

I testify today as president of Prelinger Associates, Inc. one of the largest private collections of what I call ephemeral films — that is to say, films produced for a specific purpose at a specific time. Our collection contains educational, industrial, advertising and amateur films as well as a great deal of unedited material — some 9,000 hours in all. Unlike most other collections or archives, Prelinger Associates derives its income primarily from licensing archival footage.

Although ephemeral films haven't received much attention from scholars and historians, in fact these genres have dominated American cinema for most of its history. Since the advent of the talkies in 1927, I estimate that over 600,000 of these (plus an uncountable number of amateur films) have been produced in this country. Many were made to show in theaters, and as such should be part of any consideration of film history; but the majority reached their audiences on school days or in the workplace.

Webster's defines "ephemeral" as "anything lasting but a brief time." And this has been the situation with regard to these mostly obscure films. No one knows how many survive, but perhaps as many as 50% no longer exist.

No logical principle governs what has survived and what has disappeared. No archive is equipped logistically or financially to house the remaining films, and an infinitesimal percentage has been preserved. In fact, they're one of American film's best-kept secrets.

So why bother to preserve THE WONDERFUL WORLD OF WASH AND WEAR, ROCHESTER: A CITY OF QUALITY or DATING: DO'S AND DON'TS? These are our "national home movies," the best and most vivid records of our public and private lives — how Americans have lived, worked, thought and consumed.

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MOTION PICTURE, BROADCASTING
AND RECORDED SOUND

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Recently, I was invited to visit Britton, a town in eastern South Dakota. It seems that during the Depression Ivan Besse, an enterprising projectionist, tried to boost attendance at the Strand Theatre. So he took his Kodak movie camera out to Main Street to shoot movies of people visiting town on Saturday. Later, he also shot cornhusking bees, WPA workers building a dam, and sheriffs taking prisoners to jail. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, when business was slow, he showed these 16mm pictures at the Strand.

When TV came to South Dakota, Ivan's efforts to corral audiences were no longer successful. He lost the theater in the Sixties, and the films were sold for fifty cents to a woman in Texas. Later, they came to me, and when the mayor of Britton heard this, I was invited to bring them back to the Strand. Fifty-three years later, Ivan hosted a screening of his films in his old theater, narrating them in front of an audience who pointed out their younger selves promenading on the screen. I've never seen people talk back, call out and interact with a movie like that audience did. For they saw images of their town surviving the "dirty Thirties" as best it could, and that meant a great deal to them. They saw the rich public life of Main Street, crowded with shoppers, gawkers and flirting teens; community rituals like proms, distributions of Christmas presents and Memorial Day parades; and the faces of people, their manners and body language of fifty years ago. One person even saw her older sister for the first time, for her sister had died before she was born.

Somewhere in a forgotten industrial, advertising or educational film, there's something for every one of us — scenes of our hometown, pictures of how our fathers and mothers worked for a living, a treatise on social etiquette, or maybe the look of a Twenties farm or Fifties supermarket. You won't see many of these everyday images in newsreels or feature films.

Since 1984, we have supplied footage to over 2,000 film and video producers seeking imagery and historical documentation unavailable from any other source. Images from our collection are routinely seen on PBS's *American Experience* and *NOVA*, on network news programs, in documentaries and independent productions, and of course in numerous commercials and corporate shows. I think this testifies to the importance of, and demand for, this material. We are now fielding requests from publishers of electronic books, interactive and other kinds of emerging media. Their products, if enhanced by carefully curated moving images, promise to nurture historical consciousness in future generations. But no foreseeable increase in business activity will permit more than token efforts on our part to preserve our over 23,000 completed films and 40,000 cans of unedited footage.

In order for the impact of our film preservation efforts to be felt, the archival community urgently needs assistance to make its holdings accessible to the public. Emerging technologies (especially online delivery of digital video information) can greatly assist in this effort. Archives can and should lead in this area.

I urge the Board to look beyond recognized masterworks and consider the importance of ephemeral films and the state of their preservation, which, unhappily, is insignificant at this time. I hope that you will make generous provision for them in your report, and recommend that these historical materials receive their proper share of attention (and funding) under a future national moving image preservation plan, whether they are held by public or private custodians. Their preservation and ready accessibility will send a powerful message to future generations — that the history of daily life isn't just a matter of nostalgia or quaintness, but a means of understanding the heritage of our own communities, lives and labors.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before this Board.