AN INTERVIEW WITH

CAROLINE FRICK

of the Texas Archive of the Moving Image and the University of Texas at Austin Department of Radio-Television-Film

BY **THE EDITORS**

CAROLINE FRICK SERVES AS AN ASSISTANT PROFESSOR IN THE RADIO-TV-FILM DEPARTMENT at The University of Texas at Austin. In addition, she is the founder and Executive Director of the Texas Archive of the Moving Image (TAMI), an organization devoted to the discovery and preservation of media related to the state. TAMI's online library offers thousands of newly discovered historical films and video free of charge via www.texasarchive.org. Prior to her work in Texas, Dr. Frick worked in film preservation at Warner Bros., the Library of Congress, and the National Archives in Washington, DC. Dr. Frick also programmed films for the American Movie Classics cable channel in New York and currently serves as the President of the Board for the Association of Moving Image Archivists. Her book, *Saving Cinema*, was published in 2011 by Oxford University Press. She has published in a variety of journals including the *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, *The Moving Image*, *The Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, and *The Journal of Popular Film and Video*.

VLT: During your time as both an archivist and a scholar, have you observed any major shifts in practical or scholarly approaches to film archiving and preservation?

CAROLINE FRICK: I've noticed many changes, but I think anybody who is a historian or an archivist at heart likes to look at the similarities. I struggle to say that there's been a great deal of change. When I started out my career in the film preservation community, it was during a heyday—not *the* heyday but *a* heyday in terms of interest in Hollywood preservation. The 1990s were a period in which public awareness of the major nitrate archives was higher, stemming from the highly publicized film colorization debates. What I've seen since then is the rise in the metaphor of the orphan film and rising cognizance or acknowledgment that film is just one of the components of the moving image past.

On the scholarship side, from my perspective, I think there's been a flip. In the 1990s, when film preservation had a buzz on a national level, I don't think there was much interest in "archives" or "preservation" from academia. Now, as the popular tensions seem to have waned, within academia I am startled by the kind of interest in the concept and practice of the archive. And I think those two shifts are quite interrelated.

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What would you say are the biggest challenges facing film archives and archivists today?

I think it's easy for us to use the term "film," but I really advocate for "moving image." It's an interesting conundrum because you have a multiplicity of challenges. There's always a financial challenge. Media preservation is so expensive. Technologically speaking, there's a huge challenge because of the fact that media preservation is so tied to industry that in some ways preservation practice has to follow industrial practice. Furthermore, there are no standards for digital preservation. And, like it or not, that's where we are. The industry has not come together to create digital preservation standards in the same way that you had a standard, eventually, of 35mm. It's very much like we're back in the late nineteenth century, with people scrambling for different kinds of film gauges and various nations getting involved.

I think there are other challenges as well. That *cohesion* that film archivists arguably had in the twentieth century is not there in the same way. People are struggling to find the commonalities between something like the Texas Archive of the Moving Image and the Cinémathèque Française. Today, it's more fragmented.

Building off some of your points about digital media and digital technology in the industry, how has the increased reliance on digital technologies changed how we build, use, and interpret archives?

The impact of digital technologies has been significant. When videotape arrived, and, one might even argue, when small-gauge film arrived, these same kinds of transitions occurred. I think with digital media it's both the transition and also the very, very rapid pace with which this change has occurred. I think that the impact on practice is fairly significant, the impact on *users* is significant, and the two go hand in hand. One of the most interesting aspects is the fact that digital's ability to create significantly more *access* to older material has increased demand by users. In some ways, maybe that is part and parcel of why there's now more tension. I think it's created a bit of a splintering effect between those who are truly conservationists in every sense of the word, who are all about the film medium, and those who are very pragmatic, who embrace digital and move on. And I think that in terms of practice it's difficult. If you look at collections that rush to put everything onto video, well, they're now going back to the original nitrate elements for digital.

FIGURE 1. Still from *America Welcomes President Ayub*. Courtesy of the Texas Archive of the Moving Image.

But what I'm excited about with digital is that it allows us to share material with such a wider group of people than we ever, ever imagined. Whether it's scholars or whether it's schoolkids, it's exciting. I'll use an example: the most watched film at my organization, the Texas Archive of the Moving Image, is a film about the former president of Pakistan visiting the United States. The reason it's the most watched is that it was a viral video in Pakistan. You'd never have imagined that fifty years ago. I think digital allows us really exciting changes in terms of access, but there's a worrisome side to that. If you look at preservation in the conventional, traditional way, we don't have any standards for digital preservation. I think digital allows us to redefine what preservation means. Hopefully, it asks us to really challenge those conventional, very Western notions of conservation, preservation, and restoration.

How has the adoption of digital technologies in commercial or corporate film archives compared to adoption in nonprofit film archives?

I often don't like putting these groups in binary opposition because I think the more interesting part is the confluence between them. Warner Bros., when releasing a new Blu-ray of *Mutiny on the Bounty*, is working with a nonprofit to do that. In essence, without George Eastman House,

that Blu-ray produced by Warner Bros. would not be the same at all, because the material they are using is nitrate material that's in a vault in Rochester, New York, that Warner Bros. has helped pay for. That being said, Warner Bros. is selling a Blu-ray as a product. For Eastman House, these films are artifacts, pieces of cultural heritage. It's key to think of these groups in conjunction with each other. When you start looking at smaller nonprofits, such as the Oklahoma Historical Society, Northeast Historic Film, or Oregon Historical Society, you see more of a piecemeal process. A lot of that is predicated on funding—it's when you can actually get a grant to allow you to digitize a collection of films. There is less of a large-scale digitization initiative that you might have at a for-profit company and more of a smaller project-based approach.

In what ways do regional film archives such as the Texas Archive of the Moving Image address some of these major changes that we've been discussing?

Within the US context, I think this is the growth area. I think increased regional collecting (and access to such materials) offers an opportunity to rewrite American media history. Even if you're looking at a lot of duplicative-looking home movies, there's always an aha moment, there's always a "what did I just see" moment. Going back to what I was talking about in terms of the 1990s, there is this sense of urgency to take care of films before they disappear. I feel like that movement is there on the regional level. A lot of people who have come out of educational programs that are geared toward media preservation are going out there and creating new organizations. Or, as an example, the Oklahoma Historical Society will have a media archivist on staff. These are the exciting opportunities that are there.

Why preserve and exhibit amateur film and video footage?

I think it's tied to an historical impulse. You're trying to capture moments of life, of society, and so-called amateur material is vitally important to that for very obvious reasons. I think it's very different, though, from saying that all of it should be preserved. I think that approaching it as "all of it needs to be preserved" is actually a detriment. I think that this is where the rise in attention to *curation* is really important.

Archives are not generally known for being proactive organizations in terms of actually *seeking out* material. What's interesting with regional collections that might have more interest in amateur media is that they are usually more proactive, they usually will call, and they will ride around and try to find things in a way that larger organizations simply can't do. The work that we've done at the Texas Archive of the Moving Image with our Texas Film Round-Up program—which is very much based on what happened in Australia and New Zealand, amongst other places—involves going across the state on a regular basis. The trick with this, however, is can you ever be *truly* representative? Are we really representing Texas? No, but we're trying, and we're trying to get the word out to disparate communities.

Do you see the Texas Archive as a model for other film archives to follow in the future?

I view it as an experiment, and we're seeing what we can do. I've had several people call from different states asking very specific questions about how we've set up, how we've gotten initial funding, so they could try to replicate the Texas Film Round-Up approach. I think it *could* be a model, but, in my kind of Pollyanna way, my dream would be that the United States have in each state a multiplicity of repositories and collections that reflect the state's individuality and differences. I like the idea of—and what we're seeing in the United States—more populist, organic archives popping up in some different ways in the same way that the Tennessee Archive of Moving Image and Sound has popped up in Knoxville, or the Chicago Film Archive. I think the leader in all of this is Northeast Historic Film in Bucksport, Maine. There are many of these kinds of collections starting to all have their own types of models. I'd love to see every state do a kind of film round-up, but each state would ideally do it very differently.

What are the most pressing challenges you've faced in your efforts to preserve pieces of Texas history and digitize so many different types of films and footage?

Beyond the most obvious issue of funding, I think that my biggest challenge has been marketing. I've really had my eyes opened to how education works on a K–12 level. For example, we have great lesson plans that can be used

in social studies classrooms in Texas. We have wholly unique material, so instead of kids only looking at the movie *Giant* to learn about the oil industry, we actually have amazing home movie footage of the oil industry. We have all this great material that could complement something like *Giant*. But what we have found is that not only is the education system a challenge because each country or each region has different rules, but also the competition can be overwhelming to our small enterprise. In the education market, our biggest competitors are the New York Times Company, Pearson, and Apple. One of the ways that they're trying to increase their revenue is to sell material to K–12 schools in Texas. We're a huge state with many schoolkids, and it's very difficult to go up against companies like these with product. Our organization is an educational one. That's what we think of every single day: how can we make this material interesting and relevant. Getting the word out about our program, in terms of what we're developing, has been our main challenge.

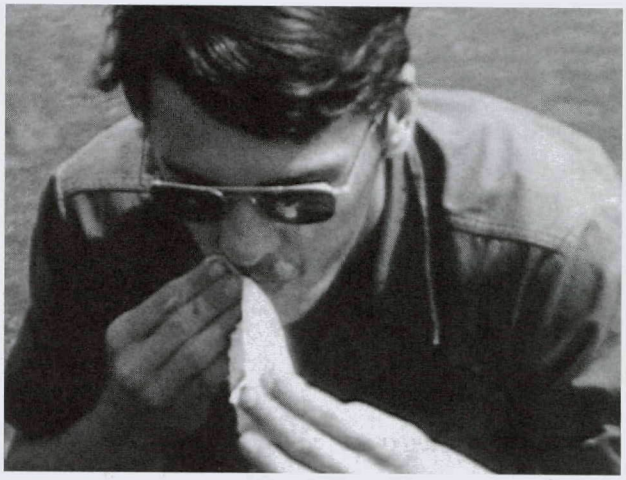

FIGURE 2. Still from the Marcellus Hartman Collection, no. 16, *Leisure Time on a Vietnam War Military Base*. Courtesy of Marcellus Hartman and the Texas Archive of the Moving Image.

What are some of the politics that influence your work with the Texas Archive? Does your archival work ever conflict with your academic research or pedagogy?

One of the core things that I wanted to do with the Texas Archive was to get material like ours into K–12 educational programs. I always thought, wouldn't it be great, instead of relying on a *National Geographic* documentary, to bring in all kinds of different materials to kids? When we think about our key user, we think of a fourth grader. In terms of the politics of it, there is some sort of censorship going on. We don't make everything available. It is a *curated* library of material; it's not "technically" an archive.

A good example of this is when we received a massive collection from a Vietnam War veteran. He took hundreds of films when he was in Vietnam. What you see is not glamorous battle scenes. What you see is boredom, and what boredom was on many bases was doing a lot of drugs, playing with a lot of dogs, and, according to what I can tell, a lot of "mooning" each other. I would love to make available a really expansive amount of that material because that, to me, says you can watch *Good Morning Vietnam* or other films about the war, but here's something else to consider. We have not put much of that footage up on the Texas Archive website because, first, it may not be the right thing for that fourth grader, and, second, we also have ethical concerns because the people in those films didn't sign waivers. You have these kinds of ethical concerns, and that's where I primarily have conflict.

FIGURE 3. Still from the W. H. Tilley Collection, no. 1, 1910s and 1920s. Courtesy of Susan T. Solomon and the Texas Archive of the Moving Image.

As the newly elected president of the Association of Moving Image Archivists (AMIA), how do you see your work as a scholar and with the Texas Archive informing the goals and outreach of AMIA?

I think one of the reasons that I find this professional organization, AMIA, a really great one is that it brings

together the communities that you've been asking about. You have your studio people, the big nonprofits, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, and the Oklahoma Historical Society, the television staff, stock footage houses, historians, and private collectors. I *love* that this group exists, because it's a great area of exchange. I think that AMIA has served a *really* important role in bringing together those voices and encouraging discussions between a group like Northeast Historic Film and a company like Warner Bros. What I've been experimenting with at the Texas Archive in terms of rethinking traditional preservation—trying to think about access, itself, as a form of preservation—is something that I'd like to see AMIA actively debate and actively talk about and move forward. It would be great if AMIA could become more active in terms of pushing for digital standards.

Do you have a vision for the future of the Texas Archive that differs much from what the organization does today?

Originally, when I thought of this, it was very much predicated on an older kind of *cinémathèque* model, where we have a kind of museum attached. I think ideally that it would be nice to have a building where people could come, because we actually have really fun exhibits that we haul around the state. We show the history of media-making in each region of the state, and we actually have that information up against state and national trends. It would be really great to think about having an office or museum—I don't mean that in a grandiose fashion—but having some sort of screening room attached, having a more *physical* presence alongside our virtual presence. This was almost the preliminary goal that I had but really switched once I realized we can reach so many other people if we did it the other way. I would also love for the Texas Archive to become a regional leader and really work more closely with Oklahoma, Kansas, and into the Southwest, Arizona, New Mexico.

What collection or film are you most delighted to have acquired through the Texas Archive, and how do you see this addressing the relationship between film archives and cultural heritage?

Within the first couple of months of getting the Texas Archive operational, a colleague of mine in Los Angeles put a woman in touch with me who said that her great uncle had been a pioneer filmmaker in Texas. When she mentioned the name, my eyes popped wide open, because I had done a lot of research on feature filmmaking in the state of Texas during pre-Hollywood days. This was one of the most prominent independent filmmakers in central Texas at this time. It was a really interesting collection to deal with, because it showcased both the history of filmmaking and the history of film preservation. In the 1950s or 1960s this filmmaker was aware of the hazards of nitrate film material, and so he, basically, dumped everything onto 16mm, but not everything; he didn't transfer his feature films. He mainly kept his own home movies and family footage, but he didn't keep his feature films, which would have been interesting. But what we found in that collection was actually the earliest footage extant of Austin. This collection demonstrates, at my core, what keeps me in this field: the cross section between conventional understanding of American cinema, of Hollywood, feature filmmaking alongside amateur filmmaking, alongside regional filmmaking. This collection personifies that.