

Our Day

By Margaret Compton

Like archaeologists examining the fossil evidence left behind in stone by animal and human migration across the earth, film archivists trace 20th-century life by examining the moving images left behind on film. Transparent, flexible, and portable, film can be held up to a light to see what was captured in each frame. Home movies especially capture intimate scenes of humans' personal lives across the world and through the 20th century. And inherent in home movies is not only the technical advancement of film from large and expensive (for the well-to-do) to small and accessible (for the masses), but the personal advancement of individuals, of families, of their travels and the stories they chose to tell in this visual medium.

As with Kodak's still photography before them, home movies began as a novelty but were later advertised specifically as a medium for capturing memories. And, as a film archivist who has seen many home movies, I am still struck by the fact that millions of people all over the world collectively filmed their very different lives in nearly identical ways. Vacations, birthday parties, sunsets, Christmas mornings, babies, kittens--you may think "you've seen one home movie, you've seen them all." Until one day, along comes a home movie that just *isn't* the same old thing and you've never seen anything like it.

Wallace Kelly's "Our Day" stands out as one of the bright spots of creativity and joy in the home movie and amateur film genre and is especially worth celebrating and preserving. This 16-minute film was brought to light at a New York City Home Movie Day event in 2007 and was shortly thereafter named to the National Film Registry. Wallace Kelly's daughter, Martha, has generously granted permission for it to be available worldwide in online platforms. View it now at one of those websites: The Center for Home Movies site: <http://centerforhomemovies.org/amateurnight/films/our-day/> or the Internet Archive https://archive.org/details/Our_Day The Internet Archive site allows for comments to be posted, giving a global living room audience a place to note the similarities and differences that our individual experiences bring to the viewing.



A frame enlargement from the film shows two of the Kelly clan playing croquet in their yard. Film courtesy Martha Kelly.

I have been a film archivist at the University of Georgia Libraries for 15 years and a member of the Association of Moving Image Archivists (AMIA) for 19 years. In that time, I've seen more formats and types of movies than I ever expected I would. As I inspect donated films, I research what I see so I may more fully describe our holdings. If I had examined Kelly's film without his daughter's input, I'd know right away that it is more "amateur film" than home movie from the head title and credits and the deliberate and expert manner in which the action is edited to unfold. I would see a multi-generational household in middle- to upper-middle-class circumstances, where lunch is served at the table by a uniformed African American woman. In the kitchen are both a wood-burning stove and an electric stove. The house is spacious and the property expansive. There was even time in their day for a game of croquet on the lawn. Card games, knitting, radio listening, and piano playing round out an evening before everyone heads to bed. Do these charming scenes look anything like your family life today? Whether or not you can relate directly to these images, it is important to have this evidence of life in the early 20th century, even and especially if our families were not like the Kellys'. They are historic points of reference, good and bad, showing where we have been and where we are going.

Home movies are often described as "boring." There's an old trope about a couple inviting friends over to the house to watch their recent vacation films, and that nothing evoked larger groans and excuses not to attend than that invitation. But today,

people are open to the nostalgia or “retro chic” of a Home Movie Day event, to seeing a local selection of the vast scope and variety of home movies, the duds and the delights equally. The ability to share one’s family scenes with a willing audience of strangers, to describe what’s going on and gain the viewers’ empathy, while sometimes embarrassing, is also empowering. Our feelings about footage that documents our human experiences are highly subjective, and moving images bring forth more emotion than even very moving written documents and photographs do. Those feelings, the “heart” apparent in a film like “Our Day,” come not just from what the filmmaker is able to do with the camera but from collective viewing, from memories and opinions about the footage expressed to others, from seeing ourselves in someone else’s filmed life. Even if their experience is foreign to ours--the 1917 yachting parties filmed with a very expensive 28mm camera, or 8mm scenes of rural poverty in Appalachia in the 1960s--these glimpses into someone else’s home life often ring very true with us. Statements such as, “There’s Uncle Bill! That was the only summer he was able to visit us before he died,” give the Home Movie Day audience an understanding that we are more alike than we are different. And we need this empathy, perhaps now more than ever.

So, on Home Movie Day, when people around the world gather to share and celebrate original films projected in public and to document the stories behind those images, you have an opportunity to join

this global family living room experience and I hope you will take it. Because something like Wallace Kelly’s “Our Day” may just turn up and you really should be there to see it.

Sources include:

Eagan, Daniel. “America’s Film Legacy: The Authoritative Guide to the Landmark Movies in the National Film Registry.” New York: Continuum Press, 2010.

West, Nancy Martha. “Kodak and the Lens of Nostalgia.” Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

Margaret Compton is the Film Archivist at the Walter J. Brown Media Archives and Peabody Awards Collection, University of Georgia Libraries. In 2012, she discovered in a 28mm home movie collection the earliest known film showing African Americans playing baseball (c. 1919, Pebble Hill Plantation Film Collection). Her articles have appeared in The Moving Image, Film History, Cinema Journal, and American Music. Ms. Compton, who earned her MLIS degree at The University of Texas at Austin, is currently researching the making of “Wedding on the Volga” (1929) a once-lost, now-found-but-mute talkie, missing only its last reel. It is the only film directed by and starring Mark Schweid, Yiddish theater playwright and actor, and was discovered in Georgia in 2015 and donated to the Brown Media Archives.