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NEBRASKA STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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DATE: January 28, 1993
 TO: National Film Preservation Board, Library of Congress
 FROM: Paul J. Eisloeffel, Curator of Manuscripts and Audio-Visual
 Collections, Nebraska State Historical Society
 SUBJECT: NFPB study on film preservation in the United States.

As part of the Library of Congress' National Film Preservation Board study on the current film preservation efforts in the United States, please allow me to offer the following profile of those efforts in Nebraska, as specifically embodied by the Nebraska State Historical Society.

The Nebraska State Historical Society has been collecting and preserving moving images since the early 1970s. In those early years, moving images crept into our collections in much the same way they had (and still do) into many other repositories: by default. We were equipped neither with the technology nor the expertise to deal with them, and while they were not sought neither were they turned down. By the late-1980s, however, the Society took a pro-active stance in regard to the moving image holdings, and added the responsibilities of their management to the duties of the Manuscripts Curator. This stance was precipitated by the growing holdings, and by the staff's increased regard for moving images as vital and unique documents in danger of slipping into oblivion -- a view that is now echoed nation- and world-wide. Besides, Nebraska has few archival repositories, and the State Historical Society was the only institution really capable of taking a state-wide leadership role in film collection and preservation.

From that point on, the Society has actively sought to identify, collect, preserve, describe and make accessible moving images that relate to Nebraska by virtue of topic or production. To date, we have built holdings of over two million feet of motion picture and video footage, dating from 1900 to the recent past. While the bulk of the holdings is local TV news footage and some original video, our collections also include film formats and genres that illustrate the broad spectrum of moving image activity in Nebraska, from feature films to amateur footage and home movies, from national newsreels to political advertisements, from locally-produced documentaries to government public service and promotional films, from outtakes to working prints.

But the management of these holdings presents problems. Funds are scarce, and the moving images, by their nature cost-intensive from a management standpoint, must compete for a piece

of the Society's overall collections management pie. Grant money is fine, but is only a temporary help in the face of a permanent, on-going commitment to film preservation. In addition, the Society's level of staffing is not equal to the enormity of the task. However, I believe that most repositories that take on moving images are saddled with the same burdens -- most, I believe, are as bad off or worse. Archives and museums of various sizes and types throughout the Plains states and nationwide have caches of unique and vulnerable moving images, and struggle to do right by them.

In response to these truths, we have endeavored to take a practical, methodical approach to our role as leaders of film preservation efforts in Nebraska. Besides the logistics of our specific management techniques, this approach is predicated by three important convictions:

1. An important part of preservation is collection. While we may not be equipped to completely service all the moving images in our care in short order, we believe that they may be at risk where we find them and make every attempt to secure them into our possession for their own good. We are in the business of keeping such things, and the sources from which we get them are not. Taking them into our care assures, at least, that they will not be discarded or damaged by abuse.

2. Collection must be based on research. Without knowing the history of moving image activity in Nebraska, it is difficult to intelligently plan collecting, and to fit those materials we do collect into their proper context. We've found newspaper and trade journal research extremely valuable in this regard, and while we may never find some of the films we now know were made here, we know what to look for and can better appreciate the ones we do uncover. Research also provides information on who has surviving films. A statewide survey (which we have yet to conduct) and the finding aids of other repositories can bring many previously unknown Nebraska gems to light. If the research reveals that Nebraska films are already in safe archival hands, which is often the case, that's alright with us -- we're just glad to have the information (which we can pass on to our constituents) and often we can purchase copies for our own use. In this way, we rely heavily on the preservation and descriptive efforts of other repositories.

3. Film preservation is both a national and a local issue. We find that we act as a link between the small local holders of film and the larger regional, topical and national resources. To the local sources in Nebraska, often the holders of wonderful one-of-a-kind footage, we offer help: We can provide management advice if they wish to keep their films, we can house their films or find a suitable

repository if they feel they are not equipped to take care of them, we can suggest repositories where they might find additional footage, and we can direct users to their collections. For the larger repositories, we can act as their Nebraska Connection: We can forward moving images to them for which they are the best repositories, and we can provide information on local motion picture holdings and history. The Nebraska State Historical Society has acted in all of these capacities in the past few years. In short, I've been impressed with the essential interconnectedness of the archival moving image community in the United States -- we all must depend on one another.

Having thus explained our theoretical base, allow me to briefly address the practical aspects of our program. We are fortunate to have a building with good environmental safeguards in which to store our film. We have no sophisticated lab, but can repair, clean and view film using second-hand and cast-off equipment from TV stations and dealers. We also have a crude film chain with which we can make video reference copies of films -- this is how we provide access to the holdings, and while these copies are by no means broadcast quality, we believe that providing such a service cannot and should not be our role. If a producer requires a better copy than we can provide, we send to film to a reputable lab at the producer's expense. We lack the ability to work with 35mm film, and have sent some to the American Film Institute on occasion. We also cannot make preservation copies in original format. Our preservation efforts, then, are limited to collection, repair, cleaning, storage, transfer and access on video, and reliance on other institutions for formats we cannot handle. The essence of our operation is a lot of resourcefulness and very little flash.

We are just now beginning to produce automated MARC records of our moving image holdings. These will eventually be available on OCLC and possible RLIN. For the time being, though, intellectual and physical access is still accomplished through me. Our constituents are mostly film producers who know of the existence of our film collections or have been passed on by the staff of our highly-used still photo collections.

In summation, I feel we are playing an important role in the preservation of Nebraska's moving image heritage. Film is scattered throughout the state, and we are providing at least a basic means for its discovery, its interpretation, and its survival. In the national scheme of things, though, we are not a big operation, and for every institution of our size there are hundreds more sources of film that are smaller still. Their countless cans of film are extremely important to them, and they desperately need the support of the archival moving image community at large. Without this conduit for sharing experience, expertise, holdings and moral support, our task in Nebraska would be doubly hard.

Thank you for the opportunity to share this information.