

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

MAR 13 1996

TESTIMONY

OTOMI
AND RECORDS

Gerald George
executive director
National Historical Publications and Records Commission

**Hearing on the State of American
Television and video Preservation**

Library of Congress
Washington, D.C.
26 March 1996

My name is Gerald George. I am executive director of the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, which is better known by its more easily remembered initials: the NHPRC. I congratulate the Library of Congress on its initiative in gathering information on the current state of American television and video preservation, and I welcome this opportunity to contribute. The subject is one that has long concerned, and in some ways perplexed, my commission.

Our concern arises from our mission. When the Congress created the National Archives, it also created the NHPRC, housed us within the National Archives, and charged us with promoting nationwide the preservation and publication of documents of particular importance for understanding American history. And in time the Congress began appropriating some funds from which we could make grants so that we could do more than just advocate attention to the source material on which historical study depends.

For a while it seemed fairly simple. The NHPRC helped launch projects to publish scholarly editions of the papers of Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Edison, of John Adams and Jane Addams, and even of Dwight Eisenhower and Martin Luther King. But at the same time we have had some remarkable revelations. It has dawned on historians that America cannot be understood simply from the activities of its most celebrated leaders. And now it has dawned on us all that even for understanding those leaders the best sources are not exclusively what they wrote.

Photographers, film makers, and video broadcasters have lead us to that insight. They have handed historians an incredible resource—the actual person, the words as delivered, the unfolding event, all captured in images, and most importantly in moving images. Tonight's "evening news" documents contemporary history at every level. It also supports creation of the visual record's own pedagogical form—the film or television documentary— which itself has expanded public access to historical insight beyond the book, the lecture, and the classroom.

What wouldn't we give to have moving images from earlier times? How stirred we would be if archaeologists in ancient Rome turned up a canister of filmed reports by Walter Cronkitus or Daniel Ratheronius on debates in the Roman Forum, spectacles in the Coliseum, Hannibal's crossing the Alps, Caesar's campaigns in Gaul, and the daily concerns of the ordinary "classical" family! No effort would seem too great to preserve such an unexpected glimpse of ancient history as it actually was. So why be careless with the recorded images we are making of our own history?

Accordingly, the NHPRC long ago recognized the value of television and video preservation for historical documentation, and we have acted on that recognition.

In 1987, the NHPRC granted funds to the American Film Institute's National Center for Film and Video Preservation to convene a national conference to plan for improving the care of local television newsfilm collections and providing access to them. More than forty institutions with collections of newsfilm sent representatives to Madison, Wisconsin, for that meeting, the published proceedings of which expanded attention to newsfilm collections and their preservation needs.

In 1991, the NHPRC gave another grant to the National Center for Film and Video Preservation, this time to help it create a local television newsfilm curatorial manual. Persons with responsibility for collections of newsfilm will find much-needed guidance in this manual for acquiring, organizing, preserving, cataloging, and providing access to moving-image materials.

These two projects at the National Center for Film and Video Preservation have not cost a huge amount of money—less than \$100,000 from the NHPRC. But they have helped the center organize attention to the need and then publish guidance for dealing with it. Also the NHPRC has invested nearly a half-million dollars of its grant funds in eleven projects to preserve collections of newsfilm and provide access to them in individual repositories. I am appending a list of those projects to this testimony. From New York to California, from North Dakota to Mississippi, future scholars and the public are going to be able to get at least some glimpses of what life was like in twentieth-century America and what our history looked like as it happened, thanks to the work of NHPRC grantees with newsfilm and video collections.

We are proud of this record, but we also recognize that it is token. We have had enough money to help a few institutions save a few runs of newsfilm for posterity out of the millions of feet of material that television broadcasters produce every month. The NHPRC's entire appropriation for grants this year is just \$5 million, with which we have to try to meet all kinds of documentary preservation needs across the entire nation. We are grateful to have even that much. But for perspective, consider this: published accounts of the production costs of Oliver Stone's latest historical film indicate that NHPRC's grant budget this year could

have financed little more than twenty minutes of it, and the entire cost was equal to our appropriations total for the last eight years.

Our era in history is the first that is able to document itself in moving images recorded as words were spoken and events occurred. But there is far more videotape and newsfilm than there is money for their preservation. When an agency with resources no larger than the NHPRC's is a leading funder of moving-image preservation, the limitations come clearly into view. Obviously, we must press the argument for increasing the financing, and I hope my remarks will be useful for that purpose.

But at the same time, we must consider rigorously how we can use most meaningfully the funds we have. At the NHPRC we are proud of our grant-program processes. In evaluating applications for grants for video preservation and access, we judge the relative historical value of the collections to be preserved and the competence of the applicant institutions, and we fund as many projects as we can that score high on those tests. But what material does not come into institutional collections whose directors write grant proposals? What are we missing? How much film and videotape of value is being destroyed or lost for future use while we are doing what we can to save a little? Is it possible to devise a documentary strategy for newsfilm preservation? What can we do to assure the people of this nation that something more than a haphazard visual record of its remarkable history will survive? These are questions with which the NHPRC is struggling. They need collaborative attention if we are to do anything more than request additional funding.

That is my view of where things stand. I thank you for the opportunity to contribute to your study. The National Historical Publications and Records Commission will welcome opportunities to work on this problem with the Library of Congress and any other organization concerned with saving the nation's irreplaceable cultural resources. We look forward to the outcome of the deliberations on which you are embarked.

**Projects for the Preservation of Film and Video Funded By
The National Historical Publications and Records Commission**

The American Film Institute, Washington, DC

\$14,000 for the institute's National Center for Film and Video Preservation to convene a national conference to plan for improved care and availability of local television newsfilm collections. (87-057)

The American Film Institute, National Center for Film and Video Preservation, Los Angeles, CA

\$79,660 for an 18-month project to write and publish a curatorial manual covering the range of activities involved in the administration and processing of archival television newsfilm and videotape collections. (91-067)

University of Baltimore, Baltimore, MD

\$55,000 to inventory, arrange, and preserve the A.S. Abell collection, consisting of 3,500 hours of local television newsfilm. The collection documents Baltimore and Maryland history from 1949 to 1983. (84-131)

Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, MS

\$29,251 to arrange and describe its Channel 3 newsfilm collection, including development of a computer-based descriptive system. (84-023)

Louis Wolfson II Media History Center, Miami, FL

\$61,594 to appraise, preserve, and make available newsfilm from WTVJ in Miami dating from 1949 to the present. The newsfilm is the earliest surviving local television newsfilm from South Florida. (88-098)

State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, WI

\$68,764 to evaluate the physical condition of and appraise, organize, and provide access to television newsfilm, ca. 1955 to 1972, from four television stations in Madison. The main goal of the project is to develop and test appraisal and description guidelines for the newsfilm. (88-115)

The Jewish Museum, New York, NY

\$1,915 to hire a consultant to bring the computerized records of the National Jewish Archive of Broadcasting into conformity with national descriptive standards. (89-085)

State Historical Society of North Dakota, Bismarck, ND

\$4,902 for consultant and other activities to preserve, organize, and provide access to television newsfilm dating from 1953 to 1978. (90-113)

Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN

\$77,267 to preserve 1,500 hours of special television news programming covering the period August 1968 to April 1979. (90-116)

Southern Methodist University, Dallas, TX

\$5,000 to hire a consultant to provide assistance in developing a preservation and access plan for television newsfilm materials held by the university's Southwest Film/Video Archives. (91-134)

State Historical Society of North Dakota, Bismarck, ND

\$87,900 to preserve, organize, and provide access to television newsfilm dating from 1953 to 1978. The newsfilm consists of approximately 2.5 million feet aired by six stations covering the state. (92-060)

New York University, New York, NY

\$24,012 (\$10,000 matching) to preserve and provide access to approximately 80 hours of film that comprise the university library's Moving Image Collection (ca. 1928-69). (94-050)

Manitowoc Submarine Memorial Association, Manitowoc Maritime Museum, Manitowoc, WI

\$5,318 for a one-year project to make accessible 85 acetate-base films (ca. 1942-84) depicting various shipping, boat-building, and recreational boating activities on the Great Lakes by transferring them to videotape. (94-053)

Total awarded: \$ 514,583