
Resurrecting USIA: A Second Act at the National Archives

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When the films of the United States Information Agency (USIA) first began arriving at the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) in the 1970s, the Smith-Mundt Act stood as a barrier to access. Congress blocked distribution of the films within the United States to avoid the appearance of propagandizing its own citizens with content created for foreign audiences. In 1990, the legal prohibition was lifted and researchers could begin to probe the contents of the massive collection, but broad access was not possible until NARA archivists and preservationists put in a great deal of work behind the scenes. With the continuing shift from analog to digital reference copies, more researchers than ever before have been able to view and study the films of the USIA. Over the course of the films' existence, they have progressed through stages of usefulness, from their origin as tools of public diplomacy to their re-emergence as the raw material of scholarship and filmmaking that allow us to better understand the past. If a film's initial use is considered as a first act, and the work of the archives allows for a second act of widespread accessibility, the researcher is the director of the third act, as it is reinterpreted and repackaged for a particular audience and purpose.

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As Michael Taylor explains in his article "Bringing Order to Chaos: Archival Processing and the USIA Film Collection," the USIA holdings arrived at NARA in various levels of disorganization. In addition, one must keep in mind that production and distribution of USIA films was a worldwide endeavor. Motion picture records arrived at NARA in multiple batches over an extended period of time, and some records may have remained in the countries where they were produced or distributed. To further complicate matters, additional materials from accessioned USIA holdings belong to a few Presidential Libraries,¹ which fall under the NARA family but have their own unique holdings and personnel. As the nation's recordkeeper, NARA is responsible for holding motion picture film records from a myriad of Federal agencies that have existed over time. USIA is only one Record Group among many to which NARA staff must dedicate resources to process, preserve, and make accessible to researchers.

While the Moving Image and Sound Branch is responsible for the intellectual and physical

control of the film holdings, it is the responsibility of the Motion Picture Preservation Lab to identify and preserve the best and most original material, making those records accessible to the public. Much of this work is invisible from the vantage point of the research room, but it is integral to ensuring that researchers are able to view films produced and collected by the United States government, both now and in the future. The Motion Picture Preservation Lab staff at NARA play an essential role in complex film processing work. The Lab is currently made up of five individuals tasked with the preservation, digitization, and technical assessment of all motion picture records held by the National Archives and the fourteen Presidential Libraries. As such, the Lab must prioritize the competing needs across the film holdings, which only allows for a small percentage of USIA material to be addressed in any given year. Technical processing services provided by Lab staff directly enable the archivists to make the records accessible. At current staffing levels, the pace of this work will continue to make approximately 56 cubic feet (or 122 new and existing titles) available each year. This is only a small portion of an ever-increasing accrual of USIA holdings as incoming accessions are added to the backlog.

In partnership with the archival unit the Lab provides the following services: 1) Technical Processing of motion picture items, both partially processed and wholly unprocessed; 2) Preservation of deteriorating items; 3) Digitization of items for access; and 4) Restoration of historically significant items. Each of these services requires Lab staff to first physically evaluate each item. The first step of this process is to determine which reels, based on condition and archival taxonomy, should remain as permanent holdings in the collection.

Technical Processing of Motion Picture Items

NARA's Motion Picture Preservation Lab works closely with the archival unit to provide information about the physical reels of film that comprise each archival item, so that the films may be made accessible to researchers while also ensuring their continued preservation. A single item is usually an individual production or title, potentially including camera originals, internegatives, separate soundtrack reels, composite projection prints, or any number of other production elements. A lab specialist performing technical processing of an item will hand-wind through the reels to identify the element types and create an archival set, designating elements as Preservation Copies (the earliest generation copy), Intermediate Copies (the next most original element), or Reference Copies (a suitable positive element). The Preservation Copy receives the highest level of protection and the Intermediate Copy serves as a reproduction master, whereas Reference Copies may be handled and viewed by researchers in the Moving Image and Sound Research Room.

The Preservation Lab has worked closely with archivists like Taylor to address the backlog of unprocessed USIA material and determine if unprocessed reels might belong with an already-processed item, or even if a processed item contains material that belongs elsewhere. We can illustrate this workflow by considering the case of the 306-HA series.

306-HA is the series identifier for the *Motion Pictures from the "Hoja" Program Series, 1952-1974*. This archival series contains films produced for the Arabic-speaking world that use puppets to act out folk tales of Nasr-ed-din Hoja (also written as Nasreddin Hodja). The majority of the films were produced for USIA by Trident Films and feature the Mary Chase Marionettes, though a few were made by a different production company with different puppets. Most of the films begin with a contemporary framing story (also puppets) that establishes the Hoja tale as a pro-Western/anti-communist allegory. There is [more information about the contents of the films at NARA's *Unwritten Record* blog.](#)²

When Taylor began work on the USIA record group, fewer than half of the Hoja films had been processed. He found eight processed Hoja items in the 306-GENERAL series, and a single item in a series named 306-HA. Taylor identified an additional sixteen Hoja titles among the unprocessed USIA material and made the decision to move all of the Hoja material into the 306-HA series to reflect their status as a discrete group of USIA-produced films. The 306-HA series now holds 24 of the 25 Hoja films produced; the final title was not accessioned by NARA.

After grouping and numbering (or renumbering) the Hoja films to match the titles and item numbering listed in historical USIA catalogs, Taylor sent them to the Preservation Lab for technical processing. While examining and winding through the reels of film, Lab specialists checked to make sure that each reel belonged with the item it was assigned to and that the reels for each item were correctly designated as Preservation, Intermediate, or Reference copies to protect the content for future use. Two of the already-existing item numbers were determined to contain elements from the same title, so they were consolidated as one item. Some of the items from 306-GENERAL that only contained a single projection print were matched to titles in the unprocessed material, allowing us to organize an archival set containing camera original material and other production elements, which are typically higher quality than prints. Technical processing is now complete on 306-HA, but if an additional reel for an item is located among the unprocessed material in the future, it will be compared to every element in the item's archival set to ensure the most original film elements are retained.

As Lab staff complete technical processing, they note information about the physical condition of the film reels on an inspection form and rehouse the films in archival cans for storage. Identifying information for the item and element type are marked on the film leader and the can. The Lab uses the information about the item's condition to make decisions about preservation actions, and the inspection information is internally tracked in a searchable database. Information about how the film sets are organized is sent back to the archivist along with the completed films. This is entered into the NARA Holdings Management System that identifies and tracks NARA's physical assets. Information gathered during technical processing is also used by archivists to write descriptions for the online Catalog. Viewing [the catalog entry for 306-HA](#) provides a clear example of how the technical processing work of the Preservation Lab supports the archival unit in making the films of the USIA accessible to the public.

Preservation of Deteriorated Items

When films arrive in the lab, it is entirely possible that they haven't been handled in decades. The USIA films are predominately acetate-based, which tend to rapidly degrade when exposed to heat and humidity. This acetate decay, known as vinegar syndrome due to its vinegar-like smell, leads to shrunken, brittle, and ultimately unusable film. Although NARA holds its motion picture records in temperature- and humidity-controlled storage, these films may have previously been subjected to improper handling, leaving them with irreversible damage. It should also be noted that each roll of film is unique and may not deteriorate in the same fashion. Therefore, it is nearly impossible to predict what state of decay lay within each wrapping of film. A rusty, dented film can may contain a reel that has fared well over the years, while a seemingly pristine container may reveal a warped and fragile mess.

A prime example of this occurred when working with a series of twelve Mexican cartoons produced by Dibujos Animados, S.A. All of the cartoons arrived in the Lab in relatively similar film cans, but a small portion of the films were suffering from vinegar syndrome. The role of the lab is to thoroughly inspect each film, measuring shrinkage and monitoring acetate decay with A-D strips. At-risk films are then photochemically duplicated to create a new copy before being returned to cold storage. The Mexican cartoons will be photochemically preserved as well, and then returned to cold storage with the rest of the series. Although vinegar syndrome and color fading are not reversible, deterioration can be effectively halted by freezing temperatures. Photochemical preservation and proper storage are the best methods for keeping the USIA films accessible and protected for the long term.³

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Digitization for Access

When researchers visit the Motion Picture research room at NARA's College Park, Maryland, facility, reference copies of motion picture records can be watched in a darkened room of film viewers. If a physical reference copy of a particular film isn't available, visitors can request that the record be digitized and made available on the research-room computers. At this request, the protected film is removed from cold storage and sent to the lab, where staff inspect each reel as they would for preservation. Once a film is deemed eligible for digitization, it is run through scanning equipment that produces a high-definition video file. A derivative file is then sent to the research room, where it can be easily accessed. Once the Hoja films were arranged into the appropriate archival sets, they too were digitized for the research room. When possible, a small series may be digitized in its entirety to facilitate increased access. This is the case with the Mexican cartoons as well, which are currently undergoing both preservation and digitization. Visitors to the research room can also access any other record that has been digitized in the past. In this way, one researcher's request helps many by making newly digitized records available to all. Files without restrictions are also uploaded to the National Archives Catalog, allowing for increased access beyond on-site research.

Records Across the National Archives

Another complexity facing the staff at NARA is that complete groupings of records may be spread across various parts of the National Archives. Five Presidential Libraries hold USIA records and many of their holdings are related to records at NARA. President Eisenhower established the USIA in 1953; some film relating to his administration can be found there under a deed of gift, but not with the 306 record group identifier. Another example is illustrated

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by footage of Duke Ellington's 70th birthday at the White House ([306.7533](#)). While NARA holds the finished film, the Richard M. Nixon Library holds 49 reels of [outtakes](#) containing content ranging from the rehearsal, to guest arrivals, and the performance itself. Another instance where this occurs is for *Five Cities of June* ([306.5932](#)), which concludes with JFK's famous visit to Berlin. The John F. Kennedy Presidential library also holds a copy of the film ([USG-01-15](#)), plus some of the original outtakes (labeled with the outtake designation 306.5932X), including footage of Kennedy in Ireland, which was not included in the finished film. In order to pass this type of information on to researchers, archivists at both facilities must be aware of this circumstance. Lab personnel must also validate the element types and scan the requested reels to fulfill requests.

Restorations for Significant Content

Two USIA titles have received full restorations to commemorate significant Civil Rights anniversaries. In 2013, James Blue's *The March* ([306.765](#)) was restored for the 50th anniversary of The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom; and in 2014, Charles Guggenheim's Academy Award Winning *Nine from Little Rock* ([306.5160](#)) was restored for the 50th anniversary of Brown vs. Board of Education. Restorations are undertaken infrequently as it is time consuming and labor intensive to review each frame for defects and make appropriate corrections to restore the titles to their original condition. That being said, it brings added value to the holdings and the National Archives is able to screen them for the public in the McGowan theater and provide copies to other institutions for screenings and events.

¹ Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, and the Richard M. Nixon Presidential Library

² Audrey Amidon, "Tales from the Hoja': Marionettes with a Message," *Unwritten Record*, October 16, 2019, <https://unwritten-record.blogs.archives.gov/2019/10/16/tales-from-the-hoja-marionettes-with-a-message/>

³ For more on these cartoons, see Ivy Donnell, "Covert Cartoons: Anti-Communism in Mexico and Beyond," *Unwritten Record*, June 23, 2020, <https://unwritten-record.blogs.archives.gov/2020/06/23/covert-cartoons-animated-anti-communism-in-mexico-and-beyond/>