

Commonwealth National Library

Film Division

DEVELOPMENT OF FILM ARCHIVES

Report to the 14th Congress of F.I.A.F.

HISTORY :

Although it is now a little known fact , Australia was , in the early years of the cinema a prolific producer of films. Many of the films reflect faithfully the manners and customs of the times in which they were made and as such represent material of great historical value. IT was natural therefore that the National Library, charged with the responsibility of preserving our historical records , should turn its attention to the preservation of film.

Prior to 1936 the collection of films was carried out on a restricted scale. But with the establishment of the NATIONAL Historical Films and Speaking Record Library in January 1936 as a section of the National Library, added impetus was given to these activities. In particular arrangements were made to preserve extracts from current news reels which , it was felt , contained many items of historical value . At the same time, the search for older films was maintained and many items of great interest discovered and preserved. For example such films as the Arrival of the Duke and Duchess of York in 1901 and the Naming of Canberra, 1913, were located and are now held by the Library.

With the outbreak of war, this facet of the Library's activities virtually ceased. However, when the Australian National Film Board was established in 1945, the Library the non-theatrical distribution agency for its producti-

tions! It was then that a Film Division was formally constituted within the Library to serve both as a film distribution Agency and as an archive, thus taking over the functions of the National Historical Film Library. The resultant increase in its resources enabled the collection and preservation of Australian films to be undertaken on a greater and more systematic scale. Especially important was the fact that the Library could now engage not only in the preservation of old films in their original state but could also arrange for the transfer of old films to new, safer and more stable safety stock. The effect of this work, in which the making of duplicating material was involved, was not only to preserve the original film for the future but was also to enable 16 mm screening prints to be produced. Thus for the first time for many years students of the film had an opportunity to see the work of our pioneer producers.

THE COLLECTION :

Over 330 newsreel items have so far been preserved. These range from 3 - 10 minutes and cover the period from 1934 to the present day.

Of the 1500 documentary, educational and scientific films produced in Australia since 1940, the Library has acquired for preservation some 800 prints. These include a print of all films produced by the Australian Commonwealth Film Unit.

A catalogue of these films has been prepared for printing and an uncorrected draft has been attached as Appendix 2.

The Library is also fortunate in possessing the Taussig collection of motion picture stills. This collection of European and American stills together with

a growing proportion of Australian stills now has some 25.III items all of which are in excellent condition. A complete listing has been made and from this copies are shortly to be made for circulation to other film archives. Two mounted exhibitions have been made from the collections, and, to give some idea of its scope, catalogues of these two exhibitions have been attached as Appendix 3.

TECHNICAL ASPECTS :

In this programme for the transfer of old films to safety stock and for the production of screening prints for use by students of the Australian cinema, the present position is set out in Appendix I. This transfer to safety stock is of course expensive and the Library is concentrating on the old and unstable prints whose condition is such that delay could well result in their loss forever. Some idea of costs in this country may be gained from the fact that a recent preservation negative from an old film of 7 reels cost £ 240.

Over the last year the Library has been particularly active in its attempts /a/ to locate historical films and /b/ to prevent the unwitting destruction of such material. As the Library's place in the search for old film becomes more widely known, the number of prints brought to light has increased correspondingly. Not only are these Australian films but there are also many overseas productions. Since these could well be of interest to other archives we have listed a number known to be in good condition although rather brittle with age.

To prevent the destruction of historical films, the Library first examined the usual circumstances in

which these films were destroyed. In most cases the destruction arose from one or both of the following sequences of events : /a/ films brought to light during the examination of a deceased estate were regarded as valueless for propate purposes and destroyed ; /b/ film brought to light during the examination of an estate for insurance puposes were regarded as dangerous and destroyed. In a few cases also inspection by fire authorities led to the loss of films.

As a result of this survey, the Library sought the cooperation of all Probate Offices, insurance companies, and fire authorities. This has met with a gratifying response and will certainly assist in preventing loss.

Finally, mention should be made of the discovery and presentation to the Library of the original musical score for the 300 ft. film, "SOLDIERS OF THE CROSS" made in 1900 by the Salvation Army. This score, expecially written for the film, must rank among the earliest examples of film music.

P ř í l o h a 1.

Australian films which have been transferred to safety stock for which 16 mm viewing prints have been made.

- 1/ Inauguration of the Commonwealth 1901
- 2/ Arrival of the Lord and Lady Jellicoe 1901
- 3/ The Romance of Margaret Catchpole 1911
- 4/ The B.A.N.Z.A.R. Expedition to the South Pole 1911-12
- 5/ The Building of Burrinjuck Dam 1912
- 6/ Naming of the Federal Capital 1913
- 7/ The Sea Raider 1916
- 8/ A Day on a Trawler 1916
- 9/ The Sentimental Bloke
- 10/ The True Story of Ned Kelly 1920
- 11/ Our Selection 1920
- 12/ Brisbane, 1920
- 13/ A Seaplane Circles a Continent 1924
- 14/ The Shattered Illusion 1924
- 15/ Trooper O'Brien 1926
- 16/ Royal Military College 1926
- 17/ The Romance of Runnibede 1927
- 18/ Kidstakes 1927
- 19/ Opening of Canberra 1927
- 20/ Conquest of the Pacific 1928
- 21/ Rice Growing in the M.I.A. 1928
- 22/ Griffith, N.S.W. 1928
- 23/ Siege of the South /Mawson/ 1929 - 31
- 24/ Diggers 1930
- 25/ The Spur of the Moment 1930
- 26/ Sydney Harbour Bridge 1932
- 27/ Diggers in Blighty 1932
- 28/ Canbarrá - Australia's Federal Capital 1934.