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WRITTEN TESTIMONY

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While the need to preserve selected feature films has been well presented and indeed dominates the field of film preservation, I urge the National Film Preservation Board to include the significance of :

- 1) non-theatrical, non-broadcast films
- 2) specifically films commonly known as "home movies"
- 3) expressly early "home movies" taken by immigrants and other ethnic Americans that are in essence documentary footage

in the preservation of our nation's cultural heritage.

The following comments will be focused on the value of amateur film taken by one American ethnic group - Americans of Japanese ancestry in the 1920s-1950s - as representative of the importance of home movies for film preservation.

The Photographic and Moving Image Archive of the Japanese American National Museum is a repository of photographic stills and moving images that provides visual documentation of the history and experience of Japanese in America. The moving image collection of the Archive currently consists of 50,000 feet of 16mm and 8mm B&W and color silent film footage taken from the mid 1920s when 16mm home movie making was first introduced and Japanese immigrants began making America their new home; into the 1930s when the 8mm format was introduced; through the 1940s during the WWII mass internment of Japanese Americans; and into the post-war 1950s. It also contains 110 reels of 1/2 inch videotape of significant events, interviews and performances of the Asian American Movement in the early 1970s.

As a history and culture museum, we have found selected home movies to be cultural artifacts representative of, and reflecting history and experience - and are committed to their preservation.

In the field of film preservation, we are interested in films as products *about* our culture and as products *of* our culture. That is why we are concerned with their preservation. Amateur films, even more than professional films, are deeply contextual and reflective of the life and times of the maker, region and time period. They are visual statements, modern mediums of communication and symbolic activity, that reflect qualitative aspects of lifestyle and remain as symbols of the creators'

real and constructed views of American life. They supply clues into the depth of people's lives, particularly into the emotional and aesthetic content of culture. They are statements *about* culture, are artifacts *of* culture and should selectively be preserved.

This is especially true for home movies made by ethnic Americans. As a nation of immigrants, the collective impact of all ethnic and cultural groups combine to create America. In the process of adapting to a new country and transforming our own lives, we have brought a variety of traditions, foods, values and history that have interacted and created new forms that are now considered American. Each culture contains its own assumptions and it is in terms of this cultural integrity, in association with their external environment, that people construct their social, symbolic, real, and even imagined worlds. Home movies, being products of the maker's reality, are particularly important in that they provide entry and better insight into who they were and what gave their lives meaning.

While the majority society was routinely documented in newspapers, magazines, newsreels and feature films, until the 1960s life in ethnic America had routinely been overlooked and therefore went undocumented. Home movies made by ethnic Americans therefore provide the only existing motion picture documentation of early ethnic American life from their own points of view and should be considered documentary in nature.

When the 16mm moving image camera was introduced to the public in 1924, Japanese Americans began taking what are now referred to as "home movies". Whereas analysis of contemporary, white middle class home movies shows a lack of documentary footage of everyday activities such as eating, going to school, reading a newspaper or book, listening to records (Chalfen, 1987); these endeavors are depicted in amateur film taken by Japanese Americans. Not only do they provide visual records of lifestyle and behavior, they provide actual evidence of intangible social constructs such as cultural adaptation.

For example, in a rare interior shot, the wife/mother puts a phonograph on the record player in the living room and the two young daughters start to dance to the music - one in western dress and the other in Japanese kimono. The mother is seen on the couch reading, and from the way she is turning the pages, we know it is a Japanese book. The father is also shown, typically reading the newspaper - but the paper is a Japanese American newspaper - not a Japanese newspaper nor an American one - but one signifying the evolution of a new Japanese *American* culture.

The immigrants probably filmed everyday activity because these new cultural renditions of familiar roles and functions were so novel. It is also known that many films were sent to Japan, presumably to show what life in America was like. On this new technology, the primary Japanese American historical themes of work, family and community are recorded.

While most of the images were created for personal reasons and use, at this time in history, these images have intellectual importance that transcends the motivation of their original creation. These images were taken by Japanese American amateur photographers of their social, cultural and symbolic worlds yet with the passage of time and the lack of documentation outside the ethnic community, what were once simply personal and family home movies are now historical documents. Rather than simply nostalgic momentos, selected home movies made by Japanese Americans constitute both records and interpretations of life in America.

About the Japanese American National Museum

The Japanese American National Museum is a private, non-profit organization incorporated in March 1985 to be the first museum in the United States devoted to presenting the history and culture of Japanese Americans to Americans of all ages and backgrounds. Through the development of a comprehensive collection of Japanese American material culture and through a multi-faceted program of exhibitions, educational programs, films, and publications, the Museum tells the story of Japanese Americans from the first Japanese immigrants who arrived in the late 1800's to the rich diversity of today's community.

The mission of the Japanese American National Museum is to make known the Japanese American experience as an integral part of our nation's heritage to improve understanding and appreciation for America's ethnic and cultural diversity. The Museum is located in the heart of Little Tokyo, Los Angeles and is housed in the historically restored quarters of what used to be the Nishi Hongwanji Buddhist Temple built in 1925.

About the Moving Image Collection

The collection is national in scope and spans from the mid 1920s, the advent of home movies, to the 1970s. The primary distinction of the collection is the focus on images created by Japanese Americans that provide a visual history of a distinct ethnic American experience as perceived, defined and indeed created by the people who lived it. The images were created by Japanese immigrants, called *Issei*, the first generation of Japanese in the United States, their American born children called *Nisei*, and the third generation called *Sansei*.

The footage provides direct visual expression of ethnic Americans doing what is considered typically "American" things such as playing football; as well as typically "ethnic" things such as participating in Japanese dances. We see them doing what can be said to be American things in "Japanese ways" such as celebrating the Fourth of July with Japanese food; as well as doing Japanese things in new "American ways" such as including Shirley Temple dolls amongst the Japanese dolls displayed on Girls' Day.

Besides having some of the earliest known American home movies to survive, the collection includes rare footage of life inside what has become known as "America's Concentration Camps" where Japanese and Japanese Americans were interned for the duration of World War II. Despite the early ban on cameras, daily activity, visits by uniformed *Nisei* serving in the Army, even footage of an internationally known artist painting, are some of the events that are documented.

Other subject matter includes:

- Family life: picnics, beach, home life, birthdays, children, anniversary parties, graduation

- Community life: churches and temples, prefectural picnics, *Nisei* Week, weddings, funerals, Japanese Language Schools, cultural events and observances

- Sports: (organized and spontaneous) football, baseball, tennis, golf, sumo, judo

- Work: lumber, hog farm, farming, nursery, stores, agriculture, banking, ranching
- City scenes: throughout the country: e.g.: Los Angeles, Santa Monica, Stockton, Sacramento, Tacoma, Seattle, Honolulu, New York, Portland, Anchorage, San Diego, Phoenix
- Trips to Japan: leaving on boat, street scenes, parades, festivals, small farming, village, people working
- Travel in US: Yosemite, L. Tahoe, Grand Canyon, Wash., DC, Oregon, etc.
- Traditional Japanese cultural activity: kumbu, ondo, obon, chigo, Boys' Day koi, Girl's Day doll displays
- American social history: Independence Day parades, 1932 Olympics

Criteria for Preservation

As in the case of other film genres, only a carefully selected number of moving images have intrinsic and enduring qualities that justify their preservation. Films selected for preservation contain images that further the Museum's mission to make known the experience of Japanese in America.

Specific criteria include the following:

1. Historical/Cultural Significance. Photographic images selected for preservation are evaluated for the information contained therein. Footage selected for preservation are treated as cultural artifacts surrounded by social and cultural contexts that capture and present the Japanese American experience. They fall into three main categories: 1) images that illuminate historical figures, events and eras in Japanese American history, 2) images that document Japanese American community, family, work and leisure activities and 3) images that yield insight into Japanese American customs and values and their perceptual and symbolic worlds.
2. Age and Physical Condition. The oldest images are provided special attention because of their probable historical significance, fragility and advanced age. By virtue of their age, they are most likely to document early life in America as well as be the most susceptible to damage, fading and deterioration. In cases of extreme fading of very old and historically significant images, the image may be selected for preservation because of their research value but not for purposes of exhibitry. Advanced age alone is not a deciding criteria.
3. Technical Quality. The quality of the image is a critical factor in its selection for preservation. While artistic or technical excellence is not a predominant factor, the images must be clear enough to create a meaningful image and impart information. In general, the image must be in proper focus to have sharpness of detail. It must have proper exposure for contrast of tones, and the subject must be composed in an arrangement that creates a meaningful image. Without these qualities the image may have little value for research. Attention will be given however, to images

that are of a low level of quality yet of a high level of intellectual content. Such images may be selected for preservation for research, but not for exhibitry or illustrative use.

Public Presentation

In 1992 a 3-screen laser disc installation featuring this historic footage was commissioned by the Museum that emphasizes the importance of preserving this footage. The piece, called "Through Our Own Eyes" features highly edited video transfers of 16mm film footage filmed in the 1920s and 1930s and uses American and Japanese music of the times. The purpose of the installation was the affective use of the moving image to evoke feelings and provoke imagination - to bring the Japanese immigrants "back to life" and insert their presence into a traditionally static museum exhibit.

The enthusiastic response to the installation by film preservationists, scholars and visitors underscores the significance of this footage for preservation. It signifies the importance of preserving amateur footage as unique artistic creations; it also shows how such footage can be effectively used to create new art. "Through Our Own Eyes" was shown at the 1992 Association of Moving Image Archivists conference as an example of footage earmarked for preservation can be effectively presented to the American public. It has been selected for screening at the upcoming 1993 Asian American International Film Festival as a work of art.

Footage has also been licensed for use in educational media productions and will be featured in Museum-based productions such as a documentary film on the Japanese American experience and in media installations for subsequent exhibits.

Conclusion

Selectivity is a key factor in the significance of so called amateur footage as cultural documents. Although the term "home movies" conjures up images of endless birthday parties and vacation memoirs, selected home footage, especially from the 1920s, 1930s, 1940s and into the 1950s, provide unparalleled documentation of American life that does not exist in any other form.

The Japanese American National Museum is committed to actively finding and selectively preserving footage that makes known the Japanese American experience as an integral part of our nation's heritage. There are a few other institutions that are committed to doing the same whether it be regional or ethnic collections. However the majority of significant home movies presently lay deteriorating in people's closets, garages, basements and attics across the country. The level of awareness and recognition of their significance, as well as financial and professional support for their preservation, must be raised or else the country will most definitely lose an irreplaceable cultural historical resource.