

JAN 27 1993



P.O. BOX 900, MAIN ST., BUCKSPORT, ME 04416-0900

Northeast Historic Film would like to bring to the National Film Preservation Board study on the current state of film preservation a statement concerning the significance, and the imperilled state, of the nontheatrical film record.

This archives was established to care for regional films. It is an uphill, almost hopeless, battle. "Local history" and "amateur" weigh heavily in some circles as pejorative. Funding support for regional film preservation is virtually nonexistent.

We believe that local and regional moving images record and interpret the real issues and real lives of the passing century. From these moving images and sound posterity will understand the era--its life and its art. James Agee wrote, "since intimate specification is even less dispensable to most good art than generalization, I believe that most of the best films, like most of the best of any other art, are and would always have to be developed locally, and primarily for local audiences." (The Nation, 24 Nov 1945).

While Agee's is an extreme statement, we'll take the opportunity to stand up for these corners of the national film preservation picture:

1. There are few advocates when the production and exhibition canon is left behind. For example, so-called "our town pictures," often made by itinerant exhibitors, have next to no literature legitimizing the genre. Their valuable look into our nation's democratization of film language and technique, as well as community life, awaits discovery and preservation. Many films were not copyrighted; they were often shot on reversal stock and rarely duplicated.

2. Television newsfilm, a virtually unparalleled source of the twentieth-century documentary record, is not only a crushing curatorial burden for the archives which choose to take it on, but it is, we feel, unwisely excluded from this survey. Would you throw out the country's newspapers? TV documentaries, public affairs and arts programs produced on film and tape make up more than a third of this archives' collections.

3. Home movies are the best surviving record of everyday life in this century: a woman and her daughter dance the twist in their living room; a child trains a pair of oxen; uniformed soldiers board a train on their way to war; brothers haul in herring; students cut and haul ice to refrigerate their school's food. These are examples of material preserved at our archives. Ours is a minuscule fraction of the material in the field. What

happens to the rest? 16 mm. and 8 mm. projectors were put away for the last time in the 1970s; the reels were retrieved one last time for transfer to videotape in the mid 1980s. And no sooner is it on VHS videotape than the original film hits the garbage can. Why should we care? Because the people's history happens in every corner of every town in the country.

Amateur footage--material which was not produced primarily for a commercial market--is not necessarily shot by amateurs. Our own collections' amateur works reflect a representation of 35mm. and 16mm. footage by professional cinematographers--work not shot in the line of duty, but filmed on their own time, with the people and locations they selected out of love and familiarity.

Regional Archiving

As an organizing principle, regionalism seems to serve this archives relatively well. If there were more such institutions, perhaps the overall preservation picture would be better. We join a number of state and local archives taking on similar missions, usually within the shelter of a larger institution (e.g., county library, state historical society). There are few independent nonprofit moving image archives. Here's why: state funds are not available. The few federal grant programs provide no operating funds. Community and arts foundations provide project funding only.

Northeast Historic Film's establishment and operation is made possible by the continuing commitment of our board of directors which includes archivists, people with administrative expertise, and business people. Operating funds come from related activities including videotape sales. Without systemic change in the funding picture we would not recommend this route to another incipient archives. But regional archives are growing despite difficulties because the value of the material is becoming ever more apparent.

Three Issues for the Survey

1. The Board would reflect a more comprehensive view of the field with an advocate for nontheatrical film preservation.
2. We perceive a need for a broader regrant program for film preservation without the arts strictures imposed by the AFI/NEA Preservation program as it is currently construed.

3. Large quantities of unpreserved nitrate are housed in the larger archives and stock footage houses which is of low priority for the holders, but of interest to regional institutions. This includes newsreel stories, actuality material, and some feature films by small production companies. Occasionally, cooperative projects are formed to preserve delimited titles. But most of the film will rot in peace.

What procedures might be developed to assist larger-scale preservation projects driven by those who are not necessarily the copyright or physical material holders? Some possibilities include economic leverage through public/private partnerships, and flexibility in licensing for reuse to help develop endowments for preservation funding.

Institutional Background

Northeast Historic Film is a nonprofit, independent moving image archives dedicated to preserving and making accessible film and video relevant to the lives of northern New England people. The archives focuses on a three-state area: Maine, New Hampshire and Vermont. While the organization is regionally based, the 300 dues-paying members represent 30 states.

The organization was founded in 1986. Since that time NHF has had signal success in its partnership with the public and with other preservation, outreach and grantmaking organizations in developing regional moving-image archiving north of Boston.

NHF has attempted to learn and communicate about the significance of the decentralized and marginalized film record. The archives were founded as a result of a nationally-recognized archival film preservation and outreach project (1985) based on a 1930 film about the Maine logging industry, a project which received the highest honor of the American Association for State and Local History. It was funded by the Maine Humanities Council with Champion International Corporation.

NHF staff members have been involved with their peers in the development of the understanding of regional nontheatrical film, participating in the first Fast Rewind: The Archaeology of Moving Images conference (1989, Rochester, New York) in a home movies panel; chairing the first amateur footage panel at the annual conference of the Association of Moving Image Archivists (1991, NY); and helping to found the AMIA amateur film/video working group, a gathering point for large and small archives interested in nontheatrical moving images. The executive director, David Weiss, serves on Maine's Historical Records Advisory Board, and on the [University of Maine] Chancellor's Committee on Information Technology.

Frustrated by the lack of available information on the history of exhibition, NHF has recently focused on how movies were seen in a project called "Going to the Movies," funded between 1990 and 1992 by the Maine Humanities Council and NEH. Through a survey of movie theaters in Maine, New Hampshire and Vermont, (more than 1,000 of them), the organization has expanded the knowledge of exhibition, distribution and local production. Discussion with film scholars and archivists around the country and in Canada have led to a more evolved understanding of the significance of small, local theaters both to their own local audiences and to the national network of exhibition.

The past year saw significant milestones, including the purchase of a permanent home in Bucksport, Maine. The archives now owns a two-story brick building, built in 1916 as a cinema, the Alamo Theatre. In December 1992 NHF was awarded a highly competitive National Trust for Historic Preservation grant, recognizing the architectural and cultural significance of the building, and permitting progress on a planning program for the structure.

Also in 1992 Karan Sheldon, one of NHF's cofounders, was elected a charter member (treasurer) of the seven-member board of the Association of Moving Images Archivists, the North American organization of individuals concerned with film and video preservation.

Summary of Film Collections

Northeast Historic Film's Collections include 3 million feet of film, primarily 16 mm. camera original, mostly black and white. In addition, the archives holds several thousand hours of videotape (2-inch, 3/4-inch, half-inch open reel and VHS).

As a regional archives, NHF concentrates on material shot in northern New England, across all genres, including industrial, dramatic, amateur, newsreel and television news film. The archives' collections criteria are recorded in our Operational Policies:

2. **CRITERIA FOR ACCEPTANCE OF FILMS/TAPES.** High priority will be given to film/videotape having the characteristics listed below, although these measures will not be mechanically applied in determining whether or not to accept footage. Generally film/tape meeting many of these criteria will have high priority for acceptance; footage answering few or none will have low priority.
 - a. Related to the northern New England region through location, subject, maker, source or other connection.
 - b. Unique, or inaccessible to the northern New England population.
 - c. Otherwise likely to be damaged or lost.
 - d. As close to the original film or tape generation as possible and is of good picture quality.
 - e. Well-documented, and where possible accompanied by related non-motion picture references such as notes, still photographs, audiotapes.

Low priority will be assigned to widely distributed finished films/tapes, to material preserved elsewhere and to film/tape requiring donor copies and/or severely restrictive conditions

Specific criteria for home movies were developed in 1989 and offered for discussion at the Fast Rewind conference:

The NHF collection contains amateur material from 1916 on, with particular strength in 16mm. b&w film from the 1930s. We look for amateur film with these characteristics:

1. A single creator covering a long span of time, particularly if the material has been or could be annotated by the creator and/or close family members. An example of this is the Meyer Davis Collection, shot by the band leader between 1926 and 1974. We actively seek annotation, that is background on the material, not only for identification of content, but also how it came to be shot, on what equipment, and also how and when it was shown.
2. A single community documented by multiple creators offering a varied perspective, such as several portraits of a town called Cherryfield, population 900.
3. Rare ethnic or cultural coverage.
4. Business, crafts or professions covered in depth, and film that reflects the creators' vocation.
5. The work of an individual with ties to the region whose home movies can be annotated, and whose moving image work might not otherwise be archived.

Conditions

The archives has two climate-controlled vaults totalling 3,200 cubic feet at 60 degrees, 50% r.h. The archives has a staff of three who share curatorial and administrative responsibilities, along with a transitory population of interns and volunteers.

NHF has 5,000 computer records describing individual stories at the item level. The software is Pro-Cite, a full-text searchable flat-file database developed by Personal Bibliographic Software, Inc. for bibliographic work. Henry Mattoon of the National Moving Image Database worked with Crystal Hall, a student completing her MLS, to define a map for Pro-Cite fields that would be MARC compatible. Hall created 150 collections-level records using these fields. About 2,000 records from a television newsfilm collection (the Bangor Historical Society/WABI Collection) were included in Footage 91, Rick Prelinger's CD-ROM.

Archival researchers are primarily off-site. Approximately 60 researchers worked with the archives in 1992. Usually a researcher will telephone with a question; a computer search will be done; and a 3/4" or VHS reference copy is sent to the researcher under a one-week loan. The archives licenses stock footage where the rights are available.



David S. Weiss, executive director



Karan Sheldon, vice president

January 21, 1993