



NORTHEAST HISTORIC FILM

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Report on the State of American Television and Video Preservation

Motion Picture, Broadcasting and Recorded Sound Division

The Library of Congress

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Northeast Historic Film is a 501(c)(3) non-profit corporation established in 1986. Our mission is to preserve and make accessible the moving-image heritage of northern New England.

We have recently purchased and are renovating a 1916 theater building as our home. We have 7 full-time-equivalent employees. The facility includes a temporary climate-controlled vault at 60 degrees F. and 45% RH. There is no air filtration. A permanent facility has been designed but will not be built for three years. We have a reference and research library, public exhibition area, 125-seat theatre, technical services area for repair of film and transfer to video, and administrative offices.

Of the four million feet of film and 2,000 hours of videotape in our collections, fifty per cent are television or video materials, from 1953 to the present. Included are collections from seven of Maine's television stations, mostly 16 mm. newsfilm; also 2", 1", 3/4", and BetacamSP.

These collections include programming like Maine Public Broadcasting's 2" masters of a weekly Franco-American public affairs program called Reflets et Lumière; all political commercials broadcast from one station from 1988 to the present (on a variety of formats); 50 hours of unedited material and finished documentaries on 3/4" videotape related to Samantha Smith, the Maine elementary-school student who visited Gorbachev; as well as the usual mass of 16 mm. newsfilm, advertising and local programming.

Video holdings include amateur works like the Archie Stewart Collection. This collection contains a 60-year (1926-1986) 16 mm. film record of family and community life, enriched by the creator's continuing to record using a VHS camcorder (1986-1992). We also hold industrial works on Betacam including a record of a Maine island telephone system, shot for GTE Visnet. Other videotape holdings include a visual studies student's EIAJ open-reel 1/2" documenting the 1969 take-over of the administration building at Harvard. The Little Tree Collection, also on open-reel 1/2", is an American Indian's documentation of his knowledge of traditional medicine.

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Preserving and making accessible northern New England's moving image heritage

TELEVISION

At our institution television preservation is defined by safeguarding 16 mm. newsfilm collections in temperature and humidity controlled storage and creating master copies on BetacamSP and reference copies on 3/4" and VHS. 2" videotape will be transferred to BetacamSP, as funding and staff time allows, and 1" is left to its own devices.

VIDEO

We are facing preservation issues with open-reel 1/2", which after some effort, we have given up trying to transfer in-house. We also have several hundred unique 3/4" videotapes from the late 1970s with important content. This material should be remastered to BetacamSP but we don't have the resources to systematically do this.

Our preservation priorities are split between preserving the most at-risk materials and focusing on the materials most likely to generate revenue. Most institutions, particularly small independent regionally focused ones, will struggle with this issue.

ACCESS

Between 40% and 50% of our collection is available to researchers. This means that the material has had some descriptive cataloguing, and a reference copy is available. Copies, where rights allow, are available for re-use. Many videocassettes are available free for off-site loan to members of Northeast Historic Film.

Minimum records at the collection level exist. More detailed item-level cataloguing has been created for 20% of the television and video collections. We use LC subject headings and have a local thesaurus. Three television collections have detailed production files.

THE IMPORTANCE OF REGIONAL LIFE

The specificities of our nation's regional life are an important part of our history. Collecting and rationally curating material from "small markets" and non-national creators is important if we are to have a sense of ourselves as a multi-faceted society. This work cannot realistically be dealt with solely by the Library of Congress or other national facilities. A comprehensive national TV and video preservation program must include a network of organizations who together preserve the nation's television and video production. The coordination of the many stakeholders in this endeavor is the key to success.

In this region, Northeast Historic Film is essentially the only archival institution with a defined mission to preserve television and video materials. Our primary area of responsibility is Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont, but we know that Massachusetts and (with the possible exception of Rhode Island) the rest of New England lacks curatorial attention to television and videotape. We have no ongoing formalized agreements with broadcasters to receive their more recent materials, although informal arrangements result in a continuing flow of material.

This is not an ideal state of affairs and we admit to lacking the resources to do better. Yet we are in the region and we are making some progress. Many areas are worse off.

At Northeast Historic Film our choices in accepting and prioritizing work with television and video collections are critically important. 98% of our reference collection and most of the pool of potential new acquisitions is on videotape. In addition, the only affordable way to provide access to our film holdings is to create reference videotapes. Television stations are generating a vast amount of videotape material which could provide a tremendously rich chronicle of the years since the late 1970s.

The development and continued viability of our archives depends on our ability to preserve this material. Success in this area will require:

A more evolved relationship with television stations and other producers. One of the keys to a successful strategy for television preservation is an improved and clarified relationship between archives and the corporate entities that control television production and dissemination.

The ability to transfer TV and video to new formats before it falls apart on our shelves.

The Library of Congress can help by using its stature to articulate a clear message that the national interest is being served through the preservation of this material, coordinating the smaller players, and providing guidelines or models of arrangements between archives and copyright holders/television stations/producers.

The producers of television material want continued access, limited cost, control of images, and a sense of receiving fair value for their efforts. The costs of preservation must be borne by revenues. These can be generated from the collections, plus whatever archives can raise, and whatever the creators decide to contribute. The creators are generally profit-driven corporations and must see a clear benefit, both financially and a new sense of obligation to provide a longterm social benefit.

Archives want ownership to enable grantwriting and fundraising, freedom to relicense allowing them to raise money through reuse, and to serve their mission of allowing access to holdings.

We feel that common ground can be found between these positions, and look forward to participating in the planning process.

Sincerely,



David S. Weiss
Executive Director