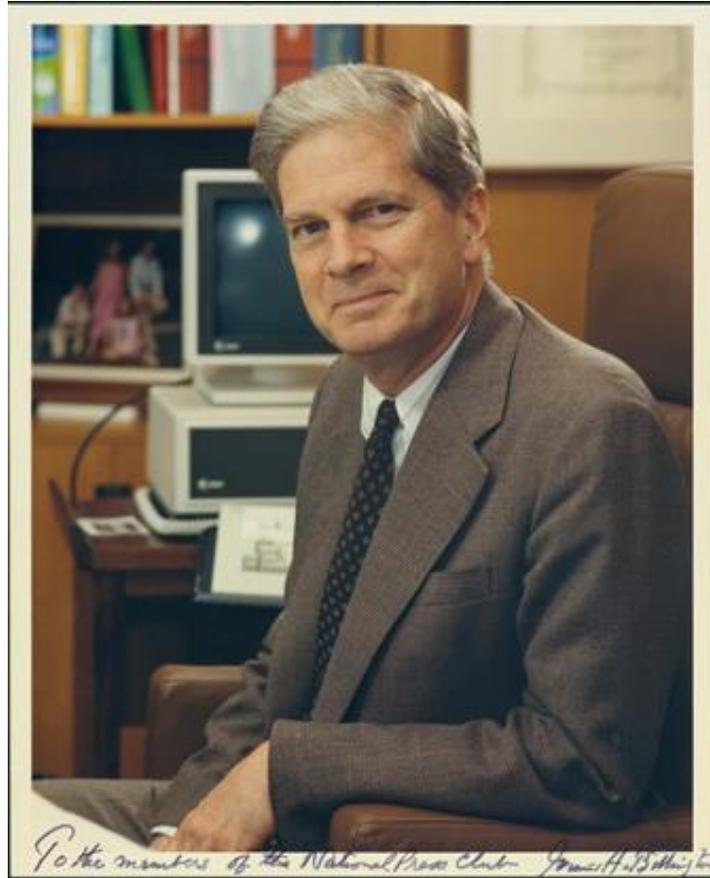


James H. Billington at the National Press Club, January 12, 1989



James H. Billington, ca. 1989. National Press Club Archives

Librarian of Congress James H. Billington (b. 1929) delivered a luncheon talk entitled “Preserving and Sharing Our National Memory” at the National Press Club on January 12, 1989. He had been nominated by President Ronald Reagan to be the nation’s 13th Librarian of Congress on April 17, 1987, then sworn in by Chief Justice William H. Rehnquist on September 14, 1987, after the Senate had voted in favor of his confirmation.

Billington formerly had been a professor of history at Harvard and Princeton, the chairman of the Board of Foreign Scholarships with authority over the worldwide Fulbright academic exchange program, and the director of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. An authority on Russian history and culture, and on intellectual revolutionary elites in modern Europe, Billington authored two books nominated for National Book Awards, *The Icon and the Axe: An Interpretive History of*

Russian Culture (1966) and *Fire in the Minds of Men: Origins of the Revolutionary Faith* (1980). As Librarian of Congress during a period of rapid developments in digital technology, Billington created and oversaw projects that employed that technology to expand the Library's core functions to include, in his words, "for the first time an educational as well as a government and scholarly service component."

In January 1988, Billington initiated a year-long review to determine, as he stated in the Press Club talk, "how is this national library to serve the nation?" The resultant vision Billington conveyed to the press of the library's mission "at the dawn of the information age" emphasized both a foray into new areas of service made possible by digitization and an adherence to longstanding core beliefs about the place in American life for "a universal library on Capitol Hill."

The "Jeffersonian Concept of Universality"

The Library of Congress was established in 1800 not as a national or universal library, but one created to serve the nation's legislature as it moved to the new capital city of Washington, then a backwater town lacking the sorts of books Congress would need to properly conduct its business. Although the Library soon expanded its clientele to include the President, Vice President, Secretaries of State, Treasury, War, and Navy, the Attorney General, and Supreme Court justices, its early holdings were limited for the most part to books dealing with law, politics, history, and geography.

In August 1814, during the War of 1812, British forces invaded Washington and burned the Capitol building. With the Library's nascent collection destroyed, ex-President Thomas Jefferson offered to sell Congress his own library, considered to be the finest collection of books in the U.S. Jefferson wrote to his friend, publisher Samuel H. Smith, requesting him to submit a catalog of the collection to Congress's Joint Committee on the Library. "I have been fifty years making it, and have spared no pains, opportunity or expense to make it what it is," Jefferson noted as he described the collection's great breadth of subject matter, far exceeding that of the collection lost in the fire.

Jefferson related that during his residency in Paris, "I devoted every afternoon I was disengaged, for a summer or two, in examining all the principal bookstores, turning over every book with my own hand, and putting by everything which related to America, and indeed whatever was rare and valuable in every science." He kept the principal booksellers elsewhere in Europe on alert for works on America not available in Paris and claimed that in his fifty years of collecting, he bought all the books he could find that were "related to the duties of those in the high concerns of the nation." He concluded his account with words that have provided later Librarians of Congress with a justification for acquisition principles that aimed for an encyclopedic and comprehensive reach: "I do not know that it contains any branch of science which Congress would wish to exclude from their collection; there is in fact no subject to which a member of Congress may not have occasion to refer."

Billington has written that the “Jeffersonian concept of universality” expressed in that statement, “became the rationale for the increasingly comprehensive collecting policies of the Library of Congress.” Indeed, Ainsworth Rand Spofford, the Librarian of Congress often cited as responsible for the Library’s shift from a legislative library to a more universal one, repeated Jefferson’s rationale in his 1874 annual report to Congress, when he maintained that in the Library’s collection, “there is almost no work, within the vast range of literature and science, which may not at some time prove useful to the legislature of a great nation in their manifold and responsible duties.”

Four years earlier, Spofford had induced Congress to pass a new copyright law making it a requirement for two copies of materials registered for copyright to be deposited in the Library’s collections. In the 1874 report, Spofford observed that because of the new law, there “could be secured for permanent preservation . . . a substantially complete record of the progress of American literature and science, not only in the higher fields of creative intellect, but in the direction of educational, musical, and artistic publications.” Billington celebrated this development, commenting that the new copyright law “ensured that the Library of Congress would become the archives of American creativity.”

Spofford went on to make the case to Congress that with the Library’s expansion to a near comprehensive collection, public access should rightly follow. “As the only library which contains even an approximate collection of the entire product of the American mind, as found in books, it may well be considered,” he suggested, “whether it is not due to the people that its stores should be made as accessible as is consistent with its safety and preservation.” Spofford used the issue of public access to try to convince Congress to fund the construction of a separate building for the growing collection. He argued that “in a Republic which rests upon the popular intelligence, and one of whose chiefest glories is its literature, a great national collection of books, while formed primarily for the uses of the legislative and judicial branches of the Government, ought to be utilized by a far wider circle of readers.” In describing the Library as having the potential to function “as a means of education and enlightenment” for the “public intelligence,” Spofford established a precedent for the educational service component that Billington would pursue using new technology.

With the support of Senators Justin S. Morrill of Vermont and Daniel W. Voorhees of Indiana, a separate building did open on November 1, 1897, accessible to visitors when Congress was not in session. The architecture critic Montgomery Schuyler called the Library’s magnificent new home a “national possession, an example of a great public building monumentally conceived, faithfully built, and worthily adorned.”

American Memory

Coming into office at a time when digital technologies offered new possibilities for preserving and transmitting collection materials, Billington began to direct the Library’s

energies toward programs that would further the goals of public access that Spofford and his successors expressed. During the year-long review process that took place in 1988, Billington and the Library's newly formed Management and Planning Committee convened ten regional forums that involved some 10,000 participants, including many librarians who offered suggestions for the Library's future service agenda. Billington acknowledged that "the idea of sharing Library of Congress collections electronically with the broader library world emerged" from these meetings.

At an American Library Association (ALA) conference forum in July, members requested that the Library "provide full-text, not merely bibliographic, access" to materials in its vast collections and to "use CD-ROM rather than microfilm for large-scale preservation." During a September visit with business leaders and philanthropists in San Francisco, Billington himself conjured up a vision of "laser jukeboxes" that might in the future give readers across the country access to materials, such as presidential papers, that until then could be studied only by scholars visiting the Library in Washington. At the culmination of the year-long study, Billington publicly announced at the Press Club talk on January 12 and to the ALA Council that same week the Library's initial initiative—called the American Memory Project—created to make digitized versions of selected materials accessible to the general public. Billington heralded the new project as an attempt at "getting the champagne into our own wine cellar, then out of the bottle and into everybody's six-pack."

American Memory bore the same name as a widely publicized congressionally mandated report issued in 1987 by the National Endowment of the Humanities (NEH) and authored by its chairperson, Lynne V. Cheney. That report called attention to a survey funded by NEH that revealed a lack of basic historical and cultural knowledge among students in U.S. elementary and secondary schools. "Knowledge of the ideas that have molded us and the ideals that have mattered to us functions as a kind of civic glue," Cheney wrote. "A system of education that fails to nurture memory of the past denies its students a great deal: the satisfactions of mature thought, an attachment to abiding concerns, a perspective on human existence."

Cheney blamed schools for failing "to transmit knowledge of the past to upcoming generations" while focusing instead on fostering learning skills in exercises bereft of substantive content. "Instead of preserving the past," she charged, "they more often disregard it, sometimes in the name of 'progress'—the idea that today has little to learn from yesterday." She quoted the Nobel prize-winning poet Czeslaw Milosz, who lamented that a "refusal to remember" had become a "primary characteristic of our age." In the Press Club talk, Billington similarly spoke critically of "an age that is present-minded, spectator-oriented, and self-indulgent."

In the earlier 1984 report to Congress, "Books in Our Future," prepared by the Library's Center for the Book, Billington's predecessor as Librarian of Congress, historian Daniel J. Boorstin—who himself later contributed to Cheney's report—had cautioned about an alarming rise of illiteracy and aliteracy—"those who can read but rarely do," as Billington put it when he called attention to Boorstin's concerns in the

Press Club talk. Billington in addition warned of “the tendency even among educated people toward a passive spectatorism and self-indulgent cynicism, which undermines the active intellect and hopeful spirit which are the two indispensable items to a healthy and improving democracy.” A self-described “cultural conservative who believes in traditional values,” Billington saw books, he told a Friends of Libraries audience in 1988, as “a moral antidote, if you like, to the creeping passivity, parochialism and shortened attention spans of our video culture.”

In an address delivered at Cleveland State University in May 1989 entitled “Libraries, Democracy, and the Future,” Billington charted a historical trajectory that credited the rise in modern times of a printed book culture and journalistic culture with having fostered the spread of such institutions—state universities, public school systems, daily newspapers, and libraries—that historically have been conducive to mass literacy and democracy. These institutions, he believed, “helped bring the diverse strands of our country to sharing a common, public culture.” In recent times, however, he contended that a powerful “electronic culture” endangered the survival of authentic participatory democracy. “Television favors image, incantation, and emotion,” Billington stated, “unlike the previous print culture, which favors cumulative, sequential thought.” To survive politically, democracy in America required “the kind of active mind that print culture produces and television spectator passivity does not.” Books, he offered, “foster freedom with dignity; they convince, not coerce.”

Television “is returning us to our animal nature,” he reiterated at a public forum in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. “It is the most profound and difficult problem facing us,” he warned. “I’m scared for the future of the nation.”

Billington’s rhetoric about the pernicious power of television was reminiscent of the portentous language used by the poet and writer Archibald MacLeish, who became the Librarian of Congress in 1939 as war engulfed Europe. Aroused by the threat that ignorance and passivity posed to democracy during a time of imminent national peril, MacLeish, in an address entitled “Libraries and the Contemporary Crisis,” issued a stark challenge to those charged with administering the nation’s cultural resources. “We will either educate the people of this Republic to know, and, therefore, to value and, therefore, to preserve their own democratic culture,” he declared, “or we will watch the people of this Republic trade their democratic culture for the nonculture, the obscurantism, the superstition, the brutality, the tyranny which is overrunning eastern and central and southern Europe.”

Billington has cited MacLeish as the Librarian most responsible for laying a foundation for the future digital library. MacLeish set out a rationale for newly formulated “canons of service” in his 1940 report to Congress. Billington quoted the following passage from that report in his own testimony before Congress in 1994: “The Library of Congress, as the reference library of the people, holds itself charged with a duty to provide information to the people with regard to materials they possess in its collections, and with an obligation to make its technical and scholarly services as broadly useful to the people as it can.” Billington pointed out that “MacLeish’s matter-of-fact assumption

that the Library's collections are the property of the American people underlies the Library's current 'American Memory' program."

American Memory was designed to employ digital technology to stimulate a desire for reading and historical investigation. As first announced, the project planned to supply thousands of schools and libraries with videodiscs and CD-ROMs containing digitized versions of selected historic documents, rare books, manuscripts, photographs, folk music recordings, and the earliest of motion pictures produced in the U.S. In order to make historical sense of these materials, users would be encouraged to consult with local librarians and teachers for direction in finding relevant books in their own libraries that would help them respond to questions the primary source material provoked. Billington described the learning process that perusal of the Library's collection of Civil War photographs might stimulate: "It's good to look at the Civil War photographic record before you know anything about it. You see proud people, confused people, live people, dead people. You are shown a whole kaleidoscope—not something prepackaged. You have to relate to it and make sense out of it, and you invariably have to go into books. You may get the raw data electronically, but knowledge, wisdom, and creativity—the higher rungs of the ladder—require you to go into books. You need to find other people's judgments, syntheses, and conclusions. It is a very uplifting and renewing thing."

Over a five-year period that ended on September 30, 1994, the American Memory project provided 44 test sites—elementary and secondary schools, colleges, state and public libraries—with CD-ROMs and videodiscs containing some 210,000 digitized items from two dozen of the Library's collections. Surveys indicated that the materials were appreciated especially by young people in inner cities and in rural locales. Billington judged that the experience "motivated youngsters who were not already plugged into reading and the educational system." The great expense involved—the bulk of funding was provided by private sources—prevented the Library from distributing discs more widely. By 1994, however, the Internet and World Wide Web promised a more efficient and potentially less costly avenue for distribution.

"A National Network of Information Superhighways"

Billington had testified in a 1989 hearing of a subcommittee presided over by Senator Al Gore that was convened to create legislation for research and development of "a national network of information superhighways." In his testimony, Billington portrayed the Library's collections as "the freight that can be carried on this highway." In a prepared statement to the subcommittee, Billington related, "With 88 million items in the Library, we have the largest collection of recorded information and knowledge ever assembled in one place here on Capitol Hill. The Library of Congress represents the nation's most important single resource for the information age. The proposed establishment of a National Research and Education Network would give an immense boost to the access of this material and allow the Library of Congress to provide to the country much more of its unequalled data and resources which can now be obtained

only by visiting Washington.”

Billington estimated that it would cost at least \$893 million to digitize the complete collection of Library of Congress textual and visual image collections, excluding maps, motion pictures, and a few other types. “It is not really practical to digitize the whole retrospective collection indiscriminately,” he advised. “Rather a program of capturing current material, older material easily identified for scientific importance, and selected brittle material should be pursued.” He warned that should the U.S. not build digital libraries and a national high-speed network, “Our scholars may be left behind first by their Japanese and then by their European colleagues regarding timeliness of exchange and use of information – information produced by other scientists in the U.S. and ideas coming in from abroad.”

The Internet was developed in stages from the 1960s through the early 1990s as a way to allow communication between seemingly incompatible computer networks residing in different localities. In many instances, early developments were funded by the Department of Defense to further military and security objectives. In 1980, the Department of Defense adopted data transmission protocols that greatly facilitated an expanded and open usage of the Internet when they were released to the public. In the late 1980s, the National Science Foundation created a supercomputer network between universities that became a crucial component of the internetworking system. Concurrently, a grassroots “Usenet” newsgroup network started in 1979 by graduate students as an alternative to Defense Department-funded initiatives grew by 1988 to include some 11,000 sites linked internationally. In 1990, computer scientists at CERN, the European Laboratory for Particle Physics in Geneva, Switzerland, developed a system they called the World Wide Web that used hypertext to facilitate automatic information sharing between scientists within the high energy physics community. The general public started to use the World Wide Web after the National Center for Supercomputing Applications (NCSA) at the University of Illinois, using funding provided by the federal government, developed in 1993 a user-friendly browser. By the end of 1994, the Web had ten million users.

The Library of Congress began in 1992 to use their own File Transfer Protocol (FTP) sites to make accessible digitized materials from their major exhibitions to outside computer users. The American Memory project placed three of its collections on the Web for the first time in June 1994. As the pilot project came to a close, the Library created the National Digital Library Program (NDLP) with the goal of making five million items accessible to the general public via the Web by the end of the century. NDLP achieved that goal at a cost of \$60 million with only \$15 million provided by the federal government. In April 2004, the Library recorded more than 47 million hits per month on American Memory Web pages. By 2005, more than nine million items were accessible on the site. In addition to primary source materials, American Memory included a learning page with resources and lesson plans to guide teachers and students in their use of the materials. In 2000, the Library launched “America’s Story from America’s Library” geared to “children and their families.”

From 1996 to 1999, the Library organized a competition to award funds to libraries, archives, historical societies, and museums to digitize significant collections in their own institutions pertaining to American history and culture. Funded by the Midwestern telephone company Ameritech, the competition produced 23 newly digitized collections that have become part of American Memory Web site. Historians Daniel J. Cohen and Roy Rosenzweig pointed out the institutional influence of American Memory. “The early success of American Memory and other pioneering web archives,” they observed, “sent hundreds of other libraries and archives to work on getting their own collections online.”

The National Digital Information Infrastructure and Preservation Program

As Web sites proliferated, concern also spread that very few “born-digital” materials—those created directly for the Web—were being preserved. In a 2002 report, Billington noted that the average life of a Web site was 44 days, and that 44 percent of sites that had been available in 1998 no longer were in existence a year later. Rosenzweig, the director of George Mason University’s Center for History and New Media, warned that digital records easily could become unreadable through slight internal damage and because of developments in hardware and software product. The paradigm shift from scarcity to abundance of digital materials, Rosenzweig wrote, caught preservationists unprepared. “Over centuries, a complex (and imperfect) system for preserving the past has emerged,” he observed. “Digitization has unsettled that system of responsibility for preservation, and an alternative system has not yet emerged. In the meantime, cultural and historical objects are being permanently lost.”

In 1998, Billington commissioned the National Academy of Sciences to conduct a review of the Library’s information technology programs through the National Research Council’s Computer Science and Telecommunications Board. The resultant report, entitled *LC21: A Digital Strategy for the Library of Congress*, contained praise for NDLP’s accomplishments, yet expressed concern “that the Library’s function as a creature of Congress, within the federal bureaucracy, will make it unable to respond in a timely and effective way to the challenges that it faces.” The report urged the Library to collaborate with other interested parties, both in the U.S. and abroad, to coordinate a major effort to overcome challenges inherent in digital preservation.

Among its many recommendations, the report advised the Library to establish a system to receive and manage copyrighted digital materials; clarify that the Library has the right under copyright law to collect copies of U.S.-based sites and, if necessary, to seek legislation to ensure that the Library obtain that right; convene a planning group to coordinate digital preservation efforts; and put a digital preservation plan into effect as soon as possible. The study applauded a collaboration between the Library and researchers at Cornell University to capture Web-originated material pertaining to the 2000 election. It recommended the Library conduct additional pilot projects in partnership with groups or individuals having appropriate expertise in order to use the knowledge gained to create effective Web collection policies.

Billington welcomed the report's findings and noted that the Library already had been working on many of the issues the report identified. "We've seen that this is a problem, and we now have a strong reinforcement for doing something on it at a more accelerated rate," he told a *New York Times* reporter.

In December 2000, Congress appropriated \$100 million to the Library for a National Digital Information Infrastructure and Preservation Program (NDIIPP) with \$75 million of that amount to be made available only when the Library raised matching funds. The Librarian of Congress was authorized to develop a national strategy to collect, archive, and preserve digital content jointly with other federal government agencies having expertise in telecommunications technology and electronic commerce policy, and with the participation of representatives of the research, library, and archival communities, and with private organizations that preserve, collect, and disseminate information in digital formats. In October 2002, NDIIPP published its initial "collaborative plan for action." The plan encouraged shared responsibility for digital content and set out a strategy to establish "a national network of committed partners, collaborating in a digital preservation architecture with defined roles and responsibilities."

The Federal Agencies Digitization Guidelines Initiative (FADGI) was established in July 2007 as "a collaborative effort by federal agencies to define common guidelines, methods, and practices for digitizing historical content." In its 2010 report, NDIIPP reported that by that date "the Library has recruited more than 185 digital preservation partners in more than 44 states and 25 nations to execute a multiphased plan to collect and preserve a broad spectrum of high-value digital content, with special attention to the needs of the public policy, education and research, and cultural heritage communities." As part of this initiative, NDIIPP launched the National Digital Stewardship Alliance (NDSA) in July 2010, a collaboration of more than 150 organizations devoted to working together "to preserve access to our national digital heritage" with the Library serving as the Executive Secretariat for the Alliance for an inaugural term. In January 2016, the Digital Library Federation (DLF) at the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR) became the NDSA's institutional home.

In 2010, an international collaboration led by the Library of Congress and with the support of the United Nations Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (UNESCO) formed the World Digital Library (WDL). The global initiative involving major libraries, archives, museums, educational institutions, and international organizations, "makes available on the Internet, free of charge and in multilingual format, significant primary materials from all countries and cultures."

"Open Access to Knowledge"

In the question-and-answer session following Billington's National Press Club talk, reporters sought his views on the future of Mikhail Gorbachev, the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union Central Committee. Since coming to power in March 1985, Gorbachev had attempted to institute economic restructuring (*perestroika*), greater freedom of expression (*glasnost*), including the end of censorship and total

Party control of the media, and democratization. Gorbachev represented a new generation of Soviet officials imbued with “new thinking” who sought liberal structural changes in part to be able to cope with the era’s technological developments that threatened to widen the economic gap between Soviet bloc countries and Western democracies.

Gorbachev had been blocked from implementing reforms by more moderate and entrenched Party leaders. In June 1988, however, the Supreme Soviet, at Gorbachev’s bequest, created new governing bodies in Moscow and in each Soviet republic to be filled through competitive elections. In October, Gorbachev assumed the role of president after achieving a major realignment of the Party to consolidate his power. In December, he announced at the UN that he planned to make drastic reductions in Soviet military forces. He emphasized that the Soviet Union was willing to seek solutions to world problems through cooperative strategies and promised to broaden civil rights. Concurrent with these developments, political groups outside the Communist Party formed for the first time in the Baltic republics of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, and in a number of major cities.

In a speech delivered on January 6, 1989—six days before the Press Club talk—Gorbachev criticized opponents of his reform program and blamed severe shortages of food and consumer goods on previous leaders who for decades had hidden huge budget deficits from the public. The *New York Times* commented that the speech “had the tone of a man who feels himself under attack from all quarters” and characterized the period as “a time of mounting pessimism in the country, brought on by disenchantment with the standard of living and by spreading outbreaks of ethnic disorder.”

Billington was asked by the press to comment on whether Gorbachev was secure in power and sincere in his reform program. A student of Russia for most of his life, Billington had accompanied Congressional leadership delegations to the Soviet Union in 1979 and 1983, and briefed President Reagan prior to his first meeting with Gorbachev in Geneva in November 1985. When Gorbachev made his first visit to the U.S. in December 1987, Billington sat with him at a White House state dinner and the two conversed in Russian. Billington traveled with Reagan to Moscow in May 1988 for the president’s fourth summit with Gorbachev and contributed to a speech the president gave to students at Moscow State University—Gorbachev’s alma mater—that the *New York Times* judged “may have been Reagan’s finest oratorical hour.”

In the speech, delivered under a bust of Lenin and in front of a mural depicting the Russian Revolution, Reagan stressed that the key to progress was “freedom—freedom of thought, freedom of information, freedom of communication.” He alluded to a host of historical Russian cultural figures and in support of his theme, quoted the writers Boris Pasternak and Nicolay Gogol, and the renowned Russian Enlightenment scientist, scholar, and co-founder of the university, Mikhail Lomonosov, all of whom Billington had discussed in *The Icon and the Axe*. “It is common knowledge,” Reagan said, quoting Lomonosov, “that the achievements of science are considerable and rapid, particularly

once the yoke of slavery is cast off and replaced by the freedom of philosophy.” In the Press Club talk, Billington reported that many Soviet officials had begun to accept the notion of “open access to knowledge as a key prerequisite . . . for any serious democratization in that country.”

-- Alan Gevinson, *Special Assistant to the Chief,*
National Audio-Visual Conservation Center, Library of Congress

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