

## **HOME MOVIES, Part 1: Understanding the Genre**

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When it comes to American cinema, theatrical feature filmmaking has long commanded the lion's share of attention. It has been intricately studied as both a mirror of and an influence on our society, and it has benefited from the earliest and the most film preservation efforts. When you think about it, this makes sense; after all, there's a lot of money behind studio production and we are, like it or not, a culture of mass entertainment.

But there are other significant aspects of America's cinematic history that have until recently been neglected by the gaze of cultural examination. Genres like corporate and educational films, local television programs, advertisements, public service films and social training films – and a myriad of others that have collectively accounted for more exposed celluloid than Hollywood ever produced.

One of these “stepchildren” of filmmaking activity has been particularly dismissed as so much trivial fluff – yet is ubiquitous, was created and still exists in great numbers, and represents a vital historical record. That is, the phenomenon we call “home movies.”

### **What are home movies?**

There is no single formal definition, but there is truth in most. Some examples: “Moving image material, the subjects of which are personal or family events, usually filmed or recorded by an amateur;” “Works created for private, not commercial use, . . . designed to be shown primarily to family and friends, . . . and usually made by people not professionally connected with the film/video industry;” and “motion pictures made by amateurs, often for viewing by family and friends.”<sup>1</sup>

More romantically put, home movies are a unique form of communication, a means of human expression that portrays how the creator chose to remember, and perhaps to *be* remembered. They give us a glimpse of the mannerisms, the events, and the material culture of the past. Most importantly – but probably least realized by the home movie photographer – they are a window on our values and ideals. This is because they are not *random* samples of life, but subjective selections. They show what is important to the photographer, and, by extension, to the family, the community, and even society.

In this way they are not unlike many other kinds of personal documents – diaries and correspondence, for example. These all portray an editorialized version of life, consistent with what the creator perceives is important for the audience to know. But besides their relative technological complexity, home movies differ from these other types of documents in that their intended audience is not just the creator, or a single correspondent. Rather, it is a whole crowd: immediate family, extended family, friends, and other affinity groups. They're not meant for strangers *per se*, but that's about where any restriction ends. Home movies are created for the familiar masses, falling somewhere between interpersonal and mass communication.

## **Context: Technology and culture**

Like so many of the other ways we document our lives and activities, the home movie genre exists thanks to a series of remarkable technological advancements – in this case, ones that have taken place in just over the last century.

Since photography's beginnings in the 1830s and '40s, devotees struggled with the problem of capturing motion. The first real development came in 1878, when photographer Eadweard Muybridge produced a series of still images of a galloping horse shot in rapid succession that, when viewed likewise, gave the illusion of motion – a new twist on a centuries-old toy, the zoetrope.<sup>2</sup> Soon after, in the 1880s, George Eastman (the father of snapshot photography), created a flexible plastic photographic film; meant to replace glass plates in still cameras, this innovation also provided the practical means whereby many quick, successive images could be made with a single camera.

In 1890s, Thomas Edison's fledgling motion picture operation produced the first American motion picture: a short piece called "Kinetoscopic Record of a Sneeze."<sup>3</sup> By the turn of the Twentieth Century, the motion picture was entrenched in American culture, and amateur still photography (already a few decades old) continued to increase in popularity. Entrepreneurs strove to meld the two – to bring motion picture photography to the common person. Yet the size and cost of film and equipment proved formidable obstacles. Several attempts to bring filmmaking to the amateur market never quite caught on. In 1923, all that changed.

That year, the Eastman Kodak Company introduced the Cine-Kodak movie outfit. The camera was certainly small and simple by contemporary filmmaking standards, but the most significant innovation was the film: only 16mm wide<sup>4</sup> (also called "miniature" or "small gauge"), made of a non-combustible plastic (cellulose acetate, dubbed "Safety" film),<sup>5</sup> and camera-loadable in daylight. Most significantly, it was "reversal" film – that is, the film exposed in the camera turned out *positive* rather than *negative* after processing, eliminating the need to make a positive print from a negative. Add to all this the fact that this miracle of technology was introduced to the public in a time of prosperity and increased affluence in America, and for the first time the ability to create motion pictures was put into the hands of the common person. The home movie was born!<sup>6</sup>

In the years to follow, Eastman Kodak and other companies<sup>7</sup> introduced a succession of variations – including the much smaller and more portable 8mm film format in 1932 – all in an effort to make home movie photography as convenient and affordable as possible. Color home movie film also became available in the mid-1930s.<sup>8</sup> By this time, home moviemaking was fairly well advanced. There were several manufacturers of cameras, projectors and film. But more than that were all the trappings of a serious hobby, even an avocation: home movie editing equipment and other paraphernalia, how-to literature, even local and national organizations,<sup>9</sup> all in the service of the home movie photographer.

The sale of home movie products peaked in the 1950s, and then started a decline. In answer to this, two more innovations hit the scene: In 1965 Super-8 film was introduced, which featured

drop-in film cartridges and an increased image area of 50% over standard 8mm, and in 1973 Kodak launched its Ektasound system, the first practical sound-on-film format for the amateur filmmaker. But even these innovations were not enough to save home movies – *on film*, that is – from the coming of videotape.

Nevertheless, home movie photography on film had a good run – nearly 60 years – and accounts for some of the most distinctive visual records ever produced.

### **Content: Defining characteristics and themes**

In spite of all the technical and creative support available to the amateur filmmaker, when it came right down to actual practice most home movies were created as if by instinct. Recent scholarship on the home movie phenomenon concludes that most people "just knew" when to get out the camera and roll film.<sup>10</sup> This, together with the fact that most home movies look so much alike, suggests that there's something almost ritualistic in the making and viewing of home movies.

There are visual characteristics common to home movies, of course. They are *moving* pictures, after all, so inherent movement (either with the camera or the subject) is frequent. Sometimes the movement is appropriate (for example, following a moving object, filming *from* a moving object, or panning to take in a wide scene), and sometimes stilted and artificial (such as when men doff their hats, or people are coached to walk toward the camera). There are other visual commonalities, too, such as varied exposures, home-made intertitles and sometimes a seemingly random order to the scenes. But it is the *content* characteristics that are especially interesting.

As mentioned before, home movies differ from other forms of personal communication like diaries and correspondence in that they were created for an audience – a select, familiar audience, but an audience nevertheless. As a consequence, home movies are somewhat more formulaic than those other modes of personal communication. They follow patterns that have inextricably grown out of the medium itself. The element of motion, the portability of the equipment, the ability to stage and edit, the potential to show them again and again (and making an "event" of these screenings), and the desire to connect with a larger audience – all of these things have come together to create *ad hoc* themes that weave throughout the home movie genre.

For example, home movies generally show people more than they do things. The people are usually family and acquaintances, rarely strangers. Children and pets are popular subjects. People in the films are awake, healthy and happy. You rarely see sick people or any unpleasantness. And because the movies are usually taken by the male head of the household, he's not likely to be shown.

When home movies do show objects, they are ones that have a certain aura of pride or attachment associated with them: the house, a new bicycle, a flower garden, the family car. These are manifestations of social and economic status, and preserving them on film verifies success.

Home movies generally represent only a narrow spectrum of everyday life. Banal activities are not worthy of capture, but "special" versions of those same activities are. For example, everyday meals aren't filmed, but holiday meals and picnics are; eating dessert is nothing special, but a pie-eating contest elevates eating to a media event. Likewise, common settings are often chosen but again an element of uniqueness intrudes – a party or visit, anything to add an element of change or distinctiveness to an otherwise familiar setting. Special events in the community, like cornerstone ceremonies, parades or fairs – even disasters, such as floods, fires and snowstorms – all add a layer of exclusivity to the commonplace. And in a turn of the tables, the movie camera was a constant companion during travels, in which the family was the constant and the surroundings provided the element of distinctiveness.

In all this we see a pattern of selectivity. In fact, far from objectively recording everyday life, home movies record an *idealization* of life. The really interesting thing is that nearly all home movies exhibit this same selectivity, the same conventions. If you view home movies that are not your own, you may not know the people or settings but you can still *understand the point* of those home movies, because they illustrate the same values and ideals as you and your family have recorded in your own. In a sense, making home movies taps into a primal desire to create a "Golden Age." These films hearken back to the family's happy times and achievements, and a community's milestones.

### **Scholarly and popular interest**

So, what's happening now in regard to these vintage home movies? Some remarkable things.

In the last dozen years or so, the home movie genre has become the subject of increased interest. This is no doubt due to several factors, among them an enhanced attention to non-theatrical film in general and new ways of sharing information and media through the Internet. But perhaps the biggest influence has been the very thing that also challenges the survival of home movies themselves: their obsolescence. To be sure, people continued to document their lives with moving images after the advent of home video, and they are still doing so with various digital devices. But just as the medium shaped the look and "feel" of home movies on film, so too do these other media bring their own character to bear on the documents created with them. True home movies are a thing of the past. They can't be honestly replicated or replaced.

This has elevated home movies to the level of cultural iconography, worthy of study as a distinctive communication genre, even a folk art. Because they show such unique and personal views of the world and are by their nature one-of-a-kind, home movies are increasingly sought after by documentary filmmakers and other media producers. Moreover, they are the subject of increased examination by scholars. The home movie genre is now a viable topic of analysis, from technical, cultural and sociological points of view. Amateur film is the focus of seminars, scholarly articles and books.<sup>11</sup> Home movies have even been named to the Library of Congress's National Film Registry.<sup>12</sup> One of the most remarkable developments has been an outreach event called Home Movie Day, a yearly celebration of amateur filmmaking. This grassroots tribute grew out of the desires of a handful of archivists, filmmakers and exhibitors to showcase the home movie genre. The first Home Movie Day was held in 2003, and it has grown to a world-wide slate of venues.<sup>13</sup>

## **A look ahead. . .**

As the home movie genre finally takes its rightful place in the heritage of American cinematic activity, archives, museums and libraries are responding in kind by collecting and preserving these unique films, and trying to better understand and utilize those already in their repositories. We will further explore this genre, next time focusing on the archival management of home movies, in the next issue of the *MAC Newsletter*.

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<sup>1</sup> *Archival Moving Image Materials - A Cataloging Manual* (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 1999); Moving Image Collections Glossary of Collection Forms ([gondolin.rutgers.edu/MIC/text/how/form\\_glossary.htm](http://gondolin.rutgers.edu/MIC/text/how/form_glossary.htm)); *Wikipedia*: "Home Movies" ([en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Home\\_movies](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Home_movies)).

<sup>2</sup> See [www.youtube.com/watch?v=qPyxhO8GnmI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qPyxhO8GnmI) for an animation of Muybridge's first motion study.

<sup>3</sup> See [www.loc.gov/wiseguide/may03/sneeze.html](http://www.loc.gov/wiseguide/may03/sneeze.html).

<sup>4</sup> After much experimenting, it was determined that the 16mm frame produced the best balance between best possible projection and small size

<sup>5</sup> Cellulose nitrate, an inherently unstable and flammable plastic, was used for 35mm film stock into the 1950s. Amateur gauges (16mm, 8mm and later Super-8) were never made of nitrate. Cellulose acetate-based stock was commonly known as "Safety" film, due to its lacking the incendiary qualities of nitrate film.

<sup>6</sup> In France the previous year, Pathe introduced the "Pathe-Baby" 9.5mm camera and a safety film to go with it. But in America, the status of founding the home movie genre belonged to the Eastman Kodak Company.

<sup>7</sup> Such as Victor, Bell & Howell, Revere, Agfa, Keystone, DeVry and others.

<sup>8</sup> Kodachrome, the first successful amateur color reversal movie film, was introduced in 16mm in 1935. Kodachrome in 8mm followed a year later.

<sup>9</sup> The largest of the national organizations was the Amateur Cinema League, founded in 1926. It hosted film contests and published the monthly magazine *Movie Makers*.

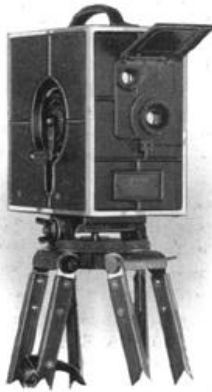
<sup>10</sup> Chalfen, Richard. *Snapshot Versions of Life* (Bowling Green, OH: Popular Press, Bowling Green State University, 1987), pp. 50-51.

<sup>11</sup> Notable among the recent resources are: Zimmermann, Patricia R. *Reel Families: A Social History of Amateur Film* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995); Citron, Michelle. *Home Movies and Other Necessary Fictions* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1998); Chalfen, Richard. *Snapshot Versions of Life* (Bowling Green, OH: Popular Press, Bowling Green State University, 1987); and Kattelle, Alan D. *Home Movies: A History of the American Industry, 1897-1979* (Nashua, NH: Transition Publishing, 2000). For a resource on home movies in the video era, see Moran, James *There's No Place Like Home Video* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

<sup>12</sup> The film taken by amateur Abraham Zapruder of John F. Kennedy's assassination in Dallas, Texas in 1963 was added to the Registry in 1994. For other home movies added to the Registry, see [www.homemovieday.com/news/2006/12/27/think\\_of\\_me\\_first\\_as\\_a\\_person\\_named\\_to\\_national\\_fi.html](http://www.homemovieday.com/news/2006/12/27/think_of_me_first_as_a_person_named_to_national_fi.html) and

<sup>13</sup> See www.homemovieday.com . The 2008 Home Movie Day is scheduled for October 18.

## Illustrations



#1 CAPTION: This graphic is from the manual of the Cine-Kodak Model A, the first American home movie format camera, introduced in 1923.



### **Motion-Picture Portraits**

*Are Life's ONLY Replica!*

Every natural expression  
is faithfully recorded—*true  
to life*—

**THE VICTOR** takes your pictures—  
**CINE CAMERA** in life-size motion  
just as easily as  
you now take the ordinary stills—  
"still."

**THE VICTOR** shows your own  
motion pictures in  
**CINE PRO-** truly professional  
**JECTOR** style. And, too,  
you may meet features, comedies,  
dramas and travelogues from the  
Kodakage Library.

Victor Cine Camera #65  
Victor Cine Projector #43.

Ask Your Dealer or Write

**Victor Cine Sales Corp.**  
DAVENPORT, IOWA

#2 CAPTION: An advertisement for Victor equipment from 1925 touts home movies as “Life’s ONLY Replica!”



#3 CAPTION: This page from the Montgomery Ward Spring/Summer catalog of 1944 shows some of the variety of accessories available to the home movie hobbyist.



#4 CAPTION: Babies were a favorite subject in home movies, as illustrated by these frames from the 16mm home movies of the Hodgkin Family of McCook, Nebraska, c. 1931 (Nebraska State Historical Society, RG4619.MI).