of advertising, public relations and filmmaking for the duration of his career. In 1999, Klein donated a film and videotape archive worth an estimated twenty-five million dollars to the [University of North Carolina School of the Arts](#) ^[8] ^[9].

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Photograph of Walter J. Klein and his wife at an advertising awards ceremony in New York City. Image from the personal collection of Walter J. Klein.

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