The Moving Image Collection at Bishop Museum Archives

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MOTION PICTURE, BROADCASTING
AND RECORDED SOUND DIVISION

by DeSoto Brown, Archivist

Bishop Museum Archives is a department of the Bernice P. Bishop Museum of Honolulu, Hawaii. Contained in the Archives are the following collections: art, photographs, manuscripts, maps, audio recordings, and moving images. The Archives is open to the public five days a week. Copies of most of the aforementioned items can be ordered by researchers and commercial users unless the Museum does not have clear rights to the material, or the donor has restricted such use.

Bishop Museum's collection policy takes in the geographical area of the Pacific Ocean. This excludes Asia, Australia, and the Americas, and instead focuses on the islands of Polynesia, Micronesia, and Melanesia.

The moving image collection is an electic one, but in terms of subjects, its contents do fall within the larger scope of the Museum's goals. Films have come from a variety of sources, both professional and amateur. Commercial travelogues, home movies, television newsfilm, and expedition footage shot by Museum personnel are included. In age, films date from 1924 up through the 1980s, and formats are 8mm, 16mm, and 35mm. Only a very small portion of the collection is nitrate; there once was more, particularly movies shot by traveling Museum staff in the 1920s and '30s, but by the 1970s nearly all of this had been discarded due to deterioration. The moving image collection, such as it was, was not accessible to researchers or under the care of any one person until the creation of a full time staff position for this role in 1987. However, this staff member (now one of eight in the department) has always had to fulfill general archival duties in addition to specific moving image work.

Preservation of this collection involves 24-hour climate control of two storage vaults. Both are kept at approximately 60 degrees F and 40% RH through air conditioners and dehumidifiers; obviously, heating is not necessary. Hawaii's warm and humid climate is unfortunately not good for movies, and vinegar syndrome is very common in safety film. It is also thought that most nitrate has deteriorated beyond hope by now, but surprisingly, a cache of nitrate in nearly perfect condition was received from a private collector in 1990. This material, mostly a series of professional theatrical travelogues from the 1930s, is a highlight of the

collection and is being used for public outreach showings this year.

On a yearly basis, selected films are copied onto new film stock of the same width as the original (including separate soundtracks, if present) and then onto one inch, 3/4 inch, and VHS videotapes for public access and copying. VHS cassette copies are used for viewing by the public in the Archives' reference room; 3/4 inch copies are used for duplicating at an outside facility when patrons order copies; and the one inch tapes are masters. While video duplicating is readily available in Honolulu, film duplicating is not and all such work, whether for preservation or for a customer order, must be sent to California. Film Technology Co. of Hollywood has done most of the preservation work. Films and tapes are not loaned out; either a tape copy is purchased, or a viewing copy is used for outreach programming by a Museum staff person. Original films are not available for viewing by patrons, only tape copies.

Funding for preservation has come exclusively from outside sources. A few donations have been received from individuals or organizations, but costs are such that government funding has been the main source of support. This mainly has come from the Hawaii State Foundation on Culture and the Arts; the purchase of viewing equipment was funded by an agency of the University of Hawaii. Grant proposals to other agencies for specific preservation projects have been turned down; however, no federal bodies have been approached. With over 1,000 titles in the collection, and only about 60 available for viewing, the slow pace of copying is apparent. Cost is the main factor in this process.

Decisions on which films to copy have been based on a perceived interest in the subject matter by potential and actual collection users, the historical importance of the subject matter, and an honest desire to have footage available which may have the potential of commercial use. Use fees are charged for the re-use of any material in any production, and in common with the rest of the museum world, such monetary returns are undeniably important to Bishop Museum. Footage that pertains to events of upcoming interest (the fiftieth anniversary of the Pearl Harbor attack, for example) will always be under consideration for access. Much of Bishop Museum's moving image collection is assumed to be unique, and it is unlikely that copies of many items are to be found in other archives. Thus the preservation of any of these films is unlikely to be duplicated elsewhere.

Films whose copyright status is unclear can be viewed in the Archives, but are not duplicated for purchase. Such work will only be done if a patron can produce written documentation that a copyright holder has given permission for such copying. Additionally, a donor can restrict duplicating at the time films are given to the Museum, but these restrictions are discouraged. As most of the films in the collection were not copyrighted in the first place, and have been given by their creators or corporate sponsors, all rights are turned over to Bishop Museum through the

standard Deed of Gift form which all Museum donors sign.

Interested parties may find out about the moving image collection through a number of methods. Bishop Museum's own literature mentions it, and it is listed in both "Hawaii Production Guide" (published by the state of Hawaii) and the international "Footage 89 / 91". These publications mainly serve professional users. Local researchers will one day be able to search the in-house moving image computer database, but it is not yet accessible to them. This database is in MARC format but only contains approximately 300 records (out of the over 1,000 which will be necessary.) The eventual goal is for it to be on-line with the University of Hawaii's CARL database, currently accessible via modem and in University facilities. (Other Bishop Museum Archives records are in CARL now.) As the state of Hawaii has residents on seven islands, it is important to be able to serve those who cannot easily travel to Bishop Museum itself. Patrons who do visit the Archives today can use a printed guide of films available on tape; this lists material by subject.

The management and growth of the moving image collection at Bishop Museum Archives has been successful in the last five years; it has gone from inaccessibility to being a recognized resource for researchers and commercial users. However, future needs will clearly include assured sources of funding (especially for preservation), larger storage facilities with climate controls in line with recent recommended standards (especially lower humidity), and increased cataloguing. While the material in this collection is mostly unique, its needs are the same as those found wherever organizations or institutions are struggling to preserve small or large amounts of America's moving image heritage.