



## Films and Sound Recordings

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TODAY'S HISTORIAN has a new dimension in which to view people and events in their intermingling in the caldron of history. For centuries past, historians have looked at fragments of source material, or even fragments of fragments, often worn and weathered by centuries of time, and from them reconstructed a historical sequence. In most cases it can be assumed that the early authors who wrote on clay tablets, parchment, and paper, rarely thought they were writing for tomorrow, and consequently, when their era is recreated from their fragments, much guesswork is, of necessity, included. Today man is recorded as he appears, moves about, and even as he talks and sings. His culture is shown through a camera lens that faithfully records anything moving in front of it, and through a microphone that painstakingly holds all sounds within its range and in their correct dimension . . . the dimension that recreates the aura of "You Were There."

Recently the 93rd anniversary of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address was celebrated. From the reconstruction of this event, it is known that the President left Washington, rode a train, delivered his short address, was poorly received by the crowd, and had some pictures taken. Many other bits of information about that day that have come to mean so much to the peoples of the world have been pieced together. Yes, a great deal is known about the actual event, but there is no evidence of how Lincoln sounded as he spoke these compassionate and compelling words. True, accounts were jotted down at the time, others years later by people who were there. Several stirring renditions were recorded rather recently by actors who have given his immortal words new life and meaning. But the fact remains, Lincoln's own voice cannot be heard, and he died less than a century ago.

Contrast this, with the comings and goings of the Chief Executive today, where all his movements and sayings are covered in minute

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detail. The slight pauses in his delivery are noted with great effect by the newsreel and television cameras. The sound equipment faithfully records his words as he delivers them, including his accent, any errors or omissions, and those sparkling bits of dialogue that occasionally appear when a speaker reaches a consonance with the audience and each utterance brings a more complete synchronization of thought.

Yes, the contrast is phenomenal and at the same time almost unbelievable. This elapsed period of time has seen great developments in what is casually called the audio-visual field of factual presentation and with its coming people in libraries, who for so many years have thrashed around with the problems of using, and at the same time preserving, ideas in printed form, suddenly find themselves facing a full-blown technology that has been developing these same ideas in a different way—a way that brings them to life. Librarians must take their methods of presenting and preserving ideas into this relatively new field which moves almost, it seems, with the rapidity of sound itself, and revise their old slogan of “The right *book* for the right person at the right time,” to “The right *material*. . .”

From the standpoint of making this material available for future use librarians should take a look at several of the things that are being done and think of each of them as a media of today and the future, and consider the librarian's responsibility for having, keeping, or knowing of these various services in fulfilling the responsibilities of the profession.

The early versions of modern day films were designed to give an audience a short sequence of a familiar scene.

The very first film ever made [1895]—*La sortie des usines Lumière, à Lyon-Montplaisir* (Workmen leaving the Lumière factory at Lyon-Montplaisir)—was in a way a newsreel subject. It was soon followed by *L'arrivée du train en gare de la Ciotat* (The arrival of the train at LaCiotat station), *La rue de la République à Lyon* (The Rue de la République, Lyons) and a number of similar films, never exceeding 65 feet in length.

From here it was only a short step to the filming of topical events as such—official visits, catastrophies, etc., and the film producers were not slow to take it.<sup>1</sup>

Pathé and Gaumont, it may be noted, went further than mere everyday street scenes, for their catalogues include such true newsreel subjects as *The Czar's Arrival in Paris* and the *March Past of the Light Cavalry* (Pathé), a *Fourteenth of July Procession* and the *Ar-*

*rival of the President of the Republic at the Enclosure (Grand Prix 1896)* (Gaumont).

"Reconstructions" of topical events were much in vogue in the United States. Film makers were frequently compelled by circumstances to use this method. The film camera was not then admitted everywhere as it is today, and especially not in theatres of military operations. This may explain why the American, Amet, had to stage in his bath a re-enactment of the destruction of the Spanish fleet during the Spanish-American War of 1898. The film had a tremendous success and was, it seems, so well made that the Madrid Government was said to have bought a copy to preserve in its military archives. This same Amet again created a sensation by reconstructing on waste ground in Brooklyn realistic battle scenes from the Boer War.<sup>2</sup>

In the early days of cinema, the news was not presented as it is today—in journal form. Until about 1907, cinema programmes were made up of comics, dramatic or news shorts. To begin with, their maximum length was 65 feet, but this tended gradually to increase. At that time exhibition of films was for the most part in the hands of travelling showmen; films were not returned as they are to-day, but sold by the film agencies directly to exhibitors, who screened the prints until they were worn out.

The birth of the first news films coincided with two revolutionary changes in the industry. One was the change-over from travelling shows to permanent halls, where, since the audience remained largely the same, the programme had to be renewed frequently. The other change-over was that from outright sale to film-renting. This occurred sometime about 1905 in the United States, and about 1907 in France. Also in 1907 Charles Pathé created his *Journal*. He was followed in 1908 by Leon Gaumont and the Societe Eclair. In 1909 the Pathé Frères went to London and pioneered news reels there with *Pathé Gazette*.<sup>3</sup>

In this period the newsreel came into being. A newsreel is a factual information film that depicts actual happenings in which the sequence of events is usually arranged as they transpired, although on occasion the film may remain unedited as source material. Some of the general characteristics of newsreels are:

- (a) They appear regularly, at relatively short intervals, being issued monthly, fortnightly, weekly or even bi-weekly, according to the country in which they appear.
- (b) Each of these issues includes several topics which are not directly related.
- (c) In principle, each of the topics presented relates to current events of general interest at the time of presentation.

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- (d) The films are generally of a standard length.
- (e) The presentation is straightforward, whereas that of screen magazines and documentaries is interpretative or didactic.<sup>4</sup>

During World War I the newsreel came into its own. Today in the National Archives rests some of the first official footage taken by the U.S. Signal Corps entitled *Army Scenes 1914 and Prior to 1914* and *Ohio River Flood, 1915-16*.<sup>5</sup> In 1918 came a stronger recognition of the value of movie cameras in the military when actual assignment of all photographic and cinematographic work of the War Department was to be done by the Signal Corps except pictures taken from aircraft, which would be performed by the Air Service. This general division of photographic work for the War Department has only recently been changed and only then because of the magnitude of the work involved.

From these early newsreels today's historian can see the somber crowds lining the streets of London at Queen Victoria's funeral in 1901, the exuberant pilot Louis Blériot after the first aeroplane crossing of the English Channel in 1909, the disastrous results of the flood in Paris in 1910, the Kaiser with his Generals during World War I. More recently he can view the pomp and splendor that attended the coronation of King George VI in 1937, the tense foreboding mood that hung over the invasion troops at Normandy Beach Head, and the joyous crowds in New York City when the peace treaty was signed in 1945.

These and many more factual newsreels filmed by commercial and governmental camera men are, for the most part, well preserved as national archives in the countries of their origin and are source material that can be used today by the competent writer. Also copies of many of these historic newsreels are on deposit in the Museum of Modern Art Film Library in New York because they are examples of the early phases of the industry.

What is the future of the newsreel as it is in the theatres today? By today's standards of television news coverage, the distribution of these films to theatres has seemed progressively slower. "Indeed, some maintain that television will cause the disappearance of news films as we know them, that daily visual news television will perhaps oust the bi-weekly news issues, already criticized for slow distribution. There is a real possibility that newsreels, unless they evolve in the direction of screen magazines, will not be able to survive the advent of television."<sup>6</sup> With these thoughts in mind are librarians not forced into lines of thought directed at preserving the older newsreels as

such, and keeping their newer counterpart, the television news film, as source material for the future.

The next stage of the film industry was marked by "talkies" which came into being in 1927. With the advent of sound, the movies became more and more of a social force working on the, at that time, ever increasing audiences. The historian cannot overlook the impact of these on our people, but he must exercise caution in choosing from the vast quantity of films produced commercially purely for entertainment and enjoyment. His own evaluative standards must be well defined and he must know of the material that has been written about films before attempting to assess their impact. Librarians anticipated this problem and in 1941 Volume I of *The Film Index* came into being with the following stated purpose: "The *Index* for the first time makes useful and accessible to the layman the enormous accumulation of information about films housed in the many libraries all over the country. . . ." <sup>7</sup>

For the more select films of this period librarians and historians alike turn to the Museum of Modern Art Film Library.

The Film Library, founded as a Museum department in 1935, has formed the most important collection of films in existence, covering the short but extraordinarily rich history of the moving pictures. Its possessions come from all over the world and are in some cases unique surviving examples. Until the Film Library began to collect and preserve them, extremely important films were being destroyed or lost or neglected once their commercial possibilities had been exhausted. And quite apart from the question of preservation, the films were formerly in drastic need of the scholarly attention to content, meaning and chronological system which had long been given the other visual arts. Under expert curatorial supervision the Museum's vast collection of films has been put in order. . . . Today . . . the films—surely the most influential visual medium of communication of our period—may be studied in the Film Library's daily programs and in its archives. The collection now forms a codified body of reference material in which professionals are naturally interested and in which laymen, by the thousands, find pleasure. As humanist documents, as sociology, history, esthetics—the films of the Museum's collection are among its most precious treasures.<sup>8</sup> The historical motion picture library of the Theodore Roosevelt Association in New York City, begun in the 1920's to gather all known motion picture films of Roosevelt, was, perhaps, the first such library in the country.

Only recently have large public libraries started using the documentary, educational or informational film as a material resource in

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their collection. As late as 1953 there were film collections in only 49 of the 107 public libraries that served communities of over 100,000 people in this country.<sup>9</sup> The high unit cost of a film, when compared to that of a book, and lack of experienced personnel to give a film program proper direction, are two factors that militate against a more widespread use. Successful solutions to both of these problems have been worked out in several places. Cooperation through circuits and larger units of service have not only cut down the unit cost of films when measured in amount of use, but have made it possible to attract and train people to properly handle film as another needed material resource for use in an area. Isolated rural areas must depend on the State Library for this type of help.

Where these programs have operated, it may be interesting for the writer of tomorrow to note that they have had very widespread use in the community and perhaps he can document the effectiveness of the dollar spent for films compared to that spent for printed material.

Film selection is a major problem facing any public or university library, or historical society with an active film program.

. . . there are comparatively few reviews of 16mm films, and often all one can find in print about a film is what is contained in a distributor's announcement, a listing in an audio-visual periodical, or an entry in *Educational Film Guide*. Since the days when Kurtz Myers was reviewing for the *Library Journal*, we have not had reviews of 16mm films regularly in a major library periodical. (Editor's note: A.L.A.'s *The Booklist* began reviewing 16mm films once a month with the issue for January 1, 1956.) There are excellent reviews in *Educational Screen*, but they are often of classroom films which most public libraries will not be purchasing. Reviews and reports in *Film News*, *Film World and A-V World*, and *Business Screen* should certainly be read. Periodicals in the subject fields should be watched for they sometimes contain film reviews. Educational Film Library Association evaluations should be considered, but remembering the primary interests of the evaluators who in many instances are from classroom centered institutions such as teachers colleges. Cecile Starr writing in the *Saturday Review*, more than most reviewers, looks at films in terms of the general audience which is the library's public.<sup>10</sup>

This year has seen the establishment of what promises to be the most comprehensive evaluative film selection aid available, entitled *Bertha Landers' Film Reviews*. Miss Landers of the Kansas City (Mo.) Public Library staff is well-known in the audio-visual field.

. . . It is highly recommended, even essential, that films be pre-

viewed before they are purchased, rented or borrowed. Previewing outside the library has the added advantage of bringing one in touch with others working with films.<sup>11</sup>

In May of 1948 Allan Nevins of the History Department of Columbia University launched a project aimed at recording interviews of important and illustrious personages of this era. Selected graduate students trained in interview techniques have been carrying on this work and have amassed many lengthy tapes which have been carefully filed away for use by historians.

Some of the memories reach far back—Lawyer Charles C. Burlingham's dimly to the Civil War draft riots; Ella Boole's over the long history of the W.C.T.U.; Henry L. Stimson's over many administrations. Movers and shakers like Herbert Hoover, Henry Wallace, John Foster Dulles and the widow of Fiorello LaGuardia have given their time. Many of those interviewed are less known to the general public but have played important parts, often behind the scenes, in political, economic and social history. In fact, when the students have finished with this material—if they ever do—there will have to be revisions, and additions, in many textbooks.<sup>12</sup>

Since 1951, Lou Blachly, of the Pioneers Foundation, Inc., has been tape recording the reminiscences of the oldest pioneers of New Mexico; the men and women who were part of the life of the frontier. The recordings are preserved at the University of New Mexico.<sup>13</sup>

Phillips Bradley of the Maxwell Graduate School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University has a project underway to tape some interviews with prominent and influential labor leaders of this country. Their personal ideas, as well as their reactions to his well-chosen interview questions will soon be available for some future historian.

Librarians and historians, following the idea of these projects, can perform a most useful function in their localities by recording, or arranging for tape recorded interviews with some of the important local personages, touching on their personal reminiscences of the area, the local catastrophes and problems of the past and their reaction to them, what they remember of the older landmarks that are perhaps now gone, etc. G. I. Will, librarian of the Yonkers, New York, Public Library, has seen the value of taping speeches and important events as they happen in his community and keeping the record for the future.

Many people who could give much factual data on the yesterdays live in rural areas without local public libraries or historical societies.

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In New York State, as in most others, library service is extended to these people through the State Library or its Traveling Libraries or Library Extension Division. Does not the State Agency, then, in the absence of the local agency, have the responsibility of recording these "nuggets" for posterity just as it has of furnishing materials for their alert minds?

Another fascinating phase of recording sound has taken the more recent form of phonograph discs. The beginnings of this are accredited to Thomas Edison, who in 1877 applied for a patent on a "phonograph or speaking machine." The first contrivance cost \$18, and consisted of a cylinder covered with tinfoil, turned by a simple hand crank. Ten years later he developed a motor driven version that recorded on a wax cylinder, and finally a disc that reproduced music with a diamond point. From these simple machines have come the complex phonographs of today capable of reproducing several sizes of discs recorded at various speeds.

Many public libraries have collections of symphonic and popular music, folksongs, famous speeches, and plays available to the people in their communities. Another segment of the population, the blind and visually handicapped, enjoy "Talking Books" which have been provided for their use by the Library of Congress and distributed through twenty-eight regional libraries in this country since 1934. These titles generally are not source material, but a few have been recorded by the author himself, and in these cases could be so considered.

Looking to the phonograph disc as source material, the largest and most fruitful collection for the librarian and historian rests in the Archive of American Folksong in the Library of Congress, which drew its inspiration from John Lomax.

He has heard America singing, not in the Metropolitan Opera House, not in her fashionable churches, but out of her heart. John A. Lomax has corralled the cowboy at the round-up, at the bunkhouse, and in saloons. He has combed the penitentiaries, the Mississippi Delta, and the cypress swamps of Louisiana, and in all of these places the people—at times lonely, at times gay—have sung to him.

He has lived with Kentucky mountaineers, Mexican vaqueros, Great Lakes sailors, and these untutored people in singing for him sang for America too. For the Library of Congress has recordings of thousands of songs which, but for his forty years of untiring efforts, might have been lost forever. It was under the spell of his enthusiasm that the Library started its Archive of American Folk Song, and now all of us,

by writing in to the Library, can get records and enjoy the stirring, spontaneous songs Lomax has found.<sup>14</sup>

Because of the growing popular demand for information about folksongs, the Archive of American Folksong published in 1953 *A List of American Folksongs Currently Available on Records*,<sup>15</sup> which lists recordings and their sources.

No critical evaluation of the recordings has been made, nor is any distinction here noted between recordings made in the field of untrained singers and those made under studio conditions by professional artists. Such distinctions and evaluations are properly the province of the professor and student studying the material.<sup>16</sup>

Adrienne Claiborne writing on folk recordings for the library noted that:

A library collection of recorded folk music can serve the community in many ways. With the growing interest in this field, a great deal of material is being recorded by companies all over the country, some of it good, some very bad, and much indifferent. The library interested in starting a collection is faced with a bewildering number of unknown labels, singers and song-titles.

. . . Records of authentic folk performers are of primary interest to the musicologist, the historian, and the student. They provide spontaneous performances of songs in action as part of the daily lives of the singers. As historical documents and basic source material, they are unexcelled. However, the uninitiated should be warned that the singing is often wavering and rough, the enunciation sometimes unclear, the recording un-professional.<sup>17</sup>

Turning a moment to the field of ethnology, the study of the various spoken languages of the American Indians were originally printed in phonetic transcriptions—which to the outsider appear as a completely different written language. Franz Boas, a most distinguished American anthropologist, published the pioneering work in this field in 1911.<sup>18</sup> With the coming of recording devices the language could be more easily studied and today, for instance, there exist many collections of tapes of the various Indian languages. Large collections exist at Cornell University, the University of Indiana, Northwestern University, Yale, the New York State Museum, Smithsonian Institution, Columbia University, and the Library of Congress. Listening to these gives the ethnologist the true feeling of the rhythm of a particular language—but only he can understand what is said. To be meaningful to other scholars it still must be placed in a written or printed phonetic transcription.

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A most interesting new bibliographical tool entitled *Ethno-Musicology Newsletter*<sup>19</sup> has recently made its appearance. This publication contains news of various studies, field recordings in progress, and current bibliography in this field and supplements the continued publications in this general field by the Smithsonian Institution in Washington and the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia.

Another resource for the musicologist, and source of pure enjoyment for the general public, is the large collection of folk music on long playing records made available by the Folkways Record and Service Corporation in New York City.<sup>20</sup> Among their ethnic series are recordings of many of the country's Indian dances and chants that answer well as source material for the writer.

With all of the technological advances in the field of audio-visual materials in the past few decades, it is becoming more and more of a challenge for librarians to acquire an acquaintance with these newer resources, know how they can best be used in their situations, and ever be aware of the calling of the profession and its opportunities for dealing with ideas, regardless of the physical format of those ideas.

In summary, librarians have found help in the guide lines established by the compilers of the new standards for public libraries that point up to them that:

The library in the community collects the materials needed to conduct the individual and group life of its constituency. Further, it organizes and makes available these resources so that they are convenient and easy to use. Still further, it interprets material and guides reading to enable as many people as possible to apply the record of what we know in their daily lives.<sup>21</sup>

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