

HISTORICAL KIMBERLEY FILMS

On 4 September 2002 Gerard Foley of the State Film Archives addressed the Society on the subject of "Historical Kimberley Films". He told us something about the history and function of the State Film Archives and the challenges of preserving historical films. He then showed five films from the collection. The State Film Archives is housed in the Battye Library in Francis Street in Perth along with other Western Australian historical collections – pictorial, private archives, books, ephemera etc. The impetus for the State Film Archives was a disastrous fire that occurred in the mid-sixties to stock held by Fred Murphy. Nevertheless the State Film Archives collection is possibly older than the National Film and Sound Archives in Canberra. The collection started in the Education Department and transferred to the Battye in 1979. It is the largest regional collection and WA is the only State with a dedicated film archives (to Western Australia). There are about 3000 films covering the period 1907 to the present day. Films about the Kimberley are well represented in the collection perhaps because it was a tourist destination and there was an urge for promoting development there.

Nitrate film, which was used before the 1950s, can spontaneously combust and these have been sent to Canberra. The collection now comprises mainly acetate; commonly known as safety film but that too is beginning to deteriorate at an even faster rate than nitrate. All film deteriorates and after a certain point the process is irreversible so it may be necessary to transfer to new film such as polyester. It is difficult and expensive to preserve film; and a transfer may cost up to \$10,000. Transfer to video can lead to loss of quality, and digital is an unknown quantity. The State Film Archives is presently concentrating on preserving the film it has. But, while it is not actively looking for film, if it hears of any that is interesting it will have a look at it.

Films made by or commissioned by the Government of Western Australia make up the bulk of the film collection but there are some personal films and these include some of the earliest personal films (or home movies) in Australia. There are also films made by commercial companies and television news footage shot by TV channels 7 and 9. The ABC has its own archives. Films taken into the collection relate to Western Australia and were selected to show the history and life style of the period. Films can be viewed at the Battye; very few can be borrowed.

Gerard selected five films to show at the meeting and he said it was not easy to make a choice considering the number available. He had prepared a handout that gave details of these five films and advised that care was required in showing the film to members of Aboriginal communities because the footage included images of people now deceased. State Film Archives seeks ongoing consultation with Kimberley communities to ensure sensitive management of relevant materials under the provisions of the Library and Information Service of WA's Aboriginal Plan of 1998.

The first film showed station life at Mt Anderson, Myroodah, Liveringa, Quanbun, and Noonkanbah stations. William McLean, a wool buyer who travelled with George Maxwell, a wool classer, had shot the film in 1929. It was in black & white, silent, 8 minutes long and it had been transferred to video for showing and was somewhat grainy. Nevertheless it was possible to pick up the people, buildings, station scenes and social activities which included catching fish from flood channels, cooking them on coals and eating them washed down with billy tea.

The second film, also in black & white, was about the pearling industry at Broome produced by the Australian National Film Board for the Department of Information in 1949. It ran for 10 minutes and had a good commentary covering the arduous work of the pearlers from the diving for shell from a lugger, stationed two days out from port, to packing the cleaned shell for export to New York. Two divers worked together from the boat, spending three-quarters of the working day under water six days a week, going overboard in their heavy suits and coming up slowly, to avoid diver's paralysis, with an occasional break of 10–15 minutes and a cup of coffee to warm the bones. Meanwhile the crew on deck prepared the mother-of-pearl shell for the supply ship that came out every two weeks, checking them for pearls (which were put into a wooden box with a non-return hole!).

Then there were two films on the Ord River Irrigation Scheme – *The Dam-makers*, black & white, sound, 7 minutes, shot by TVW7 in 1963 on the occasion of the completion of the first dam across the Ord, and *Breakthrough in the North*, colour, sound, 15 minutes, made by Bryan Lobascher in 1970. Together they gave a good picture of the development of the Scheme, first conceived in the 1940s, to use the vast supply of water in the Ord during the wet season to produce food for a hungry world on irrigated farms. The latter film also showed life in the new town of Kununurra.

The last film – *All Points North* – was made by WA Government Films and MacRobertson Miller Airlines (MMA) in 1957 in colour and ran for 21 minutes. It was a promotional film taken on the MMA flight route from Perth to Wyndham and it had a commentary about the country traversed and the local industry and attractions at intermediate points. For instance in the Kimberley it covered the pearling industry and lovely sunsets at Broome, Beagle Bay Mission, the port of Derby, Yampi Sound, Balgo Mission on the edge of the desert, the estuary of the mighty Ord River etc. and also showed the difference air-freighting made to the cattle industry.

All five films were of great historical interest for members of the Society and were well received.

Dorothy Perret