HOME MOVIES, Part 2: The Archival Challenge
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EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the second of a two-part series on home movies. The first part appeared in the July 2008 issue of the MAC Newsletter.

In our previous entry, we explored the history and character of home movies as technical and cultural artifacts and noted the recent rise in scholarly and popular interest in the genre. This time, we'll take a more practical turn as we look at home movies in the context of archives management.

Just as with so many other audiovisual documents, home movies present a particular challenge to archivists more familiar with paper-based materials. Much of this has to do with the dependence moving images have on machines to access their content, unlike traditional documents for which tools no more sophisticated than a person's hands and eyes generally suffice. Add to that the obsolescence factor, which creates an increased scarcity of equipment, supplies, and expertise, and you've got a formula for significant bewilderment on the part of the well-meaning archivist. To be sure, these hurdles affect every aspect of the archival enterprise. But given the rising interest in home movies and the professional support network that has grown up around them, archivists can hardly avoid these remarkable treasures any longer.

Collection

There's no doubt about it: home movies are everywhere. Together with snapshot photography they account for the enormous amateur-made photographic record of life in twenty-first century America.[1] While some home movies already reside in repositories, untold numbers are still "out there," mostly in the hands of the families that created them, in the offices of businesses and organizations whose activities were captured on home movie film, and as orphaned remnants of settled estates. By their nature they are one-of-a-kind, since the photographic process created expressly for popular moviemaking churned out film that was ready to project, removing most reasons for duplicating it.[2]

How do home movies end up in archives? In many cases, in the same way most materials do. Amateur-made movies are often components of larger acquisitions of papers and records. A notable concern here is reluctance on the part of the donor (and sometimes the archivist) to consider home movies to be viable and useful historic documents. This mind-set is diminishing in direct proportion to the recent and ongoing elevation of the home movie genre's status, yet it still may come down to the archivist asking for them.[3]

There are other ways to ferret out home movies. Camera clubs, alumni associations, retiree organizations, and civic groups can reveal likely sources. Collaboration with local audiovisual transfer services, which encounter lots of home movies, can put you in touch with owners who often see no need to retain originals. And any outreach efforts you conduct, like exhibits, public presentations or newsletter articles—especially any dealing with popular photography or personal and community memory—make nice segues to requests for home movies.

Of course, the act of collecting home movies should be subject to the same internal acquisition and appraisal policies and procedures that guide the rest of your collecting. Issues of collecting scope, collection needs, physical condition, content quality, use potential, and copyright all factor into their selection.[4] An additional concern, conditional to all machine-dependent audiovisuals, is the repository's ability to service and access the film; many believe this should be weighed in the context of the home movies' prognosis for survival if not taken in by an archives.[5]

Arrangement and Description

Repository practices may differ, but using provenance (photographer, family, collector, and institutional source) as a home movie's overarching designation within a repository's holdings is the norm, just as it is for other archival materials. How home movies (and most audiovisuals) differ from this point on is the content within the physical media, and this impacts on both their arrangement and description.

A home movie reel is made up of a string of discreet scenes, sometimes seemingly random in order and topic. Due to their visual nature, the practical usefulness of home movies most often lies in the content of these individual scenes. Because these scenes are physically bound together on a reel, they don't lend themselves to physical rearrangement as do loose letters or snapshots within a folder or box.

This can make description all the more important. Ideally, description should reflect the content, order, and placement of these discreet scenes; this kind of finding aid is typically known as a "shot list" or "shot log," and may even be accompanied by still images of representative frames of the individual scenes. However, this is not to say home movies can't be "browsed." In the spirit of "More Product, Less Process,"[6] a home movie collection can be described in summary terms, putting the onus on the user to discover its visual details.

In recent years descriptive standards have emerged for audiovisuals in general, and for moving images in particular.[7] While these tend to be weighted more toward theatrical and broadcast productions, they are based on Dublin Core and MARC cataloging schema, and the data elements they use for the description of moving image materials are worth exploring for use with home movies.

Preservation

From a preservation standpoint, there are three particularly useful points to realize from the outset about home movies. The first is that the "small-gauge" 16 mm, 8 mm, and Super-8 film formats were never available as cellulose nitrate, the plastic notorious for its chemical instability and incendiary tendencies. Rather, small-gauge film stocks were acetate-based—not without preservation issues of their own, but certainly not in the same league as nitrate.

Secondly, it is important to understand that even though home movies are machine-dependent, they should be spared the undue stress of projection and viewing equipment, except under controlled circumstances and with the use of trustworthy equipment; there are other, less invasive ways to examine the content and condition of moving image film.

Finally, while it is common (sometimes even necessary for access) to transfer home movies to magnetic or optical media, the originals will far outlast these copies. The precept that digitization is not a replacement for the originals is particularly accurate with moving images on film.

Beyond these points, guidelines for the examination, preservation, and storage of home movies (and for moving images in general) are abundantly available through on-line sources. Some of the most useful are the Film Forever Web site (http://www.filmforever.org/), the Film Preservation Handbook of Australia's National Film and Sound Archive (http://www.nfsa.gov.au/preservation/film_handbook/), and the National Film Preservation Foundation's Preservation Basics page (http://www.filmpreservation.org/), which includes its award-winning Film Preservation Guide. These sources and others[8] offer practical strategies, procedures, and benchmarks for film-archiving novices.

Access and Use

Accessing the content of most archival documents, images, or published materials is a "self-serve" function: unless there is an issue with condition or a restriction on the items, access is pretty much accomplished with the hands and eyes of the user. But concerns rising from the machine dependency of audiovisuals can make access to home movies problematic.

Even so, a repository's options for providing access to the content of moving images are several, ranging from textual description and still capture of representative frames to supervised viewing on reliable film-editing equipment and donor- or user-financed digital transfer.[9] More than with most other documents, issues of access and use of audiovisuals can get archivists thinking creatively, even collaboratively.

In any case, it is important to realize that home movies are such unique and matchless documents, increasingly appreciated and in demand, that access to even a portion of a repository's holdings can go a long way to increase interest and attention, both outside the institution and within—and to generate not only institutional support, but revenue that can go back to sustain additional holdings. Similar results can come from a repository's use of home movies in its own outreach efforts, such as public programs, Web sites, and exhibits. A

convincing testament to the power of the home movie as an outreach tool is the success of Home Movie Day, a yearly celebration of amateur filmmaking that has been growing in popularity and breadth since it was first held in 2003. This year's Home Movie Day is scheduled for October 18.[10]

Help! … with Home Movies

The archivist who desires to collect home movies or whose holdings already include them is by no means adrift in an ocean of isolation. Unlike even a scant decade ago, many helpful resources now exist, ripe for the tapping. Ranging from supply and equipment vendors to training opportunities, on-line forums to best practices, grant possibilities to transfer services, the professional community has absolutely blossomed with activity in the realm of archival audiovisuals.[11] And vintage home movies, as well as the archivists who work with them, stand to reap the benefits.

More than at any other time in history, the reasons and opportunities for collecting, preserving, and providing access to home movies are quite extensive. Rather than regarding them as unfamiliar and intimidating, the time has come for archivists to embrace home movies as the unique and valuable historic and cultural resources they are.

Notes

[1] Richard Chalfen notes in his Snapshot Versions of Life (Bowling Green, OH: Popular Press, Bowling Green State University, 1987): 4, that the "Kodak Culture" created by the availability of inexpensive photographic equipment, supplies, and services has made us the most photographed people in history.

[2] The "reversal" film exposed in the camera turned out positive rather than negative after processing, eliminating the need to make prints from an original negative.

[3] This is also the time to inquire about original equipment used by the photographer to create and exhibit home movies. Particularly because the creation and use of the home movies were dependent on these devices, they make nice companion artifacts to the moving image documents themselves.

[4] Institutions are increasingly reaching the conclusion that before they can make even basic appraisal decisions, they need more information about their holdings than they've currently got. This realization has spawned more than a few survey and assessment projects aimed specifically at audiovisuals. Some that already exist are the California Preservation Program's CALIPR automated survey tool (http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/CALIPR) and Columbia University's Survey Instrument for Audio and Moving Image Collections (http://www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/services/preservation/audiosurvey.html). Another that shows

great promise is the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign's IMLS-funded Audio-Visual Self-Assessment Program (http://www.library.uiuc.edu/prescons/services/av_self_assesment_program.html), which they hope will produce guidelines for any repository to use. The Texas Commission on the Arts' Videotape Identification and Assessment Guide (http://www.arts.state.tx.us/video/) is another, but deals specifically with videotape formats. In general, these are all weighted more toward gathering condition and preservation data than contextual data.

[5] This balance is predicated on the idea that a repository's ability to access machine-dependent documents can change, but the salvation of the document is immediate. Under these terms, the archivist's first concern should be to save the resource from extinction.

[6] The latest breakthrough in archival processing theory, dubbed "More Product, Less Process" (or MPLP for short), was first presented in detail in an article of the same name by Mark A. Greene and Dennis Meissner in American Archivist 68:2 (fall/winter 2005): 208–263. It advocates a universal retreat from detailed, item-level processing. The impetus of this minimalist approach to archives management is the reality of overwhelming collection backlogs colliding with limited resources, creating a situation in which unacceptably large percentages of archives' collections are unavailable for use—even unknown to the public—because they're not processed to the detailed level to which archivists have traditionally aspired.

[7] Some of the more ambitious projects to create descriptive schema for moving images are the Library of Congress's Moving Image Collections Catalog (http://mic.imtc.gatech.edu/index.php), the Corporation for Public Broadcasting's PBCore (http://www.pbcore.org/index.html), the Visual Resources Association's VRACore (http://www.vraweb.org/projects/vracore4/index.html), and Independent Media Arts Preservation's IMAP Cataloging Project (http://www.imappreserve.org/cat_proj/index.html). Another useful work that predated these others is the Library of Congress's Archival Moving Image Materials: A Cataloging Manual, 2nd ed. (http://www.itsmarc.com/crs/arch0332.htm), which was designed to provide guidance for moving image description within the framework of the Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules, 2nd ed. (AACR2).

[8] A few others worth a visit are Folkstreams' Video Aids to Film Preservation (http://www.folkstreams.net/vafp/), the University of Washington's Washington State Film Preservation Manual (http://www.lib.washington.edu/specialcoll/film/preservationmanual.pdf), Independent Media Arts Preservation's Preservation 101 page (http://www.imappreserve.org/pres_101/index.html), and Bob Brodsky and Toni Treadway's Little Film site (http://www.littlefilm.org/) dedicated specifically to home movies.

[9] Just as scanning is for still images, transferring home movies to a digital format is the current process of choice for creating use surrogates of the originals. Best practices for the digitization of historic and cultural moving images are just now becoming available, and the possibilities for

Web dissemination have never been more prevalent; for one example of the former, see chapter 9 of the University of Maryland Libraries' Best Practice Guidelines for Digital Collections (http://www.lib.umd.edu/dcr/publications/best_practice.pdf), and one up-and-coming project that illustrates the latter is the Audiovisual Archive Network (http://www.amia.typepad.com/aan/) sponsored by the Association of Moving Image Archivists and funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

[10] Home Movie Day started as a grassroots effort on the part of a handful of archivists, filmmakers, and exhibitors to pay tribute to the genre. Since it was first held five years ago, the event has grown to fill a worldwide slate of venues. See http://www.homemovieday.com/ for details.

[11] There are too many to list here, but feel free to contact author Paul Eisloeffel at pje@archivesfilmworks.com or 402-730-9735 for suggestions.

Illustrations

Horizontal stacking is one of the main storage principles for moving image film. Courtesy Nebraska State Historical Society.

The deficiency of still photography to capture some subjects with the same accuracy and vitality as moving images is illustrated in this still frame from a home movie of a University of Nebraska gymnast in action, ca. 1935. Courtesy Nebraska State Historical Society, RG1658.MI.

Even simple equipment, like the viewer, film rewinds, and light table shown here, can go a long way to empower the archivist to examine home movies. Courtesy Nebraska State Historical Society.

Physical evidence, quite apart from content, can reveal details about a home movie. For example, the three dots in the right margin of this 16 mm film indicate that the film stock was made in 1928, and the single large dot on the left shows that the camera used was a Cine-Kodak Model B f-6.5. Courtesy Nebraska State Historical Society, RG4619.MI.