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Jim Henderson
publius@maine.com

Karan Sheldon
Northeast Historic Film, karan@oldfilm.org

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Northeast Historic Film and the Documentation of Maine's History

by Jim Henderson and Karan Sheldon

The mission of Northeast Historic Film is to collect, preserve, and share moving images of interest to the people of northern New England. We secure the region's moving-image heritage through archival storage of significant collections, while engaging the public in finding, using and enjoying audio-visual media.

Moving images are among the most important documents of twentieth-century life as they capture policy steps taken and not taken, infrastructure created and abandoned, politicians' campaigns and public governance, citizens' work lives, social and cultural attitudes, industries, natural resources and their use. "Unlike traditional paper records, these research materials move and talk. They provide multiple insights into historical events and engage the viewers' imagination and emotions in a special way" (Sahli 1997).

Film is paradoxically robust. In cool and dry storage it can last for many decades, yet much of the film record is lost, and the surviving reels require expert attention and ongoing commitment of resources. All moving images including film, analog video reels, and born-digital video files are technology-dependent records, which require future migrations from one format to the next.

Film documents, millions of feet of them, were created by units of government, and by corporations, individuals, and educational institutions with specific intentions: to promote, inform, educate, record, entertain, persuade. Beginning in the early years of the last century, copies of films made in Maine were distributed in service of these missions. In the 1980s, as analog video replaced film, Maine's circulating 16mm film collections for classroom and public use closed.

Moving-image media are, when discoverable and accessible, rich documents, supporting many areas of research. One example is the experience of tuberculosis patients in public health facilities as described in "Forced Fun and a Stiff Upper Lip: Glimpses of the

Western Maine Sanatorium and Tuberculosis Treatment in Maine, 1909–1960," a presentation given by Erik Jorgensen at the Northeast Historic Film Symposium, *Time Out: Images of Play and Leisure*, in 2007. The presentation drew from the Talbot and Barbara Hackett Collection's 16mm film of the Western Maine Sanatorium in Hebron. Historian Libby Bischof of University of Southern Maine is an enthusiastic user of moving images with her students and in her research, recently using NHF's archives to write about Harrie B. Coe, general secretary of the Maine Publicity Bureau and author of the five-volume *Maine—A History* (1928). (See Figure 1.)¹

Film records such as Coe's state-produced promotional pieces will survive to serve as primary source materials only if these conditions are met: (1) the records are recognized as having value; (2) physical storage is provided with stable cold and dry climate control and regular condition inspection; (3) the media are accompanied by descriptive records written in standards-based metadata so that they may be discoverable and understood; (4) the original content is made available through thoughtful and sustainable digitization so they may be

FIGURE 1: **Still from Harrie B. Coe Collection Film**



Northeast Historic Film, Harrie B. Coe Collection, ACC_0760-3

viewed and reused; and (5) planning and funding to meet essential standards of care stays ahead of deterioration and accommodates changing technologies.

Maine benefits from steps taken to meet these conditions with the 1986 establishment of the independent nonprofit organization Northeast Historic Film (NHF). Located in Bucksport, the moving-image archives—whose mission appears at the head of this piece—has invested approximately \$15 million to collect, safeguard, and make accessible the region's moving-image heritage. Northeast Historic Film's conservation center consists of a three-story cold storage building, trained staff, and a 25,000-item database supporting findability and custodial care. (See Figure 2).

Along with serving scholars, NHF takes up diverse users' needs by distributing media at low cost to teachers and students and by providing storage and technical services to institutions such as Maine Public Broadcasting, the University of Maine, and the Maine State Archives. Northeast Historic Film collaborates with scholars who build tools to help others to navigate the collections such as "Wabanaki Film Holdings at Northeast Historic Film: A Bibliography," by Micah Pawling (2009). The Council on Library and Information Resources, Cataloging Hidden Special Collections and Archives program helped fund the online selection of Moving Images of Work Life, 1916–1960.²

In the 1990s, NHF developed a plan to evaluate, rehouse, catalog, and make accessible copies of films from the Maine State Archives (MSA) that had been produced by units of Maine state government, starting

with 79 reels of film from the Maine Department of Agriculture. In addition to bills, reports, statistics, and other printed records of state government, film and now moving-image media on other carriers, constitute part of the MSA records mandate. Many units of state government used films for communicating their missions, persuading citizens, and reaching potential visitors and trade partners. The state produced films related to agriculture, health and safety, fish and wildlife, forestry, tourism, trade, among others. State-created film was produced by or for state agencies including the Department of Agriculture, Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, the Department of Tourism, Department of Education, Department of Transportation, the Department of Environmental Protection, and the Governor's Office. The films are tangible representations of state priorities of the day.

The report "On the Condition of Historical Records in Maine," sent to the Maine State Legislature in 2002 and based on surveys of public and private repositories, stated that Maine had at least 400 million historical records in many formats (text, graphic designs, still images, moving images, sound) on many types of recording media (paper, leather, glass, film, wood, acetate, mylar, vinyl) using various fixing techniques (printing, painting, drawing, chemical, magnetic, laser) (Henderson and Hollinger 2002). It noted that recording media may degrade and retrieval aids may become obsolete (e.g., Edison's cylinder players, Dictaphone players, 8-inch floppy disc drives and related software). The report also noted the importance of an expert resource to deal with the Maine's inaccessible and deteriorating collection of motion picture films, which were stored in boxes along with paper records of Maine state agencies and were in jeopardy.

Northeast Historic Film provided services essential to preserving and providing access to these records. Executive Director David Weiss transported reels to Bucksport, assessing their condition and organizing them. Northeast Historic Film staff replaced old containers and created basic catalog records, containing the following: item number, collection name, title, silent/sound, color/black and white, length, negative/positive, date, transfer, source of content notes, and an abstract. Cataloging provides access to the content, and the catalog records were delivered in a database to the MSA for reference purposes. Northeast Historic Film produces digital copies of selected archives material on request.

FIGURE 2: Northeast Historic Film, Vault 5 Film Cans



In 2004 a National Endowment for the Humanities grant for Stabilizing Humanities Collections was awarded for NHF and Archival Storage Consortium partners, including the MSA. The funding helped with installation of climate control, fire suppression, and security systems for NHF's three-story media storage building. Northeast Historic Film's cold storage vault answers the 2002 report's documented need for secure, climate-controlled environments for long-term storage of fragile materials. Maine State Archives transferred 252,000 feet of 16mm film to Bucksport and pays an annual fee for storage. This formal agreement is part of the archives' practice of pursuing services from vendors as outlined in the 2002 report.

The Association of Moving Image Archivists (AMIA) is the professional organization for those managing time-based media collections. Members are watching several recent large-scale initiatives dealing with digitization of analog holdings, including Indiana University's Media Digitization and Preservation Initiative. The scope and scale of Indiana's initiative is remarkable both for the details provided in the initial assessment plan and the resource commitment of \$15 million. Indiana University Bloomington's *Media Preservation Survey: A Report* (2009) is worth reviewing for its clear attention to format obsolescence and the downstream implications of content migration.³

What do we think of the relationship between the "Indiana Approach"—as it's dubbed by the Library of Congress—and the planning and resource allocation necessary on the part of local, state and regional media custodians? We propose that the road map offered by Indiana is an inspiration and a challenge. Recognizing the significance of moving-image media to informed governance and to humanities disciplines is a starting place. We contend that Indiana University shows us that investment in our knowledge base is crucial. Northeast Historic Film's vision for Maine's moving images positions stakeholders and leaders to imagine a collaborative, efficient, forward-thinking "Maine Approach." 🐟

ENDNOTES

1. More information about the Talbot and Barbara Hackett Collection and the Harrie B. Coe Collection is available on NHF's website: Talbot and Barbara Hackett Collection: http://oldfilm.org/collection/index.php/Detail/Collection/Show/collection_id/223. Harrie B. Coe Collection: http://oldfilm.org/collection/index.php/Detail/Collection/Show/collection_id/8
2. The Moving Images of Work Life, 1916–1960, collections are available at <http://oldfilm.org/collection/index.php/Browse/HiddenCollectionsList>
3. The website for Indiana University's Media Preservation Initiative is <http://www.indiana.edu/~medpres/>. The full report may be accessed at http://www.indiana.edu/~medpres/documents/iub_media_preservation_survey_FINALwww.pdf

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Jim Henderson, Northeast Historic Film board president, was director of the Maine State Archives from 1987 to 2007. He is publisher/author of *Maine: An Encyclopedia* at <http://www.maineencyclopedia.com>.

He was advisor to the Council of State Archivists for its Essential Records preservation project.



Karan Sheldon is a cofounder and board member of Northeast Historic Film. With David S. Weiss, she was a recipient of the Silver Light Award from the Association of Moving Image Archivists. In Maine, she was honored with the Constance H. Carlson Public Humanities Prize.