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NYU: Moving Image Archiving & Preservation
Introduction to Moving Image Archiving & Preservation
November 13, 2013

Home movies are amateur recordings that provide a brief insight into the life of a individual, group or family unit. Like Socrates once said “*The unexamined life is not worth living*”. In this sense, home movies provide us with the opportunity to look back and reflect on our lives. In addition to providing people with a connection to their past, they serve as a looking glass into the past for future generations who are interested in what life was like at a certain point in time. In most cases, home movies can even provide a more honest depiction of culture during a specific time period. Although many home movies are recorded with little consideration of the future, their perspective and content serve as invaluable moving image resources. For the purposes of exploring home movie culture from both an enthusiast and research point of view, I will briefly outline the history of home movie culture and document my findings and experience in the acquisition of an unknown Super 8mm home movie. In conclusion, I will highlight current preservation and access efforts, as well as touch upon issues concerning home movies today.

In 1965, Eastman Kodak released its Super 8mm film format. It was a brand new format with one main goal, to revolutionize the amateur filmmaking market. “*The targeted market for the new product seems unquestionably to have been the amateur filmer, beginning with the Instamatic name itself, thus tying the product in the public’s mind with the hugely successful Instamatic still cameras, which sold over ten million units in the first two years on the market*” (Kattelle, 207). The main areas of the amateur filmmaking market were education, commercial and industrial use, and home movies. Kodak launched a full fledged marketing campaign consisting of family oriented commercials that aired on television, and full page

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advertisements they placed in popular magazines like LIFE and LOOK. Cameras were designed to be as easy to use as possible, so practically anyone could operate one. Even the Super 8mm film was housed in a cartridge, a change from the 8mm film format, and the entire fifty foot reel could be shot without interruption. In 1973, Kodak added a magnetic sound strip to the Super 8mm format; only further solidifying its role as an easily transportable and complete tool for amateur filmmakers.

Needless to say, Super 8 was a huge success. Super 8mm film cameras were a hit with American families and young amateur filmmakers. The Super 8mm amateur filmmaker enjoyed “... *total control of subject matter and execution... having no need to appeal to a wide audience*” and “*the independent Super 8 filmmaker was best equipped to tell truths about his country that would otherwise be ignored or suppressed by the professional*” (Kattelle, 297). Kodak, as well as other camera and projector manufacturers like Bell & Howell, heavily promoted this whole idea of “documentation”. Whether it was documenting one’s family, surroundings or historical events; everyone was encouraged to get behind the camera. In a 1967 television commercial produced by Kodak for their Instamatic movie camera, men (specifically fathers) were encouraged to purchase the Instamatic movie camera for their wife; who would presumably be at home capturing all the childhood memories while fathers were at work. “*Despite Eastman Kodak’s best efforts and, to some extent, that of other manufacturers to encourage women to use the movie camera, most early amateur filmmakers were men*” (Kattelle, 282). Although not true in every case, fathers usually ended up taking on this role of “documenting the family”.

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Why are home movies important? Home movies retain both personal and cultural significance. They capture memories, temporarily fulfill our desire to be remembered, provide future generations with a glimpse into the past, and hold historical and documentary significance beyond the family setting. When deciding whether or not home movies are important, one of the main questions often is *Who really cares about preserving your life for future generations?* I think most people would agree that the home movies of Marilyn Monroe would attract more attention than the home movies of an average unknown family from Kenosha, Wisconsin. Watching past lives is entertaining, whether it's yours or someone else's. Home movies may be ephemeral in the sense that the physical material they are captured on is impermanent, but they are not at all temporary in the cultural value they possess.

“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.”

Toni Treadway
Director of the International Center for 8mm Film

This quote is a true summation of home movie culture, and its potential. Home movies are full of possibilities, and the purpose they serve may be different for each individual.

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I set out to acquire a home movie, preferably one shot on Super 8mm film, for the purpose of inspection and repair, review of content and education in the true spirit of home movie culture. During my search on eBay, an online auctioning company, I came across a Super 8mm silent film from the 1970s. The listing specified that there were three reels of film, one of which was labeled “Wedding, June 20, 1970”. After contacting the seller, I learned that the films were purchased from an estate sale in Leicester, UK (also the location they would be shipped from). No other information was available. After receiving the film, I did an initial inspection of the plastic cans and opened them to see if there were any odors or visible signs of mold or deterioration. I then conducted a more thorough inspection of the reels on rewinds, looking for any tears or sprocket damage that might interfere with any attempt to project the material. There were two torn sections within the wedding reel, so a Super 8mm tape splicer was used to reattach these sections of film. Minor scratches and splotches were also present in some of the frames, but not to any great extent. The sprocket holes were in good condition, and leader was attached where needed. The next step was to review the material and take notes on the content, so an attempt could be made at trying to identify any landmarks or events present in the film. A Bell & Howell Autoload silent Super 8mm projector was used to review the material. During projection, I recorded the footage with a Nikon D5100 at 30 frames per second with a resolution of 1920x1080. Although not a desired digitization process, this was done in order to provide reference stills during the research process.

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I was very surprised to learn that the films were set in various parts of Ontario, Canada and Montréal, Québec, instead of being shot in parts of the United Kingdom; since that is where the films were purchased from. Snowden Becker, one of the co-founders of Home Movie Day and the Center for Home Movies, mentioned that “...archivists deplore the existence of a collectors market for ephemeral films, having seen many intact family collections (even long single reels) broken up and sold piecemeal on eBay, their context and integrity sacrificed in the hope of higher bids for the individual reels” (Becker, 27). Perhaps a collector from England purchased the film from Canada some years ago? During my research, I was able to find some ties between the law schools of the universities in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada and Leicester, England. There could be any number of reasons for this turn of events, and any theory would be just that- a theory.

Nevertheless, the content was very educational both historically and culturally. One reel featured a family visiting the Parliament of Canada in Ottawa, Ontario and at Expo '67 in Montréal, Québec during Canada's Centennial year in 1967. Another reel featured the same family visiting Niagara Falls in Niagara Falls, Ontario, at a picnic with friends and then in Windsor, Ontario with other family members at an unidentified house in the suburbs. The final reel, labeled “Wedding, June 20, 1970”, featured newlyweds signing their marriage license with a magistrate and witnesses, them posing for wedding photos outside of an unidentified church, and the wedding reception at another unidentified location. After reviewing the material, I suspect that the cameraman is the groom featured in the “Wedding, June 20, 1970” reel of film.

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He is only shown a few times in the other reels of film, often walking towards the camera in long still shots (as if orchestrated by him). He most likely had a friend film his wedding for him, since he was obviously busy at the time.

In reviewing these three reels of unknown Super 8mm film, I found myself on the receiving end of everything I previously stated that home movies have to offer future generations. I was given a glimpse into past historical events, landmarks and family traditions, while enjoying memories captured by someone who thought they were important and significant enough to document. They were right. Until the age of twenty-three, I lived only thirty minutes from Canada, but I learned more about it's history in these three reels of film than I ever learned during the time I spent in Ontario and Québec. The next Canadian Centennial will be in the year 2067, and I will (hopefully) be eighty years old. The fact that I might not even be around for the next centennial really put into perspective just what a unique experience this was for the family featured in the film. So consequential, that they travelled all the way to Ottawa, Ontario and Montréal, Québec to take part in the festivities. The contents of this film could be useful or of interests to others, and after I have made every attempt at trying to identify and contact the family, I will look into donating the three reels of film to a home movie repository.

When it comes to present day home movie culture, there are currently some efforts being made at preserving and providing access to home movies of the past. Home Movie Day, a response to the large generation of people who lost touch with their family films, developed out of a Small Gauge and Amateur Film Interest Group (SGAF) meeting at the 2002 Association of

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Moving Image Archivists (AMIA) conference in Boston, Massachusetts. The first Home Movie Day event was held on August 16, 2003 (Month/8 - 8mm and Day/16 - 16mm, the most common film formats). The two principal elements of a Home Movie Day event are inspection of film and the actual screening of those films. The Home Movie Registry (homemovieregistry.org) serves as an online directory that compiles thousands of digitized home movies and amateur films into a searchable database accessible by anyone. In 2005, The Center for Home Movies was established as a nonprofit by the original founders of Home Movie Day. The initial goal was to oversee the ongoing progress of the Home Movie Day project, as well as explore and find funding for other home movie related initiatives. Their mission “...is to transform the way people think about home movies by providing the means to discover and preserve them as cultural heritage” (Center for Home Movies). Over the years, many archival institutions have begun to embrace the value of home movies and recognize the benefits of including them in their repositories. Currently, they have a collection of 1,196 home movies and amateur films located at the Internet Archive (archive.org).

As home movie formats have continued to change over the years, it has become increasingly more important to educate amateur (and some cases, even professional!) filmmakers on what it means to preserve and manage our home movie culture. “*The focus of Home Movie Day is on filmed home movies rather than home video, for two major reasons: small-gauge films are much more likely to be inaccessible to their owners for lack of equipment and familiarity, and HMD can accomplish more with a projector and a take-up reel than with a VCR and*

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monitor” (Becker, 22). Like Home Movie Day, Activist Archivists of New York, NY are in the process of organizing Home Video Day in an effort to focus on fading magnetic tape and digital video formats that have been used to record home movies over the past twenty years. Many of these formats, such as MiniDV and VHS, are in danger of becoming inaccessible and should be migrated in order to save the content for future generations.

“The aim of this event is to highlight the need for preserving family and community memories as part of a peoples’ history. As is clear to documentary filmmakers in addressing events and times from U.S. history- the visual documentation that exists, especially for the history and culture of marginalized communities, i.e. people of color, immigrants, and others, is often only found in the home movies, photos and videos that individual families own. Often unaware of the importance of such materials for future generations, and unaware of the physical dangers to the media itself (decomposition and lack of decks to replay) families may let their audio visual memories languish and potentially disappear”

Kelly Haydon
Activists Archivists

At this event, Activists Archivists and volunteers will provide educational materials with storage and digitization recommendations. People are often unaware of the fragility of their family memories and do not realize they should be actively managing their home movie collection, or

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they fall victim to cheap digitization services that end up providing lower quality copies of their family memories. They are looking to hold an event sometime in the year 2014.

So, what does the future of home movies look like? Unfortunately, the future is not very bright and there are many concerns for the stability of the media that home movies are currently being recorded on, and the education of consumers who are utilizing current technology to capture their memories. Smartphones have become the cameras of today, not because they are better in quality than other cameras, but more due to the fact that they are convenient and the one thing people don't leave home without. Even if someone owns a nicer camera, they are more likely to use their smartphone to capture those unexpected moments. Some of the main issues with utilizing current video recording methods are storage, importation and management. Many rely solely on their mobile device to store their moving images, and are often surprised when they lose information due to accidental damage (ex. dropping device in water), mobile operating system malfunctions etc. Also, users are unaware of how to import their video in a way that retains the quality of the original; or if this is even an option with their device. Lastly, backing up data and the ongoing management required by file based (the structure in which digital video is captured on mobile devices) media is not common knowledge or a priority for many. These are issues that future moving image archivists will end up facing when it comes to the category of home movies. The truth is, in some ways, the home movies being captured today are more vulnerable than the home movies of the past.

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