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## A BOX FULL MEMORIES

When **Aubrey Reeves** discovers a box of Regular 8 film footage, she embarks on a journey that leads to a network devoted to the preservation of film

This summer I was helping to clean out my parent's basement when I came across a small box labeled "home movies." Inside were a dozen reels with labels such as "PEI vacation", "Christmas 56" and "Cottage." According to my mother, these were films shot by her father when she was a child. My curiosity was piqued, but I didn't know what I should do with them or how to even view the movies.

A filmmaker friend told me about a group called Homemade Movies (HMM), which is the only organization in Canada dedicated to showing and preserving home movies. Since 1999, HMM has been hosting "Bring-Your-Own-Home-Movie" (BYOHM) screenings and clinics. With my box of reels under my arm, I went down to Hart House to attend one of these events and get some more information about what to do with my family's films.

In the dim light of the hall, people were bent over small viewing devices and getting instructions from volunteers on how to repair their films. The attendees at the event came from all walks of life. Some, like myself, had brought in their family's films, whereas others were collectors and nostalgia buffs who acquired home movies at junk shops, estate sales and flea markets. The vast majority of home movies brought in to BYOHM events are 8mm, a format that was immensely popular from the 1930s to 1970s for consumer use because of its rich colour and for the portability of the 8mm cameras (especially exciting in the 30's when at that time all news reels and most Hollywood films were still in black and white). As a result, most people's home movies are anywhere from 35 to 70 years old and will be facing some preservation issues.

The most common problem with old home movies is that the glue-made splices have dried and come apart. Fortunately, this is the easiest deterioration to fix. Regrettably, another common problem is shrinkage, which is irreversible. The acetate base of some films that are over 50 years

old dry out, causing the space between sprockets to be shorter. This makes it almost impossible to run the film through an ordinary 8mm projector. HMM has acquired special equipment to deal with this problem and may still be able to project a shrunken film. In addition, if films have been stored in a basement or other damp environment, there is a possibility that mildew has grown on the film, causing washed out colours and the chemical of the film to be permanently altered. If the film smells of vinegar, it has undergone a chemical change and should never be stored with other film since the chemical reaction can migrate to other reels and ruin a whole collection.

Despite these possible deteriorations, film is a very stable medium. I was cautioned that even if I decide to have my family's home movies transferred to DVD to ease viewing, I should always keep the original films. Digital formats become obsolete quickly, whereas film has already lasted 100 years. Besides that, a video transfer will not retain the same intensity of colour, especially if the original is Kodachrome stock. For this reason, HMM is committed to always showing home movies on their original formats, never on video. They want people to know that it is possible to show old home movies on film projectors without damaging them and that the experience is something quite unique.

Indeed, the screening that followed the clinic was an unusual experience. As the HMM crew ran the projectors, the owner of each film was encouraged to tell what he or she knew about it. For instance, one film depicted three small girls at Stanley Park in British Columbia. An elderly woman in the audience told us that she was the youngest child in the film and the other two girls were her older sisters, now both deceased. As we saw the girls riding ponies, feeding birds and kittens in the park, she narrated her recollections from that summer over 60 years ago. As an audience of strangers, we were privy to a surprisingly intimate account of her childhood and memories, which was a very touching experience.

Not only is the audience experience at the BYOHM screenings quite different than an "art film" screening, but the films themselves have a very unique aesthetic. Liz Czach, a board member of HMM who has written her Ph.D. on home movies points out that the aesthetics of home movies is everything that mainstream films are not. They lack story, actors and have no mise-en-scene. "Some see the aesthetics of home movies in negative terms," says Czach. "There's a misconception that one of the worst things is to be invited to someone's house to watch their home movies. But I like to think that the typical mistakes are part of the aesthetic and the best thing about home movies."

What might be considered errors in mainstream films, such as waving and smiling at the camera, add to the charm of these films and what Czach calls the "strong emotional factor." There's pleasure in recognizing members of your own family in their younger days or even seeing

strangers who are recognizable as “ordinary people” doing everyday things as opposed to watching polished actors perform scripted tasks.

Many of the films shown at the screening depicted typical family gatherings and holidays. Through the passage of time, even these glimpses of somewhat banal life become fascinating, sometimes puzzling and exotic to the contemporary eye. For films that were undated on the canisters, audience members at the screening were calling out guesses of the year based on the women’s fashions and hairstyles. This demonstrates what many professional archivists and historians have begun to realize in recent years: Home movies represent one of the most vast and untapped records of ordinary life through the twentieth century. Home movies depict lifestyles of all classes of society, typical social mores and behaviours, fashion styles, the intimate spaces of private homes and above all, events that were often unrecorded by newsreels, documentary films or even represented in fictional films. The Association of Moving Image Archivists (AMIA) have been behind the movement to get home movies preserved and collected by major libraries and archives for the sake of historical research. The AMIA has a very useful website ([www.filmforever.org](http://www.filmforever.org)) that provides considerable information about preserving, storing and repairing home movies.

At times, some home movies even capture historically momentous events that were beyond the reach of the news media. The screening ended with a remarkable home movie shot in 1966 in Shanghai, China. It was filmed by the father of a woman at the screening. Her father had been a tour guide. His tour was one of the very last groups of Westerners admitted to China before the Cultural Revolution came to full force. With mounting tensions in the city, the tour group was not allowed on the streets unaccompanied by government officials. As a result, much of the footage is shot from the balcony of their hotel, looking down on the procession of demonstrators. In stunningly rich Kodachrome colour, he captured images of thousands of Chinese peasants marching up the wide boulevard, brandishing banners of Mao and scarlet flags. Few professional photojournalists and filmmakers captured China at this significant turning point, and even fewer from such a close and unguarded vantage point.

Obviously, a film of such historical significance may be of interest to many

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different people, not just enthusiasts of home movies. That is one of the reasons, HMM maintains a growing database. Historians, filmmakers or researchers can contact HMM to inquire

about certain subjects in the database, but the movies are not held in a collection. When the organization began, HMM realized that a physical collection was not only difficult to finance and store, but also not in line with the wishes of most home movie owners, who want to keep their films in the possession of their family. Instead, the database acts as a way of connecting people who own films with people who are interested in seeing them, as well as archiving information about the films for future generations. HMM encourages all attendees at their clinics to register their films in the confidential database. Soon HMM is moving to an online system, where films can be registered, as well as searched by topic.

Following their advice, I have begun cataloguing my family's collection to be added to the database. With a simple form provided by HMM, I record as much information as I can ascertain about each film and then I will need to quiz my older relatives about the identity of certain people in the films. This ensures that the future generation of my family will not find a box of home movies of forgotten people and places in my basement. With the aid of the database information, they will be able to identify their great-grandparents and distant relatives.

More so than any other organization in Canada, HMM does not believe that film is dead. If there's a noteworthy attempt to resurrect film, this is it. "The Future of Homemade Movies is in the past," says Czach. "As long as we can maintain ways to show the [8mm] films, they will live on." By keeping 8mm alive as an exhibition format, preserving and archiving collections of movies, and raising awareness of the rich store of historical information held in each home movie, HMM ensures that film has yet to live a very long life.

Homemade Movies can be reached at [homemademovies@hotmail.com](mailto:homemademovies@hotmail.com). Their next BYOHM screening and clinic will take place 20 November, 2006 at 7:00 pm at the Cecil Community Centre, 58 Cecil Street, just east of Spadina Ave.