

## **HOME MOVIES: A BASIC PRIMER on care, handling, storage**

by Toni Treadway, ©©1992, ©©1996, ©©2001, ©© 2004.

### **HOME MOVIES: WHY BOTHER?**

Most amateur motion picture film contains one-of-a-kind images that are unique and important to the history of our culture. So-called home movies reveal a great deal about the filmmaker, what she or he was involved with and the people and events filmed. They provide us with a deeper look into our past from many more diverse points of view than commercially-made movies. This article grew from contact with many people today who do not realize the value of amateur film as cultural document. Home Movies are the moving image equivalent of a personal diary or family journal. Home movie formats in the hands of an artist are a film art form themselves. Home movies are as important to preserve and share as old photos, old diaries, old paintings and sketches, great-grandmother's quilt or great-grandfather's carving. They are a folk art, sometimes high cinema, and always a window on the culture.

Film preservation is an exciting arena of cultural activity in the USA today and many more people are aware of its issues. But families must start creating their own archives because the public film archives are inundated with footage and lack the resources to meet the urgent need of much of the professional movie history of the first half of century. Family archivists and filmmakers in amateur formats need to understand you are front line for preservation of your heritage, of your artistic expression. Like investigating your genealogy, updating the family tree in the front of your family Bible, or copying early photos to give all the grandchildren, your family's home movies will only be preserved for future generations if you take an interest.

If you are interested in placing your inactive records in an archives or starting your own archives, please contact:



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**STEVE WALKER CA**  
**STATE ARCHIVIST**

Idaho Public Archives and Research Library  
2205 East Old Penitentiary Road  
Boise, Idaho 83712-8250

VOICE (208) 334-2620  
FAX (208) 334-2626  
E-mail [steve.walker@ishs.idaho.gov](mailto:steve.walker@ishs.idaho.gov)

## HOME MOVIES: A BASIC PRIMER on care, handling, storage cont.

### WHY PRESERVATION NOW?

Home movies were first introduced to a generation who is now passing. Many skilled photographers found their hobby led them to try movies when they became affordable in the 1920's and 1930's. Family homestead are cleaned out and sold, and belongings fall into the hands of younger generations. Some remember seeing themselves on the silver screen as children, some do not know film from video. It is time to gather up the films and show them to the elders who remain. They can look at the images and recall the names and deeds of the people on film.

Another reason to save our home movies has to do with this positive development in the American culture: increased interest in our history and in our diversity. This means that primary source or "first person" documents have greater authority than in the past because they are now being sought out to amplify the historic record. We all know books or television shows that have drawn on journals, diaries and eyewitness testimony to add to, refine or challenge history. The popular series on the Civil War on Public Television drew largely on private letters of regular people. Like these written sources, home movies offer a way for the viewer to have a glimpse of a particular moment in the past as seen by an individual. We need to preserve as many views as possible for the fullest record so that in the future our heirs or our historians can have lots to consider.

Home movie filmmakers must act as their own film preservationists. Evidence of neglect abounds: too many movies reside in an attic or a wet basement, two of the worst places for storing photographic materials. An important ethnographic film was left in a refrigerator to stay cool but its images disappeared when it sat in red wine spilled from the shelf above. A Super 8 cinema punk rock classic was found in coils on the floor when its reel was appropriated by the artist on the night she was to premiere another film. One family tells the story of having their movies transferred to VHS video but the video shop advised them to throw out the film, a shocking and ignorant suggestion. Our personal film heritage cries out for attention. You can help with storage cool and dry, annotation, while the elders remember the images and sharing this word and your images with the family.

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### CONTENT

Amateur motion picture films provide a record of life that is unique. Unlike commercially produced movies, they are usually shot by people intimately connected to the experience who choose moments and subjects important to them. The impression that only rich people took movies while on safari or a cruise is not complete. 16mm film, introduced in 1923, indeed carries many images of the privileged class and some astonishing cinematic experiments by artists. The marketing of 8mm in the 1930's broadened the scope of home moviemaking to include families from a variety of ethnic, racial, economic and social backgrounds. If a family member had a hobby of photography it often turned into moviemaking. As a result, any of the amateur films of this era are beautifully composed, well exposed, extraordinary records.

Home movies often hold quite different content and form than professional films, whether newsreel or dramatic films. The professionals were paid to set up tripods and roll film of the rich and famous, the newsworthy event, the bankrolled script. Meanwhile, home moviemakers tended to family and friends, buddies with a shared love of a sport, the picnics at the beach, grandma's place, play in the backyard, or hanging on the stoop waiting for the parade. The home movies give us information that is not centralized, not government propaganda, and not made for hire.

The most famous 8mm film of the century is The Zapruder Film, the record of President Kennedy's assassination made by a by-stander in 1963. Arguably, it is quite a different record from the professional news gatherers of the day and it was the first 8mm film included in the Library of Congress' National Film Registry.

As we near the end of the motion picture century, so-called "home movies" are gaining in appreciation. Amateur-made movies recently used in TV biographies reveal personal moments in the lives of famous people as diverse as Orville Wright, Malcolm X, Lucille Ball, and Lee Harvey Oswald. Meanwhile, 16mm and 8mm films also recorded the experiences of regular people, from pastoral childhood scenes at a summer camp to disturbing street scenes of the Warsaw Ghetto made by an unknown photographer.

All records of the culture, be they amateur or professional, naively or purposefully constructed, could one day have value to the maker's descendants or to artists, historians and cultural anthropologists of the future. It is not for us today to guess which films will be important, rather let's save as many documents as possible for the future to examine.

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## **WHY ARE HOME MOVIES IMPORTANT?**

Old personal movies are increasingly used in television alongside other historic materials to expand the record of history. Media producers and audiences look to reexamine history from more diverse points of view. Unique scenes often show up in documentaries on PBS's Frontline, American Experience, NOVA A&E's Biography and other TV programs that explore culture and history. Home movies were not the sole provenance of wealthy or white families; their filmmakers came from all parts of the spectrum and their images expand the social and political context of events.

The Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles has integrated into their exhibits the images of one filmmaker who had a camera with him during his WWII incarceration in the relocation camps. The museum also archives his films of the mainstream American lifestyle of Japanese-American families in the late 1930's prior to their imprisonment. A poignant point-counter-point, the scenes of USC football games and church youth groups contrast sharply with the rigorous, spare conditions in the camp during the war years.

For the 1995 celebration of the launching of the newest ship named "US The Sullivan" one filmmaker edited together clips of historic professional films with amateur films made by crew from the decks of all the prior ships of that name. For fifty years, friends, family and crew attend reunions to commemorate the Sullivan brothers.

While researching the life of Malcolm X for the PBS documentary, producer Orlando Bagwell and his team found 8mm in the hands of a amateur photographer. A trusted member of the Nation of Islam, this man was allowed to film inside the Temple with his 8mm camera. His film gives us scenes with cultural details not available in other media.

So-called home movies provide the culture with a deeper and different record than moving images made professionally. Home movies hold clips of life over the last 70 years, things that are passionately interesting and of importance to individuals. The uniqueness of point-of-view motion pictures from the past makes it imperative that more such records be made, be shared, and be preserved for future generations.

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## THE HIGHLIGHTS

HOME MOVIES are unique cultural documents recorded on amateur motion picture film (generally on 16mm, 8mm or Super 8mm and a few esoteric gauges.) Families need to find their home movies, review their condition and store them carefully for they hold both a personal and cultural treasure that can last a long time for future generations to enjoy. More than ever, home movies are growing in appreciation as families and media producers of documentaries are beginning to understand the unique role these movies have as the repository of personal moving images.

HOME VIDEO, including copies of your family's home movies on video, is a useful and fun medium for recording and viewing family events, but video does not have the history of image permanence of amateur motion picture film.

In view of the current state of video with its ever-changing array of formats, hardware and new technologies and as advocate for the long range cultural record, the author recommends above all:

- THAT FAMILY HISTORIANS PAY ATTENTION TO THE HANDLING AND STORAGE OF THEIR HOME MOVIES AND OTHER PHOTOGRAPHIC RECORDS OF THEIR FAMILY AND REGION
- THAT ALL FAMILY HISTORIANS SHOULD RECORD EVENTS ON FILM FOR POSTERITY NO MATTER WHAT RECORDINGS ARE ALSO MADE ON ELECTRONIC MEDIA.

This means at historic moments, one family member must be sure to expose a roll or two of FILM. Whether still film or movies, this is necessary to preserve baby's first steps, the wedding, a family feast, or any sight or event that interests the maker for posterity. Then, process the film at a reputable lab and store it well, cool and dry. This will ensure that future generations can have access to the moments you thought were important to share. The film stocks that have the best track records for image permanence without a doubt are Black and White films or the venerable color film Kodachrome.

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**The good news for family historians and low budget, film-loving artists is amateur motion picture film is still available.** You can find working cameras and projectors in closets and at flea markets. Super 8 and 16mm reversal films are manufactured by Kodak while film in 8mm or 9.5mm are more rare but still found in niche markets. Some people protest that movie film is quite expensive per minute when compared to home video, yet film is a very accessibly priced medium when the long range record of your family is taken into consideration.

Early videotape has not held up well over time and new videotape has not been in existence long enough to have a track record for stability or shelf life. Formats come and go in video and retrieval of images will depend on access to technology. Many families play original videotapes over and over which further puts the recorded image at risk, especially if a videotape is frequently reviewed fast forward or slow motion. In the future, access to the images may be available, to images may be degraded or lost, but access is sure to be expensive to the right equipment to play video back or duplicate it onto some new technology. Few people are taking actions which help preserve their home video collections such as setting aside the hardware that will be needed by their great-grandchildren to watch it.

**More good news! Motion picture film made for families is SAFETY FILM which is not flammable.** Home movies were made for amateur projection and cannot burst into flame spontaneously. Articles in the media about flammability and film preservation efforts refer to professional movies which were generally made on 35mm nitrate prior to 1950. Many of those films are indeed beyond help or at risk. Home movie cameras, film and projectors were not mass marketed until the refinement of safety film, which is acetate based, not nitrate, and melts if you try to burn it. SAFETY FILM IS NOT FLAMMABLE. Home movies are often found in good condition but the ones that are stored badly, in attics or wet places, are at risk.

Home movie fans should find their movies and check them. **FAMILIES MUST GET THEIR FILMS BACK AFTER VIDEO TRANSFER, FOR IT IS THE MOVIES THEMSELVES WHICH WILL LAST TO THE SEVENTH GENERATION NOT THE VIDEO COPY.** Deterioration can still exist with safety film. Usually, deterioration has nothing to do with age; it is most often due to poor processing or bad storage.

A little extra care in storage can achieve much longer life for home movies. If no other steps are taken, families should at least move film immediately to a safe, dry, cool and comfortable place to help insure a longer life. Films and other photographic materials like negatives of still images will greatly benefit from simple relocation to a desk drawer rather than the attic or a wet basement. Amateur motion picture safety film during its 70-plus year history has proven to be remarkably stable when stored under favorable conditions. It can last another one hundred or two hundred years to provide a source of enjoyment, continuity and history.

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