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Reel Michigan: A Film Project at the Clarke Historical Library

By Jennifer Bentley, Tressa Graves, and Marian Matyn, Central Michigan University

Background

The Clarke Historical Library, Central Michigan University (CMU), is both an archives and a historical library with a collecting focus on Michigan history, children’s literature, and CMU history. The Clarke has a variety of film formats in various collections, some contain a film or two, and some are composed entirely of film. Most of the films are 16 mm acetate and document CMU or Michigan history and range from home movies to more professionally created films. Highlights of the collection include CMU marching band performances, Hans Lantzsch downriver community workshops, Sen. Robert Griffin films (visiting China during the Nixon administration), and Professor Joe De Bolt’s Vietnam Moratorium film documenting CMU and national student protests in 1969.

The Clarke’s largest film collection comprises 3,000 reels of Channel 9 and 10 news film from the 1950s through the 1980s. Channel 9 and 10 was and still is the main TV news station for the 35 counties in the northern Lower Peninsula, the Upper Peninsula, and parts of Canada. It is a goldmine of historic Michigan local news. The reels are mostly small and include outtakes, stock footage, A and B rolls, final products, color and black-and-white footage, and silent and sound footage. Some text records are included.
As for content, the collection includes

- Permanent file (segments of news features or stories), total films on 8 reels: 81 (8 canisters), footage (total) 5,775 ft.
- MDA (Muscular Dystrophy Association) Telethon, total films on 4 reels: 6 (4 canisters), footage (total) 6,600 ft.
- Sports films, total films on 3 reels: (3 canisters), footage (total) 3,900 ft.
- News and views (lengthy evening news local features), total films on 38 reels: 41 (38 canisters), footage (total) 51,485 ft.
- Alphadated (combinations of short features organized alphabetically by the first letter of the topic and chronologically, so all 1971 items are together, and within 1971 everything beginning with B or C is together), total films on 10 reels: 176 (10 canisters), footage (total) 19,100 ft.

Subjects covered include meetings of various local committees and government officials, paving projects, strikes, fires (town, building, forest), special civic events, the Mackinac Bridge, sand dunes, and other parks.

Interesting subjects include building the Mackinac Bridge; searching for and memorializing the *Edmund Fitzgerald*; Vietnam prisoners of war returning (1973); computer education and women in STEM K–12 educating primary students; Irene McCabe clad in her white housewife apron protesting forced city busing in Flint and touring Northern Michigan (1973); maiden voyage of *Stewart J. Cort*, the first 1,000-foot freighter on the Great Lakes (1972); the 1970 energy crisis; strikes; and a film labeled “Traverse City Porno,” protests of Marlon Brando’s *Last Tango in Paris*. Another interesting film documents men at Camp Custer, near Battle Creek, Michigan, 1928.

**Value of Collections to Patrons**

Channel 9 and 10 news film collection provides a useful local Northern Michigan information source covering the 1950s through the 1980s, especially if the events were not covered in local newspapers or the newspapers no longer exist.

Our project had two main goals: to improve both preservation and access. Archivist Marian Matyn and undergraduate student Tressa Graves began the project in 2012 to identify, rehouse, preserve, and make accessible our historic film collections. They faced the following film issues: existing storage was fair to inadequate for film; some film was in the late stages of decomposition; existing descriptions varied greatly; film cores were almost totally lacking; film storage containers were unacceptable; films were lacking documentation and labels. Significantly, ours was the first archives in Michigan to embark on a film preservation project.

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We sold our plan to administration based on statistics of film deterioration in the collection. The AD Strip level results were crucial: 9 films at 0.0 AD (good); 55 between .5 AD and 1.0 (poor); 3 between 2.5 and 1 (poor to critical).  

**Preservation**

For this project, we followed national and international best practices and standards for analog film based on the resources listed at the end of this article. While we hope to digitize a few brief segments of some select films for our web page in the future, digitizing this film was not a focus of our project. Also, while we have temperature- and humidity-controlled storage, it is optimal for books and manuscripts but not for film. One of our long-term goals is to create a proper, optimal film storage environment.

Graves viewed all the films, identifying in detail main scenes, locations, people, events, and, if possible, dates or eras, before each was rehoused. All the films required rehousing. Some were in rusty canisters. Some were on cores. Some were not on cores. Some were in plastic bags. Some were physically bent and distorted from not being properly housed. Graves placed films in new archival cans with cores. For collections with multiple films, films were spliced together according to film shrinkage percentage and theme, with white leader separating them. In so doing, Graves followed the example provided by the Alaska Moving Image Preservation Association to maximize limited space and funds. White leader was placed at the front of each new canned film, and black leader was added to the end of the film. In some cases, film was found taped together instead of spliced. In these cases, the students carefully removed the tape and spliced the film together.

Of course, at all stages of the preservation and rehousing steps, students wear white cotton gloves following best
practices to protect the film from oils, dirt, and fingerprints which contribute to the deterioration of the film and to prevent skin rashes.

We developed standardized labels that include creator, title, date, extent of collection, and accession number.

**Access**

Using the detailed inventories developed by Graves, Matyn amended the existing catalog records or created new ones with detailed information about each film. This information was added to the inhouse catalog MARC record, finding aids, and encoded finding aids, but not to the OCLC national catalog record. This decision was based on the size of the 990 note fields and the likelihood that local researchers would be more interested in the film than researchers from farther away. Also, with the information available via the online finding aids, it was deemed unnecessary to enter the information into the national catalog record.

The Clarke houses and provides access to the earliest existing films documenting CMU history, including notably the Vietnam Moratorium protest actions on campus, and many historic films documenting Michigan history. Some of the CMU films feature a Chippewa Indian mascot. These images provide striking evidence of how the university routinely used negative stereotypes of Native Americans in the past. This piece of regional history is especially important to note in light of the ongoing national debate regarding American sports and their use of cultural and ethnic groups as mascots. Also of national import is the interview with conservative Republican writer/theorist Russell Kirk of Mecosta County. His ideas and writing profoundly influenced and shaped national Republican values in the late twentieth century.

Graves processed all of the film collections that were not connected to Channel 9 and 10, organized all of Channel 9 and 10 film for the next film students, created the processing plan for 9 and 10, trained her replacement (student film processor, Jen Bentley), and completed a reel of nearly each of the film subsections in 9 and 10 as a starting point. In May 2014, Graves graduated from CMU, helped educate and inspire other Michigan archivists with a film workshop, and then went to work for Michigan State University Archives and Historical Collections, assisting its film preservation project.

Earlier this year, we discovered two 16 mm Super Slim Slot Load ESL/SSLS Series film projectors that were scheduled to go to the university public auction. We are now using one to view films after they are processed to help with identifying images. This allows one student to work in the cramped film area, while the other watches film in another room.

**Ongoing Project**

We are now in our second year of the film project with Matyn and two graduate students, S. K. Haase Duthie and Jen Bentley, working with the Channel 9 and 10 films. Haase Duthie and Bentley have processed 36,400 feet of film this academic year, including compiling the series statistics.

We hope to complete film processing by December 2016. Cataloging will take longer. Except for still trying to purchase a refrigerator and not finding some legendary footage of the rock band KISS (in Cadillac, Michigan, October 9–10, 1975), we have met all our project goals. We have improved preservation and discoverability of the films and educated ourselves and others about film preservation. We also found some interesting films and acquired two film
projectors. We would also like to reorganize part of the manuscript processing room to allow the film processors more room and access to the film projectors. To maximize discoverability, we hope to digitize some (parts) of some films and make snippets available on the Clarke’s website or a related page. We like MSU’s film web page, On the Banks of the Red Cedar, which provides information about the film, its provenance, subjects, and a still image, and allows visitors to view the film. We believe improving access to film is vital for future patrons.

Future Plans
In addition to building the web page, we hope to write articles, make posters, and present on panels at archival conferences. Michigan is now developing a Digital Public Library of America service hub that Matyn plans to use to expand awareness and use of our collections nationally. It would be wonderful to include the film collection in this project. After we finish with the film, we plan to continue to work with other assorted audiovisual formats.

Resources
• Association of Moving Image Archivists (AMIA), www.amianet.org
• Steven Davidson and Gregory Lukow, eds., The Administration of Television Newsfilm and Videotape Collections: A Curatorial Manual (Los Angeles: American Film Institute, c. 1997).
• International Federation of Film Archives (FIAF), www.fiafnet.org.
• On the Banks of the Red Cedar, onthebanks.msu.edu.

NOTES
1. Graves and Matyn would like to formally recognize the contribution of S. K. Haase Duthie to this project and article.