

What's Happening

I N T H E U S A ?

BY LAWRENCE GABLE

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In 1988 the U.S. Congress established the National Film Registration Board. Its National Film Registry is a list of significant movies from film history. Every December it adds 25 films to the list, movies that it will preserve forever.

**More Movies
Make the List**

The Library of Congress is in charge of the National Film Registry. The Library of Congress began in 1800, and its mission always has been to “further the progress of knowledge and creativity for the benefit of the American people.” The Library owns a collection of more than 144 million items. Among them is the world’s largest collection of film and television recordings.

The history of film goes back to the end of the 19th century. At that time photography still captured images on glass plates. Then in 1885 the American inventor George Eastman made moving pictures possible when he discovered a paper base that could capture images. When he wound it into a roll, it became known as film. His company, Eastman Kodak, started selling film in 1889.

Early films do not resemble the long feature films of today. Most films by both amateurs and professionals were quite short. Home movies showed the American family and community life. Newsreels reported on current events. Businesses and government agencies produced films to teach people about their work.

Many years passed before people realized that film would not stay in good condition. Even after plastic replaced paper as the base material for film, it did not last long. The heat and stress of running through a projector shortened a film’s life. Over time the images on film lost clarity and colors faded. As film got old, often it cracked and crumbled. If it got too warm, it stuck together. If it got damp, mold grew on the film and ruined it.

The number of films that have disappeared forever is shocking. The Library of Congress has learned that half of the feature films from before 1950 are gone. More than 80 percent of the films made in

the silent era (1893–1930) no longer exist either.

In addition, a high percentage of the films that survived are damaged. No one knows how many short and independently produced works also have disappeared. Now the National Film Registration Board’s job is to identify and preserve important films.



Every year the Board takes nominations for that year’s 25 movies. It receives a few thousand nominations from film critics, teachers of film

history, people in the film industry, and from the American public through the Internet. The librarian of Congress, James Billington, makes the final selections. The movies must be at least 10 years old. According to Mr. Billington, he does not choose the best or most famous films. Instead they are movies that continue to have “cultural, historical or aesthetic significance.”

Preserving film from deterioration requires several steps. One is to print the movie onto new film. Another is to store the original and the new master copy in cool and dry conditions. A third step is to give the American public access to a movie by making copies for libraries, museums and film institutes. This is especially important for older movies or little known films that did not come from Hollywood studios. The cost of preserving a movie exceeds \$20,000.

There are currently 550 films on the National Film Registry. The earliest one is “Newark Athlete” from 1891. It lasts only ten seconds. Four others on the list also come from the 1890s. The most recent ones are two from 1996, the feature film “Fargo” and an experimental, 16-minute film in black and white. Even Michael Jackson’s music video “Thriller” made it onto the list in 2009, as did “The Muppet Movie.”

Because major film studios make money from TV movie channels, movie rentals and sales, now they are preserving their movies well. However, the National Film Registration Board is not interested in making money. It preserves films, old and new, so that they will form a record of America’s cultural history. That will allow people to learn from them and enjoy them long into the future.

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The Library of Congress is in charge of the National Film Registry. The Library owns a collection of more than 144 million items. Among them is the world's largest collection of film and television recordings.

The history of film goes back to the end of the 1800s. At that time photography still captured images on glass plates. Then in 1885 paper on rolls replaced the glass, so moving pictures became possible.

Early films do not resemble the long feature films of today. Most films were quite short. Home movies showed the American family and community life. News agencies reported on current events. Businesses and governments produced films to teach people about their work.

Many years passed before people realized that film would not stay in good condition. Even after plastic replaced paper, the film did not last long. Over time the images on film lost clarity and colors faded. As film got old, often it cracked and crumbled. If it got too warm, it stuck together. If it got damp, mold grew on the film and ruined it.

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public. The librarian of Congress makes the final selections. The movies must be at least 10 years old. Movies on the list are not the best or most famous films. Instead they are movies that have cultural, historical or artistic importance.

Preserving film requires several steps. One is to print the movie onto new film. Another is to store the original and the new master copy in cool and dry conditions. A third step is to make movies available to Americans by making copies for libraries, museums and film institutes. This work is especially important for older movies or little known films. Preserving a movie costs more than \$20,000.

There are now 550 films on the National Film Registry. The earliest one is "Newark Athlete" from 1891. It lasts only ten seconds. The most recent ones are two from 1996, and one of them is an experimental, 16-minute film in black and white. Even Michael Jackson's music video "Thriller" made it onto the list in 2009, as did "The Muppet Movie."

Because film studios make money from TV movie channels, movie rentals and sales, now they are preserving their movies well. However, the National Film Registration Board is not trying to make money. It preserves films, old and new, as a record of America's cultural history. That will allow people to learn from them and enjoy them long into the future.

Background Information

Of the National Film Registry's 550 films, it includes 16 films from both 1939 and 1940, the most of any calendar years.

The best way to protect film is to keep it in an environment that is as cold as possible, yet neither too damp nor too dry. Major Hollywood studios and other film archives have built humidity-controlled cold storage vaults.

The public can nominate films by going to the Web site for the Library of Congress (www.loc.gov) and signing in for the National Film Registry.

Converting films to digital copies means that there is no film to decay, and it preserves the colors.

The librarian of Congress, James Billington, has called America's film heritage an "endangered species."

There is a documentary film about the National Film Registry called "These Amazing Shadows."

In 1889 Thomas Edison and W.K. Dickson developed the kinetoscope, a peep-show device in which film is moved past a light. This is how people saw the 1891 film "Natural Athlete." Edison introduced the movie camera in 1893.

Several decades passed before feature films were able to add sound. Although experiments with color films were made as early as the late 19th century, a 35 mm version of Kodachrome that could be used in standard motion picture cameras became available in 1950.

In 1996 Congress also created the non-profit National Film Preservation Foundation. It is related to the National Film Preservation Board, but it raises money for preservation from the private sector. The National Film Preservation Foundation has helped to preserve more than 1,850 films in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico.

In 2007 the curator of the History of Science and Technology Collections at Stanford University announced a list of the ten most important video games of all time. The list was modeled after the National Film Registry, and began efforts to preserve video games.

President Reagan signed the law that created the National Film Registration Board. He had had a successful career in acting before he entered politics.

Topics for Discussion and Writing

Pre-reading:

- List some ways to see a movie without going to a movie theater.

Comprehension:

- What does the National Film Registration Board do?

Beyond the Text:

- What kinds of things have you noticed in films that you have seen that you consider old?
- Do you think you can learn more from reading about something or from watching a movie about it?
- What qualities might make a film important rather than just entertaining?

Vocabulary (*advanced article only)

Article-specific: to preserve; mission*; to further*; feature movie; amateur*; projector*; mold; nomination; according to*; aesthetic*; deterioration*

High-use: to establish*; significant*; benefit*; to capture; image; to resemble; professional*; to survive; critic; selection; access*; institute; to exceed*; major*

Sources

Film History January 1, 2009

Cinema Journal April 1, 2008

CNNfn "The Biz" December 19, 2002

Millimeter December 17, 2002

National Film Preservation Board www.loc.gov/film

National Film Preservation Foundation
www.filmpreservation.org

CA Curricular Standards (4–12)

English-Language Arts

Reading 1.0 Vocabulary Development

2.0 Comprehension (Informational Materials)

Writing 1.0 Writing Strategies

2.0 Writing Applications

ELD—Intermediate and Advanced

Reading Vocabulary Development/Comprehension

Writing Strategies and Applications

Listening and Speaking

History-Social Science

4.4; 11.5; 11.8