

# THE LAST FILM SEARCH

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Sometime in 1979, the Chairman of the Council of the National Library of Australia, Kenneth Myer, was seeking a way to boost the work of the National Film Archive. He suggested that I devise a worthwhile, sponsorable project which he could recommend for support by a particular foundation with which he had contacts.

An organised and very public national search for nitrate film seemed to me the logical project. While the Archive had for 20 years or more pursued various approaches in searching for lost material, they had been low key, intermittent, and - for reasons of expense - had involved only limited fieldwork. Outside the collector network and the incidental discoveries which came our way, I believed there was more material in private hands - in old, closed picture theatres, attics, barns and garages, and elsewhere - that we would never turn up unless we had the means to add a new dimension to the task.

Furthermore, at the time it was received wisdom within FIAF that the world's remaining nitrate film holdings would have pretty well disintegrated by year 2000 (we now know better, of course). We were therefore running out of time. Added to that, the survival rate of Australian silent films was poor - less than 5% of the estimated output was known to exist in archive collections. Sound films of the 30s and 40s fared better, but there were still major gaps. Finally, there was the sheer size of Australia: a big country with plenty of out-of-the-way places where films might have been left and forgotten. A non-current film programme ending up in an outback country hall at the end of its circuit could easily stay there, because it wasn't worth the distributor's while to chase it up.

How would the task be conducted? A field officer would travel the country, with car and caravan, on a literal treasure hunt. He would have a backup person at the Canberra "base". His arrival in each locality would be pre-publicised through the local radio, TV and newspaper and his contact details made known. On arrival, he'd be interviewed by the media, respond to enquiries and would proactively search likely locations (such as closed up theatres) or seek out promising individuals. The Canberra back-up person would follow up on the contacts made once the field officer moved on.

As a working name, I first called the proposed project *Operation Nitrate*. Further reflection brought to mind the Bogdanovitch film *The Last Picture Show*, an alternative lifestyle book with the striking title *The Last Whole Earth Catalog*, and an article I'd written some years earlier called *The Last Newsreel*. So it seemed to me that *The Last Film Search* combined a proper sense of apocalyptic urgency with accurate description. As a slogan "*nitrate won't wait*" - borrowed from "*nitrate can't wait*", used by a Canadian colleague - seemed simple, direct and apt.

In the event, the project proved to be outside the parameters of Ken Myer's intended foundation (later they bankrolled an entirely different project for us) so my deputy, Mike Lynskey, and I went looking for corporate sponsors. Kodak and the Utah Foundation led the final consortium, which collectively provided the required A\$100,000 - plus. While corporate sponsorship for cultural institutions is common today, it was not so in 1980: it was a new experience for the National Library and none of us were sure how to handle it!.

*The Last Film Search* was formally launched in October 1981 with film director Peter Weir doing the honours. It immediately gained a media profile, enhanced the following March when former Prime Minister Gough Whitlam launched an associated book, *Australia's Lost Films* (which I had written in conjunction with film historian Andrew Pike). In my favourite press clipping from the *Search*, the national newspaper *The Australian* did a front page story on 26 March headlined (not entirely accurately) "**Archivist in race against silver nitrate time bomb: raider of the lost art scours the countryside for old film**". The "raider" was field officer Michael Cordell, and as he travelled the backblocks in his brightly-painted caravan he became, for a while, a media phenomenon. For its first year and beyond, the *Search* garnered immense free publicity in the press, and on television news and chat shows. It ultimately yielded two one-hour television documentaries. My impression was that most Australians came to hear about the *Search*, picked up the slogan and understood its basic message. Once a taxi driver in Sydney, who did not know where I worked, regaled me with great enthusiasm about the project - and, as everyone knows, taxi drivers are the best barometer of public opinion!

Throughout, we did not spend a penny on paid advertising, though we did produce what is now called "collateral" - a project logo, information brochures, "nitrate won't wait" badges, *Last Film Search* stationery, wall posters and even T shirts - and we distributed these judiciously. Under the sponsorship arrangement, we had access to Kodak's public relations and design department, and their people created the "look" of the *Search*. At the outset, the relative prominence of each sponsor's name and logo in publicity had been agreed; all of these, in turn, were subsidiary to the project name itself.

The *Search* officially ran for 5 years, though its most active and publicisable phase was the first 18 months. It turned up over a million feet of nitrate film (plus a lot of acetate film), it served its sponsors very well, and it permanently lifted public awareness of the loss and vulnerability of our film heritage. "Nitrate won't wait" is a simple message and it hit home, publicly and politically. I believe it hastened the day when, in 1984, the National Film and Sound Archive was separated from the National Library to become an autonomous institution, and ultimately achieve adequate funding and means for preserving its nitrate collection. By any measure, the project was a signal success, and to my delight other archives have since used it as an effective model.

I have often asked myself *why* it was so successful, for its public impact was well beyond any of our expectations. I think it was a combination of many things: the name and the slogan, the romantic appeal of a national treasure hunt, the simplicity of the message, the fact that the results were showable on television, and the sentiment Australians have for their film heritage. These insights were all post-facto: at the time our strategy (if that's what it was) arose more from intuition than analysis. Perhaps intuition - the conviction that the material was there, and this was the way to find it - was the most important ingredient of all!