

As published in the *Hong Kong Film Archive Newsletter* September 2002

<http://www.lcsd.gov.hk/CE/CulturalService/HKFA/english/newsletter02/n121.html>

AN ARCHIVIST'S STORY

Ray Edmondson

How do people get into film archiving? There's never been a well-defined path to follow. Everyone has a personal way into it. I've been asked to record mine.

At the tender age of six I acquired my first film projector, a gift from a very wise and prescient Santa Claus. It was a toy "Dux Kino", driven by a clockwork motor, and its comic strip style films – with two alternating movements on a horizontal strip of 35mm film – each took five minutes to grind through. I have been hooked on film projection and the fun of presenting a show ever since.

As I grew to adolescence, other projectors – silent 16mm and 8mm – followed. They ran the short 50 and 100 feet "package" movies that one could buy at serious toy shops or photographic stores in those pre-video days. I teamed up with a school friend who had an equally eccentric interest in film projection, pooling our equipment to put on film shows for kids in our inner-Sydney neighbourhood. We would switch from one projector to another, play around with fancy light effects on the screen and curtains, and add music from a wind-up gramophone. What our audiences thought of these extravaganzas I don't know: they were always very polite about it, and I suppose the shows had the virtue of being free.

Children's matinees – "Saturday arvo at the flicks" as we called them – were popular in my childhood. At about the age of 12 I happened to see, at my local cinema, a 1936 Cinesound feature film called *Orphan of the Wilderness*. It's an appealing story about an orphan kangaroo called Chut, whose adventures see him sold to the circus as a boxing kangaroo. Mistreated and crazed by thirst, Chut attacks his trainer in the ring, and escapes. At that point in the story, two children near me ran out of the theatre in tears. The film made an impression on me too – but for more than one reason.

By the 1950s, the once active Australian feature film industry was dead. The only local movies one ever saw were occasional documentaries and the weekly newsreels, *Australian Movietone News* and *Cinesound Review*. To my generation, it was other countries – primarily Britain and USA – that made the 'big' films, presumably because we didn't know how to. The realisation that an Australian company, Cinesound, had once made features as well as newsreels somehow amazed and intrigued me.

Fast forward to 1967. Now in the final year of my Arts degree at university, I happened to catch on television a documentary called *Forgotten Cinema*, made by a young,

independent film maker named Anthony Buckley (today he's a major producer). During its 60 minutes the unfolding history of Australia's forgotten feature industry – most of its output destroyed by time – captured me. And right in the middle, there it was: a section from *Orphan of the Wilderness*. The end credits identified the National Library of Australia as the source of the footage. I had never heard of the place, but thought how much I would enjoy working among all that film! Right on cue, a representative of the Library turned up at the university on a recruiting drive....and before long I was offered a cadetship to train as a librarian and move to Canberra where, in December 1968, I found myself with the grand title of reference librarian in the Library's Film Division.

My main job was to help borrowers find films in the Division's extensive 16mm documentary film lending collection. But when time could be spared, I also comprised the entire staff of the embryonic film archive. And what was the first thing I did? You guessed it. I searched the shelves looking for a print of *Orphan*. And there it was!

Growing the Archive first as a collection and then a staff unit within the National Library, and later as a separate institution (the National Film and Sound Archive [NFSA] was separated from the Library in 1984) was to become a long and eventful journey over the next three decades and more, although I couldn't have guessed at the time where it would lead (and would have been terrified if I had). It was also to be a constant voyage of discovery as Australia's film history unfolded to me, and I was to repeatedly experience that greatest privilege of a film archivist – finding an important “lost” film.

Then, as the 1990s dawned, the voyage unwittingly went further. Opportunities came to travel in South East Asia, so I searched for my opposite numbers to find what was happening in their countries: and discovered that they had been seized with the same curiosity! A seminal gathering in 1995 of 20 archivists from across the region, for a month-long training seminar at the NFSA in Canberra, crystallized the relationships and convictions on which SEAPAVAA was founded the following year, and on which it has worked and grown ever since. It is archiving at the raw edge, for many of its members work with the most minimal of resources. But it has given a face to the region, and its richness lies in its nature as a professional family, for relationships are strong, personal and supportive. At our most recent annual conference in Vientiane, Laos, when my term as the inaugural President ended, there were a hundred of us: a possibility no one could have imagined a decade earlier.

I have gained many treasured friendships, with the filmmakers of yesterday and today, with researchers and activists who were concerned, like I was, that our film heritage should be rescued and protected within an appropriate organization. One of those friendships, for the last 20 years of his life, was with Ken G. Hall, a giant of Australia's film industry and the man who produced and directed *Orphan of the Wilderness*. He told me that, of his 18 feature films, it was the one he most enjoyed making. It remains my favourite.

I've always seen that title as a metaphor for the realities which so many of us face as film archivists. To some extent, we are still pioneering an idea. We are orphans abroad in

environments that aren't always sympathetic, and sometimes we feel very lonely and ill-equipped in our vocation – it is the price of trailblazing. Globally there are surprisingly few of us compared to the size of our task, and faced with rapid technical change, ethical dilemmas and limited resources we seem to stand in a wilderness without reference points. Except, that is, for a long horizon. We are still an evolving profession and, like Chut the kangaroo, we don't give up easily.

In case you're wondering, yes, I still have the "Dux Kino" and its several successors. And the wind-up gramophone. And the films. And they still work. Of course, I also have DVD and CD and the other digital gear of today. But I've never tired of the fun of projecting film - for family and friends. They are still, I'm glad to say, polite about it. And it's still free.