

Walter Theodor Selsted 1921–2011



Walter Selsted was born and raised in Berkeley, California. He passed away after a short illness in Walnut Creek, California where he had lived since 1995. Early in his life, Walter showed his love for electronics and knew he wanted to be an electrical engineer. When he was 14 years old, he was already building radios and power amplifiers. In 1944 he graduated with honors from the University of California in Berkeley with a Bachelor of Science degree in electrical engineering. Upon graduating, he was recruited to be a research engineer with the Manhattan District Project, National Defense Research Committee, at the University of California Radiation Laboratory. He worked there until the end of WWII.

Walter then joined Pacific Broadcasting Company as chief engineer. It was a new company formed to design, construct, and manage a new FM station that would become only the fifth FM station in the San Francisco Bay Area. He helped pick the site for the tower, selected the equipment, managed construction, and trained the staff.

While working at the FM station, Walter met Alexander M. Poniatoff, who was founder and president of Ampex Corporation in San Carlos, California, and they became good friends. During the war, Ampex had been successful at manufacturing small motors and generators for military applications. With the war over, Poniatoff felt he had to redirect his company into a new line of business. He

asked Walter Selsted to help decide the new direction. In late 1946, the decision was made, and Ampex went into the professional tape recorder business. Although, Walter was still with the FM station, he often helped Ampex as a consultant. In 1949, he officially joined the company and soon afterward became chief engineer.

He helped Ampex become the world leader in the use of magnetic tape recorders for audio, instrumentation, and video recording applications. He led in the development of recorders where some had multiple tracks, some had recording capability to DC (0 Hz), others to the megahertz range, and still others for high-shock environments such as bomb blasts. Walter also was a major contributor to the development of Ampex's video tape recorder that was introduced to the world in 1956. His greatest asset was his ability to always find a simple way to solve a problem. He was also an optimist about designing something that had never been done before. In many ways, Ampex's early success was due to Walter's unique abilities. In 1954, Walter Selsted was named corporate director of research, and in 1959, vice president of Ampex in addition to corporate director of research.

In 1963 he left Ampex and joined Hewlett Packard where he became manager of engineering of the Mt. View Division. He led an analog team that developed a new product line of magnetic tape instrumentation recorders to complement other HP products. He also had a digital team that developed magnetic tape recorders for computer mass memory applications.

In 1966, Walter left Hewlett Packard to become a consultant to a wide range of companies, including some small recorder companies that had been founded to compete in what was then the growing market for magnetic tape recording. He had a very successful business for the next 20 years of his working career.

Walter's wife of 61 years, LaVerne, passed away only five months before his death. She suffered from Parkinson's disease. Walt cared for her for all but the last six months of her life. They are survived by three children, Michael, Kathie Hetherington, and Richard, and their families.

Walter Selsted is listed as inventor on 26 U.S. patents plus numerous foreign patents related to the same inventions. He was a Fellow of the IRE (now the IEEE), a Fellow of the AES, a founding member of the San Francisco Chapter of the AES, AES Western vice president in 1959/1960, AES governor in 1961/1962, and a member of the AAAS. Walter was author of numerous technical papers.

John Leslie