

Book Review of

The Film Preservation Guide: The Basics for Archives, Libraries, and Museums

National Film Preservation Foundation, 2004

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NOTE

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The Film Preservation Guide: The Basics for Archives, Libraries, and Museums presents a hands-on introduction to the art and science of film preservation while offering a sidelong glimpse of selected projects funded by the National Film Preservation Foundation (NFPF). Though a slender volume (freely downloadable at <http://www.filmpreservation.org/preservation/film%5Fguide.html>), the guide actually goes beyond the basics. It also provides advice on how to customize projects according to individual repository goals and budgets, and more significantly, how to create a sustainable film preservation program.

The days of major film studios neglecting to preserve their own output have slipped into the distant past: Profitable video, DVD, cable and related markets create incentives for the film industry to invest in preservation and restoration (p. vii.). Commercial preservation programs are flourishing, guaranteeing that the tragedy that befell early Hollywood film – fewer than 20 % of silent-era features survive in complete copies today – will not repeat itself.

However, the same cannot be said for films without access to industry-sponsored preservation programs. Termed “orphan films,” they are unable to recoup the costs of their own preservation through commercial markets. In addition, they may lack clear copyright (p. 3). Orphan films may include amateur works, avant-garde works, educational films, silent-era films, or news reels. They often make their way into research and cultural heritage organizations such as museums, libraries, and archives. These organizations are now at the front lines to rescue these treasures and make them viewable for the public.

Cultural heritage organizations generally have no choice but to address the various preservation challenges presented by multimedia collections. Many archives no longer have the “luxury” of accepting only traditional paper documents. Rather, motion pictures frequently arrive as part of large record groups, which may include a variety of digital, audio-visual, special collections, or personal papers (p. 2). These multimedia bring with them new sets of preservation issues, different from those in paper-based collections. Furthermore, the increasing number of formats does not necessarily translate into more staff members. A 2002 NFPF survey indicated that caretakers of special materials usually handle more than one format (p. 2). Film is just one of the many special formats that today’s cultural heritage professionals curate in his or her typically budget-stressed repository.

This book is created by and for public research institutions that include motion picture film in their repositories. Although large film archives would also benefit from having the guide on hand, it was not created exclusively for them. Rather it was written for a broad range of repositories, reaching out to those that do not specialize in film but find that they have rare and historically significant film amongst their accessions and are perplexed as to where to begin.

The manual benefits from the interactive and collaborative planning that went into its production. Thanks to a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the NFPF developed this publication with significant input from potential users: publication managers held needs assessment sessions at two repositories with young film preservation programs. Session attendees indicated that they wanted the guide to “keep it simple,” include “real-life” examples, and refrain from jargon. They also said they would like to see a discussion of preservation within the context of other archival activities (p. vii-viii, xi). The guide succeeds on all of these counts: it is clear and well written in plain English, and it includes case studies of film preservation projects at various institutions throughout the United States. It also has chapters on other archives functions—cataloging, legal issues and access. These chapters provide an introduction to these topics as well as an explanation of their interrelation to preservation work.

The case studies are a welcome feature of this guide. Eight examples of preservation projects are distributed throughout the book. Each case study examines aspects of film preservation pertinent to the chapter in which it appears. Featured repositories include state historical societies (Oklahoma, Minnesota, and Nebraska), state and regional film archives (Alaska Film Archives and Northeast Historic Film), and various non-profit and university organizations. The case studies illustrate that cultural heritage organizations charged with safeguarding unique motion picture film are indeed diverse in terms of breadth, focus and scope. However, whether they are major film archives or claim only several thousand feet of motion picture film amongst all their collections, repositories share a need for up-to-date film preservation information and know-how. The case studies also demonstrate that films of many different types are candidates for preservation. A 1950 nitrate political advertisement, a 1939 compilation 16-mm film including some of the earliest color footage of the Amazon Basin, and a 1976 16-mm film about a unique musical group which had both its sound track and images restored are among the projects discussed. The guide’s case studies enhance the encouraging, can-do tone of the manual, while serving as examples for U.S. repositories considering applying for NFPF grants themselves.

The Film Preservation Guide takes the beginner through keys steps in the preservation process: from how to do a safe “close reading” of the film artifact to how to select storage and outside vendors, and finally how to benefit from outreach opportunities that emerge from film preservation projects. An emphasis is on establishing a sustainable film preservation program even when a repository lacks a full-time preservationist. Suggestions include documenting preservation-related activities, decisions, and procedures to aid in the development of an ongoing program and training skilled volunteers to participate in the workflow.

This guide is a valuable reference, complementing other NFPF online publications on this topic. It builds on the “Preservation Basics” overview on the NFPF website at www.filmpreservation.org. It is also useful in conjunction with another NFPF online publication, the *IPI Media Storage Quick Reference*, which is broader in scope than the *Film Preservation Guide*, addressing various audiovisual formats including photographic prints, videotape, CDs, and other materials (The *IPI Media Storage Quick Reference* is

available at http://www.climatenotebook.org/MSQR/MSQR_home.html.) *The Film Preservation Guide* is an accessible and encouraging introduction to the world of motion picture film preservation and conservation. It is recommended for the community of research organizations that include film in their collections. Although film certainly presents preservation challenges, there are compelling reasons to meet these challenges. As historical and cultural records, motion pictures convey the ambience and message of an era in a way that paper records cannot. Cultural heritage organizations wishing to preserve motion picture records and make them available to others will appreciate the guidance provided in this manual.