

# **THE FILM PRESERVATION GUIDE**

**THE BASICS FOR ARCHIVES, LIBRARIES, AND MUSEUMS**

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San Francisco, California

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San Francisco, CA 94102

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

The film preservation guide : the basics for archives, libraries, and museums.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-9747099-0-5 (alk. paper)

1. Motion picture film—Preservation. I. National Film Preservation Foundation (U.S.)

TR886.3F58 2003

778.5'8—dc22

2003024032

CIP

This publication was made possible through a grant from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. It may be downloaded as a PDF file from the National Film Preservation Foundation Web site: [www.filmpreservation.org](http://www.filmpreservation.org).

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Except as noted below, all photographs were provided by Barbara Galasso and the L. Jeffrey Selznick School of Film Preservation at George Eastman House. The following contributed illustrations and text material: American Museum of Natural History (94), Anonymous (67), California Pacific Medical Center (57), Chace Productions Inc. (12 center and right), Duke University (48 top), Estate of Edith Lutyens Bel Geddes and the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas at Austin (84), Florida Moving Image Archive (91), Image Permanence Institute at the Rochester Institute of Technology (10 top), Library of Congress (48 bottom, 51, 63, 87), Minnesota Historical Society (92), National Center for Jewish Film (90), Nebraska State Historical Society (69, 73, 74), Northeast Historic Film (back cover, 62 bottom, 76, 85), Oklahoma Historical Society (5), Pacific Film Archive at the University of California at Berkeley (back cover), Sabucat Productions (93), UCLA Film and Television Archive (86), University of Alaska Fairbanks (40), University of South Carolina Newsfilm Library (89), Visual Communications (58).

Typesetting by David Wells

Copyediting by Sylvia Tan

Printed in the USA by Great Impressions

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## PREFACE

This guide is designed to introduce film preservation to the community of research organizations that now have collections of motion picture film. It is a basic primer for film preservation “beginners”—professionals trained in archival studies, librarianship, museum work, or a subject field but unschooled in this technical specialty.

Film preservation is a relatively new activity for libraries, museums, and archives. For many years film was equated with the Hollywood feature and acquired by only a handful of organizations. In recent decades, however, scholars have come to value other types of films as historical and cultural records. A growing number of research institutions are opening their collections to regional documentaries, amateur films, newsreels, scientific footage, expeditionary documentation, political ads, educational and training films, and avant-garde works. The preservation literature has not kept pace with the expanding mix of film-collecting organizations.

In 2002, the National Film Preservation Foundation (NFPF) began talking with the Image Permanence Institute at the Rochester Institute of Technology and the L. Jeffrey Selznick School of Film Preservation at George Eastman House about what professionals needed to know in starting film preservation programs. The discussions broadened to include the Council on Library and Information Resources and several members of the Association of Moving Image Archivists’ Regional Audio Visual Archives Group. All agreed on the importance of “demystifying” film preservation for individuals with curatorial duties involving film.

The group received a grant from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to develop two publications specifically for these professionals. *The Film Preservation Guide: The Basics for Archives, Libraries, and Museums*, prepared under the direction of the NFPF, aims at summarizing basic archival practices for handling, identifying, copying, storing, and making available motion pictures under conditions that extend their useful life. *IPI Media Storage Quick Reference* has a wider purpose. Designed for managers of multimedia collections that include film, *Media Storage* brings together information relevant to the preservation and storage of motion pictures, photographic prints, glass plates, ink-jet prints, audiotape, videotape, CDs, and DVDs.

We developed the two guides through an interactive process, involving users at key points. After sketching the preliminary plan for the publications, we held needs assessment workshops at Duke University and the Minnesota History Center of the Minnesota Historical Society. Attending were collection professionals from organizations in the early stages of developing local film preservation programs. At the two sessions attendees discussed what they desired to see in the publications

and helped formulate the approach for *The Film Preservation Guide*. Users asked for tools to guide decision making, for troubleshooting advice as well as step-by-step explications, and for case studies and “real-world” examples. Most important, they told us to avoid technical jargon and to provide a larger context for film preservation actions. We have tried to put these suggestions into practice.

As a second check and balance, both publications were reviewed by the students of the L. Jeffrey Selznick School of Film Preservation at George Eastman House. The students gave the publications a fresh eye and had many practical comments for improving their content and approach. Several helped the George Eastman House staff prepare the photo-illustrations for *The Film Preservation Guide*.

The guide went through another series of reviews. Each chapter was discussed and revised by the editorial committee. Then each was sent out to technical experts who checked through the text and made additional corrections. A number of institutions provided case studies and illustrations during this process. To complete the circle, volunteers from the needs assessment sessions then read through the working drafts and offered final suggestions. It is no exaggeration to say that the resulting publication represents the contribution of scores of individuals and institutions.

It is not surprising, given the diversity and range of the field, that experts disagreed on some emerging practices. Whenever approaches differed, we tried to choose those most appropriate for the intended users of the guide. Practices will improve in the years ahead. However, even as techniques change, they will remain rooted in the core curatorial principles followed by all archives, libraries, and museums.

Film preservation is an evolving field. This publication gathers together current information for nonspecialists working with film in regional archives, historical societies, libraries, and museums. It provides a starting point. We hope that *The Film Preservation Guide* will encourage new practitioners to join the film preservation community and take steps to save their institution’s films.

Annette Melville, Director  
National Film Preservation Foundation

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This publication would not have been possible without the encouragement and support of The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

Scores of individuals generously contributed to *The Film Preservation Guide*. Heading the list is David Francis who, as a consultant, developed the technical framework and helped lead the discussion at the needs assessment workshops and the testing sessions at the L. Jeffrey Selznick School of Film Preservation at George Eastman House. Members of the editorial committee—Abby Smith (Council on Library and Information Resources), Karen Glynn (Duke University), Paolo Cherchi Usai and Caroline Yeager (George Eastman House), Jean-Louis Bigourdan (Image Permanence Institute, Rochester Institute of Technology), Bonnie Wilson (Minnesota Historical Society), Paul Eisloeffel (Nebraska State Historical Society), and Dwight Swanson (Northeast Historic Film)—were instrumental in seeing the project through, from start to finish. All deserve special thanks for tirelessly giving their time to make this guide a reality.

Many others had a significant role in the publication process. Participating in the needs assessment groups were Debra Elfenbeine (American Dance Festival Archives), Barbara Mathe (American Museum of Natural History), Elizabeth Barret (Appalshop), Leslie Calmes (Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona), Erin Foley (Circus World Museum), Suellyn Lathrop (East Carolina University), Jon Williams (Hagley Museum and Library), Lynn Smith (Herbert Hoover Presidential Library and Museum), Glenn Small (Johns Hopkins University), Rachael Stoeltje (Kinsey Institute), Andy Lucas (Mayo Foundation), Katy Wood (Motorcycle Hall of Fame Museum), Michael McLaughlin (National Endowment for the Arts), Steve Massengill (North Carolina State Archives), Bill Moore (Oklahoma Historical Society), Steve Wilson (Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin), Julie Arnott (Southeastern Library Network), Ginny Daly (Southern Highland Craft Guild), Connie Brooks (Stanford University Library), David McCartney (University of Iowa Libraries), Al Lathrop (University of Minnesota), David Boutros (University of Missouri—Kansas City), Jill Vetter (Walker Art Center), and Mark Peterson (Winona County Historical Society). A number of participants also reviewed the manuscript and contributed information.

At George Eastman House, many staff members helped with the illustrations, testing, and technical information, including Jared Case, Karen Everson, Barbara Galasso, Kelli Hicks, Chad Hunter, Anthony L'Abbate, Deborah Stoiber, Jeff Stoiber, Edward Stratmann, Dan Wagner, and Tim Wagner. The students critiquing the working draft were Susan Busam, May Dea, Andrew Lampert, Diana Little,

Ember Lundgren, Brianne Merkel, Robert Nanovic, Heather Olson, Brent Phillips, Magnus Rosborn, Alexandra Terziev, and Benjamin Tucker. Also assisting were Daniel Blazek, Brendan Burchill, Donna Ellithorpe, Eric Green, Annette Groschke, Laura Krasnow, Siusan Moffat, Nathan Moles, Christina Nobles, Ayuno Okamura, Loubna Regragui, David Rice, Norberto Rivero Sanz, Jennifer Sidley, Marcus Smith, and Anna Sperone.

Many others reviewed the manuscript or provided information. Invaluable for their technical review were Robert Heiber (Chace Productions Inc.), Ralph Sargent and Alan Stark (Film Technology Company Inc.), Peter Z. Adelstein and Karen Santoro (Image Permanence Institute), Ken Weissman (Library of Congress), John Carlson (Monaco Film Labs), Alan F. Lewis (National Archives and Records Administration), Grover Crisp (Sony Pictures Entertainment), Roger L. Mayer (Turner Entertainment Company), and Eddie Richmond (UCLA Film and Television Archive). Paul Eisloeffel graciously wrote the chapter on cataloging, as did Eric J. Schwartz (Smith & Metalitz L.L.P.) the chapter on legal issues. Rick Prelinger (National Film Preservation Board) reviewed the curatorial, legal, and access chapters and offered many helpful suggestions.

Contributing and reviewing information relating to their collections or specialties were Josef Lindner (Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences), Dirk Tordoff (Alaska Film Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks), Norma Myers (Archives of Appalachia, East Tennessee State University), Janice Simpson (Association of Moving Image Archivists), Katherine Nyberg (Bell Museum of Natural History, University of Minnesota), Carol Brendlinger (California Pacific Medical Center), Steven Davidson (Florida Moving Image Archive), James Reilly (Image Permanence Institute), Jim Hubbard (Independent Media Arts Preservation), Gregory Lukow and George Willeman (Library of Congress), Jennifer O'Neill (MIT Museum), Steven Higgins (Museum of Modern Art), Miriam Saul Krant and Sharon Rivo (National Center for Jewish Film), Nancy Goldman (Pacific Film Archive, University of California at Berkeley), Rick Utley (Protek), Jeff Joseph (Sabucat Productions), Lisa Scholten (South Dakota Art Museum, South Dakota State University), Charles Hopkins (UCLA Film and Television Archive), Ben Singleton (University of South Carolina Newsfilm Library), Linda Thatcher (Utah State Historical Society), Jeff Liu (Visual Communications), and Richard Fauss (West Virginia State Archives). To all who have helped, thank you.

## HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

As mentioned in the preface, this publication was created through an interactive process that started with workshops. “Keep it simple!” was the mantra of these discussions.

Accordingly, *The Film Preservation Guide* attempts to cover a range of motion picture technical issues in relatively jargon-free language accessible to collection professionals without prior film preservation experience. Generally technical terms are defined the first time they are used and in the glossary as well. Whenever possible, technical information is summarized in charts or diagrams and presented so that it is easier to apply in decision making. Most chapters end with case studies providing examples from the field.

The arrangement of the chapters follows the path of film through the preservation process, from the first viewing by the subject specialist to the presentation of access copies to the public. The discussion focuses on collection activities that are distinct to film. Archives, libraries, and museums already have established practices for core functions such as cataloging; in these areas, the guide briefly highlights topics and issues particular to the moving image.

Motion pictures have been with us for more than a century—in a myriad of formats, venues, and uses. This guide does not attempt to address these many permutations. Instead it strives to describe motion picture preservation in terms of the materials and equipment most widely found in archives, libraries, and museums. It is intended as an introduction to the fundamentals of film preservation.

There are exceptions to almost every generalization. In seeking to provide a short, practical overview, most specialized techniques and formats are omitted. For more about these, see the selected bibliography.



# 1. WHY PRESERVE FILM?

America's film heritage is as diverse as America itself. For more than one hundred years Americans with movie cameras—professional and amateur alike—have traveled the country documenting traditions, telling stories, and recording events of the day. They have captured peoples and places not filmed by the mainstream media.<sup>1</sup>

Documentaries, newsreels, avant-garde and independent works, home movies, industrial films, political ads, scientific footage, anthropological records, travelogues, and fictional narratives—these works stand as the collective memory of the first century witnessed by the moving image. By saving and sharing these works, we can illuminate our common heritage with the power and immediacy unique to film.

For many years the value of these varied film types was not widely recognized. We associated filmmaking with Hollywood sound features and knew little about non-theatrical films held by museums, libraries, and archives. These one-of-a-kind works often lay untouched in the stacks or were simply too fragile to be shown to the public. Now, thanks to preservation work over the past two decades, these films are beginning to be seen. A more inclusive picture of national filmmaking is emerging to enrich our understanding of cultural history.

## 1.1 THE COMMUNITY OF FILM ARCHIVES

A few words on the changing nature of film archiving will help set the context for this publication. In the first decades of film preservation awareness, the priority was to salvage abandoned commercial releases from the early years of motion picture production. A small cadre of nonprofit and public institutions rose to the challenge. They developed techniques to duplicate decaying nitrate film onto safety film stock and showed the results at museum screenings and specialized festivals.

In 1938, these pioneers formed the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAF) to exchange information and promote standards for professional practice. By the late 1970s there were five large “nitrate” archives in the United States: George Eastman House, the Library of Congress, the Museum of Modern Art, the UCLA Film and Television Archive, and the National Archives and Records Administration (the official repository of U.S. government film production).

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1. This chapter is drawn largely from the following sources: *Film Preservation 1993: A Study of the Current State of American Film Preservation*, 3 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1993), also available at [lcweb.loc.gov/film/study.html](http://lcweb.loc.gov/film/study.html); *Redefining Film Preservation: A National Plan* (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1994), also available at [lcweb.loc.gov/film/plan.html](http://lcweb.loc.gov/film/plan.html); National Film Preservation Foundation, *Report to the U.S. Congress* (San Francisco: National Film Preservation Foundation, 1997–2002); and *Treasures from American Film Archives: 50 Preserved Films* (San Francisco: National Film Preservation Foundation, 2000).

As the study of film has evolved beyond the Hollywood feature, so has the film archive community. *Film Preservation 1993*, published by the Library of Congress at the direction of the U.S. Congress, pointed to an increasing number of public and nonprofit organizations collecting motion pictures relating to a region, subject, or ethnic group. Since 1991, the Association of Moving Image Archivists (AMIA) has helped the film archiving movement to grow by providing a professional framework through which regional specialists could meet with their counterparts from the FIAF member archives and the Hollywood film industry. AMIA offers training, conferences, and opportunities for sharing information through its listserv and committees. Between 1993 and 2003, the association's membership quadrupled.<sup>2</sup>

Many more organizations, beyond those participating in AMIA, have moving image material of research value. Usually these motion pictures are part of audio-visual, digital, and paper-based special collections, personal papers, and record groups. In a survey of program participants completed in 2002, the National Film Preservation Foundation (NFPF) found that mixed-media collections are the rule rather than the exception among responding libraries, museums, archives, and historical societies.<sup>3</sup> In these institutions professionals do not specialize solely in film. Ninety percent of NFPF respondents reported that they were personally responsible for caring for materials in two or more media. More than half had curatorial duties involving film and at least three other types of materials.

Multimedia libraries, museums, and archives represent the most recent wave in the film preservation movement. As film gains recognition as documentation for research,<sup>4</sup> it is being collected and used by a broader range of institutions, and expanding the definition of the film archive.

## **1.2 ORPHAN FILMS**

In film preservation, there is an informal division of labor between the public and private sectors. As demand has expanded for video, DVD, cable, and other ancillary markets, commercial film producers increasingly view their films as valuable corporate assets. The film industry now invests heavily in preservation and restoration activities. Today, when a public or nonprofit organization assists with the restoration of a commercially owned sound motion picture, it often works in partnership with the entity that owns the film. Generally the project has importance

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2. AMIA grew out of two organizations devoted to the archival management of moving image material: the Film Archives Advisory Committee and the Television Archives Advisory Committee.

3. As reported in the findings of an unpublished 2002 survey of the NFPF's program participants, analyzed by Claire Nolan. The survey response rate was 93%.

4. See Stephen G. Nichols and Abby Smith, *The Evidence in Hand: Report of the Task Force on the Artifact in Library Collections* (Washington, D.C.: Council on Library and Information Resources, 2001), 35–38. Also available at [www.clir.org/pubs/abstract/pub103abst.html](http://www.clir.org/pubs/abstract/pub103abst.html).

for motion picture history, and the archive brings unique footage or special expertise to the collaboration.

Many films, however, fall outside the scope of commercial preservation programs. The Library of Congress's 1993 film preservation study drew attention to the preservation needs of these unprotected materials, often termed "orphan films." Orphan films lack either clear copyright holders or commercial potential to pay for their continued preservation. Generally the types of films most at risk are newsreels, regional documentaries, avant-garde and independent productions, silent-era films, amateur works, and scientific and anthropological footage. To a large degree, the preservation of orphan films has fallen to nonprofit and public organizations. Most federal grant funding for film preservation now targets orphan film materials that would be unlikely to survive without public support.

Given the expanding interests of contemporary scholarship and the growing appreciation of film as a cultural and historical document, orphan films have earned a place in the collections of libraries, museums, and archives. Like any research material, however, films vary in their quality, content, and value as historical records. Not every film can be saved through archiving and preservation. Some loss is inevitable. In a world of finite preservation resources, it is the responsibility of each institution to determine the parameters of its film collecting and manage materials so as to maximize long-term value for its constituencies.

This guide focuses primarily on films of historical and cultural interest and does not address the additional preservation issues of Hollywood sound features and works of art on film. It is designed to assist collection professionals in developing a phased approach to the preservation of film, one that recognizes priorities for preservation copying and integrates storage, conservation, duplication, and access into a broader plan for extending the useful life of film originals and their content. *The Film Preservation Guide* is a primer for those developing film preservation efforts at their institutions.

### 1.3 THE LANGUAGE OF FILM PRESERVATION

In news stories on rereleased classic Hollywood features, the words "preserved" and "restored" sometimes appear to be used interchangeably. Before going further, it is important to define these terms in the context of public and nonprofit film collections.<sup>5</sup>

**PRESERVATION.** For many years, in practice and in casual discussion, the term *preservation* was synonymous with *duplication*. When archivists inquired if a film had been "preserved," they generally were asking if it had been duplicated onto new and more stable film stock.

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5. See Paolo Cherchi Usai, *Silent Cinema: An Introduction*, rev. ed. (London: BFI Publishing, 2000), 65–67.

## *Why Preserve Film?*

Over the last decade, however, a broader definition of preservation has gained acceptance. Increasingly it is understood as the full continuum of activities necessary to protect the film and share the content with the public. Film preservation now embraces the concepts of film handling, duplication, storage, and access. These are the topics that will be covered in this guide.

Film preservation is not a onetime operation but an ongoing process. Even duplication must sometimes be repeated as techniques and standards improve. Like other museum objects and library materials, film needs continuing care to extend its useful life.

**CONSERVATION.** Conservation is the protection of the original film artifact. Film has value as an object and as a carrier of information. Many organizations guard the original from unnecessary handling by creating surrogate copies to carry the content. The copies are used for exhibition and research. The film original can then be stored under conditions that slow physical decay.

**DUPLICATION.** Duplication is the making of a surrogate copy. Preservationists consider film fully safeguarded only when it is both viewable in a form that faithfully replicates its visual and aural content and protected for the future by preservation masters from which subsequent viewing copies can be created. When making a preservation copy, preservationists generally try to work from the material that most closely represents the film as it was originally shown.

**RESTORATION.** Restoration goes beyond the physical copying of the surviving original materials and attempts to reconstruct a specific version of a film. Ideally this involves comparing all known surviving source materials, piecing together footage from these disparate sources into the order suggested by production records and exhibition history, and in some cases, enhancing image and sound to compensate for past damage. Film restoration, unlike art or paper restoration, always involves duplicating the original artifact.

**ACCESS.** Access is the process through which film content is shared with the public. Depending on the institution, access embraces a range of activities, from support of on-site research to exhibition on the Internet. In museums, libraries, and archives, the most common access media at this time are film and video.

## CASE STUDY: OKLAHOMA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

***This Is Our City* (1950, 600 ft., 35mm nitrate, black and white, sound), preserved by the Oklahoma Historical Society.**

With the passage of time, films can take on new meaning for the communities they depict. *This Is Our City*, a political ad preserved by the Oklahoma Historical Society, shows how a film can provide a window into history.



In the late 1940s, Oklahoma City leaders saw their growing community on the brink of a vast change. To move forward and continue to attract new business, the city needed to invest in streets, sanitation, flood control, an airport, libraries, and parks. Community leaders decided to put a bond issue to the voters in May 1950.

The chamber of commerce formed a committee to urge its passage and mounted a multimedia campaign embracing billboards, newspaper ads, radio spots, and speeches. Central to the effort was *This Is Our City*. The five-minute political ad appealed to civic pride and showed how the bond issue would improve life for the average family. In the last days before the election the ad was screened in movie theaters and meeting halls across the city. The \$36 million measure passed overwhelmingly, with 80% voting yes.

The Oklahoma Metropolitan Library System, a beneficiary of the bond issue, saved a 35mm nitrate print of *This Is Our City* and donated it to the Oklahoma Historical Society. In 2001, the society received a preservation grant to copy the film on 35mm safety stock and make videotape copies for public access. Since then, the film has been exhibited by the Library of Congress at the Oklahoma venue of its national tour celebrating film preservation, excerpted for news segments and television programs, and even cited in a campaign for a new bond issue.

Many historical accounts, newspaper stories, pamphlets, and chamber of commerce records survive to tell the story of the election campaign and its importance to the development of Oklahoma City. More than do these paper records, *This Is Our City* captures the rhythms and feel of contemporary life. It seems to strip away the five decades separating us from this campaign and shows us how the issues were seen and understood by citizens in 1950.