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Indexing Archival Films: Alaska Archival Motion Picture Program

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Since the turn of the twentieth century, the state of Alaska has attracted professional and amateur filmmakers eager to document the northern wilderness and its inhabitants. Existing films on Alaska include thousands of feet of historically precious, unedited footage as well as studio productions; they are in demand by research specialists, educators, and filmmakers, as well as nonprofessional Alaskan citizens. Responding to that demand, administrators of the Rasmuson Library at the University of Alaska in Fairbanks launched the Alaska Archival Motion Picture Program to preserve film footage on Alaska and the circumpolar regions and to make it available to a variety of user groups.

First funded in 1979, the program has enabled Rasmuson Library staff to preserve 300,000 feet of film, of which 233,000 feet has been indexed in a computerized system. Because most of the first films in the collection were unedited compilations of sequences of footage on unrelated subjects, program developers had to modify existing indexing systems that reference single-subject, whole films. As a result, the Catalog-Index of Alaska Archival Motion Pictures indexes scenes within a film--one of its special features.

In developing a cataloging system for Alaska films, Steven Walsh, chief indexer, consistently strove to accomodate the different needs of potential patrons--all those who had expressed sufficient interest in Alaska films to provide incentive for the program. As a result, the indexing system generates information in different formats. The catalog-index, which is available on microfilm, online in the university mainframe computer, and on hard copy in the

Rasmuson Library, is easily accessible to the general public and provides enough information, scene-by-scene, to identify films of interest. The index and film abstracts that compose the catalog-index are a concentrated version of information that is originally recorded on "logging sheets" and "cover sheets." The logging sheets break each scene into individual camera shots to provide a detailed narrative of each motion picture, including notations on film quality. They are a valuable resource for filmmakers and research specialists, especially those who are located outside of Alaska. Patrons can request a printout of the logging sheets from the archival film office in Fairbanks.

A description of the kind of footage available in the collection will facilitate the explanation of indexing decisions. Travelogues, such as those taken by <u>Nature Magazine</u> photographers William Finley and Arthur Pack, are typical of the kind of unedited films that defy classification unless they are broken into smaller segments. For instance, the viewer might see bears rumbling along, then fishing in a river, followed by a shot of a cabin along the river, a pan of the riverbank, the forest, a shot of a man standing in the cabin doorway smoking a pipe, men wading across the river holding motion picture cameras, someone using a rifle to frighten a bear, then a shot of a canoe paddled in the river, a big steamboat, or gear being loaded onto the steamboat from smaller boats. The above example could be classified under at least three different subjects: bears, cameramen, and the steamboat. The Alaska archival film indexing system makes it possible to do this, by referencing sequences of footage within a film. By adopting methods for classifying unedited footage, the indexers developed an efficient system for handling all film, including fully edited and narrated material, that economizes on patron research time.

Silent films in the collection often provide subtitles on separate frames. The films of William Van Valen belong to this category. Van Valen headed the Wanamaker Expedition to the Arctic from 1917 to

1919, during which he filmed subjects such as Eskimo whaling, Eskimo sports, reindeer herding, and other activities. Subtitles provide information that might be significant to researchers. For instance, a soft black and white image of an old Eskimo man in thick hooded parka and skin boots, with an ice tester in one hand, is followed by a slide that indicates he is a renowned hunter who is able to smell a dead whale through twelve feet of ice. The following scenes show Eskimos digging a huge hole in the ice and hauling up a dead whale. Sensitive to the needs of researchers, indexers in the Alaska program include significant detail in the index entry whenever it occurs on film. As example, two index entries for the above scenes, under the subject heading HUNTING:, follow:

Whale: Eskimos use picks, ice testers to dig huge hole to pull up rancid whale; Barrow, Alaska, near.

Whale: Portrait of Eskimo who can smell whale through thick ice pack; Barrow, Alaska, near.

Notice that the index uses verbs to provide thorough but economical subject information in a readable format. Patrons who are not research specialists can use the index without training or assistance to find films on subjects of special interest. Teachers can search for classroom material. Descendants of early Alaskans can look for films that show the lifestyle of their forebears.

Index entries are organized under subject and location headings which are listed alphabetically. Always sensitive to the needs of researchers, indexers decided not to use an existing classification system, but instead to develop one that would correspond more precisely to materials in the collection and, thus, streamline the pursuit of special inquiries. Indexers identified subject categories as related material accumulated within a film and from different films in the collection.

Figure 1 shows how index entries are organized under headings. Underneath each heading, entries are listed in alphabetical order. Therefore, the first word of an entry serves effectively as a subheading.

AGRICULTURE

> Harvester pulled by tractor, men harvest potatoes, haystacks in filed: Palmer, Ak.; summer.

AIRPLANES

> Cargo airplane, Soviet, "CCP 04175"- on side: Treshnikov Ice Island, Chukchi Sea.

> Drops bag at mining camp, bag picked up: Bird Creek, Talkeetna District, Ak.; summer.

> Military: P-38 Lightning; other military airplanes fueled.

> Military: U.S. Air Force weather airplane with crew in flight: Elmendorf Air Force Base, Anchorage, Ak., near.

> Single-engine, worked on, takes off from gravel road: Southeastern Ak.; spring.

> Ski-plane, on frozen lake, taxis, "N704BK" on wing gear, dogs unloaded; winter.

ANAKTUVUK PASS, ALASKA

> Boy plays with paper airplane; summer.

> Dog mushing; summer.

Figure 1. Index entry headings.

Like headings, subheadings are defined as material accumulates from the films that are cataloged. As data accumulates under a particular subject, the indexers designate certain first words as formal subheadings, to ensure that all relevant information is grouped there, even if it must be entered more than once underneath a heading. Subheadings that have been formalized are set off in the index by a colon. In Figure 1, there is only one formal subheading, Military:.

Thus, the indexing system provides for an emergent classification scheme tailored to materials in the collection. To assist patrons, the index includes a subject heading guide and a location heading guide. (See Appendix A for a sample of the Subject Guide.)

An example of the full index entries, with film and footage reference data and date or approximate date of the film appears in Figure 2 (the letters in parentheses have been added to facilitate explanation).

(A)	FILM NO.	FEET AND FRAMES	FILM DATE
FISHING			
(B)	(C)	(G)	(H)
Fishwheel: man poses	147		~1947
with fish caught by fishwheel;			
drying rack with fish; Fairbanks,			
Ak., near, possibly.			
		(D) (E)	(I)
Nets repaired; Atka, Ak.	18	1347-26	1946
		1481-30	
	(F)		
	22	116-00	1953
			(J)
Sticks used by three	52	169-38	1935-1948
young persons to search for			
something, possibly fish, in			
shallow water.			

Figure 2. Full index entries.

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Notice that headings (labeled A) and entries (labeled B) are listed alphabetically. In the figure, the first entry starts with a formal subheading, Fishwheel followed by a colon. The second entry begins with an informal subheading, Nets followed by a semicolon. The third entry begins with a first word that is merely descriptive and is not set off by punctuation from the rest of the entry--Sticks. Only headings and subheadings appear in the Subject Heading Guide.

Reading left to right in Figure 2, the first column following an entry is a film number (labeled C). The film number is followed to the right by one or more scene referral numbers. These are paired numbers separated by a dash: the first (labeled D) refers to feet of film and the second (labeled E) refers to a frame of film. The paired referral numbers indicate the first frame of the scene that includes footage of the indexed subject. The complete referral sequence directs the user to a specific film and to one or more specific scenes in the film. If more than one film contains the subject indexed, then there will be more than one film number listed (F). Also, if no paired numbers follow the film number (see G), then the entire film may be considered relevant to the indexed subject.

The last column provides film dates. There are three possible notations for film dates. The first (labeled H) is preceded by "~" to indicate that the date is estimated to be within a year or two of accuracy. The second film date (labeled I) represents what the cataloger believes to be the exact year the film was shot. The third film date (labeled J) shows two dates separated by a hyphen indicating that there was insufficient information to estimate the year the film was shot, so a range of years is provided instead.

The index is both concise and informative. By scanning the Heading Guides at the front of the index, a patron can search efficiently for instances of a specific artifact or a particular human subject. By reviewing relevant index entries, the patron can select films or portions of films that might be of interest.

The catalog-index also provides an abstract of each film, arranged chronologically according to its date of acquisition. A film summary number heads the abstract, which outlines the title, subject activities, "animated objects" (including humans and animals; a semicolon is used to separate the categories), location, date of filming, and film credits. The outline is followed by a summary of the film and concludes with data on the film condition, available format, and length of film. An example of a film abstract is in Figure 3.

Archival Motion Picture No. 1
a. Untitled
b. Grass gathering: scenic boat trip
c. Native Alaskan and Caucasian
d. Near Atka, Alaska
e. 1946
f. Summer
g. Photographer: Simeon Oliver

Grass gathering at Atka, Alaska. Residents cut long grass, lay it out to dry in sun, split grass. Scenic boat ride by inlet or "Old Harbor." Rectangular holes dug in ground; purpose of digging not known.

Original Format: 16mm film   Silent/Black and White

Film Condition: Little scratchiness throughout
Time: 5 1/2 Minutes

Figure 3. Film abstract.

The Catalog-Index to Alaska Archival Motion Pictures, composed of film abstracts and the index, is the major product of a program also devoted to film

acquisition and preservation. Likewise, it is the end product of a thorough logging system which begins after films have been inventoried, and technical and accession information has been filled out on cover sheets (see Appendix B for cover sheet format). Patrons can request a computer printout of the cover sheets and logging sheets if they want additional information on a film.

The logging process is the backbone of the catalog-index. It entails writing a verbal description of a film while viewing it through a film reader. The detailed logging procedure is actually comprised of simple conventions that facilitate the translation of filmed events into a written narrative. Using a set of terms for describing types of camera shots and a few punctuation marks to denote how the shots are connected, indexers can track camera movements, correlate a written narrative to sequences of footage, and give a reader a clear and accurate impression of a film. An additional set of symbols that denote technical flaws in film quality add sufficient information for filmmakers in distant locations to select footage from the Alaska film archives by reading the logging sheets.

Logging sheets provide columns for (1) a running record of feet-and-frames to mark the beginning of scenes, (2) a narrative description of shots within scenes, (3) problem coding, and (4) index entries, which can be composed during logging or after the written narrative of the film is complete. To fill out the logging sheet, the indexer loads a film onto a film reader and punches a "start-hole" through the film with a paper punch. The frame at which the hole was punched is advanced until the hole projects onto the screen, and the feet-and-frame counter is reset to zero at that frame.

As the film advances, the indexer records what is happening in every shot. (A shot is defined as footage that is continuous until the cameraman releases the camera trigger or until the editor later splices the film.) A shot might be taken from a distance or close up; the camera might be stationary

or gently swung or tilted. Alaska indexers adapted symbols denoting types of shots from those used at the National Archives in Washington, DC. (A complete list is available from the authors.)

Since a cameraman usually uses a number of shots to cover one subject, each scene is generally composed of multiple shots. For instance, an airplane landing might be shot from a distance several times, then as a close-up. In order to economize the narrative, the descriptors are used with punctuation to indicate how the shots are linked.

If the shots are of the same kind (e.g., multiple long shots), an apostrophe is used with the descriptor plural (LS's). If different types of shots are used (e.g., long shots and close-ups), and if they occurred in sequential order (first long shots, then close-ups), the different descriptors are separated by a dash (LS's-CU's). If different types of shots are used but not in sequential order, the descriptors are separated by a comma: "LS's, MS's" indicates that both long shots and medium shots were used; at least one long shot occurred before any of the medium shots; otherwise, the order of shots cannot be determined from the record. Generally, shots are combined in sequences that are thematically related. To indicate a related sequence of shots, each verbal description is followed by a semicolon, until the last verbal description in the sequence is marked with a period. (See Figure 4.)

FEET-AND-FRAMES   LOG
15-06   MLS   Man rides snowmachine pulling sled, ap-
                proaching airstrip,
        MS   man sits on sled, smokes cigarette,
        ELS   airplane in flight;
        MLS's   Pilot unloads box from airplane, man
                lifts box onto sled attached to snow-
                machine,
        LS   village in distance, snowmachine ap-
                proaches.

Figure 4 . Sequence of shots.

Interrelated sequences of shots combine into scenes. By compiling verbal descriptions of interrelated sequences of shots, the indexer builds up a scene description. The indexer must determine when one scene gives way to the next, a point open to interpretation.

Since filmmakers, historians, and archivists are all interested in the quality of the film image, the logging system includes a code to indicate the condition of footage throughout the film. The indexer uses the problem code column on the logging sheet to note film condition during the viewing process. (A complete list is available from the authors.) Figure 5 is an example of a logging sheet, filled out through the scene that begins at ten-feet-plus-six-frames from the start-hole.

Feet-and-Frames		Scene Description	Problem Code
0-00	Start-hole		
1-02	CU's, LS	Wildflowers: chocolate lilies, iris, sitka rose, bluebells, shooting stars; large white dog runs to person in field of shooting stars at Knik Flats near Anchorage.	
7-20	LS's	Cars move on four-lane street in Anchorage, sign, "515 CLUB." Small boats moored; dock buildings.	UE1 (under-exposure; slight problem)
10-06	LS's	Homestead house, children play with dogs on porch; children, dogs walk through field of ripe oats.	CH1 (camera handling; slight problem)
	LS's	Bulldozer pushes over spruce trees;	

```
MUS's       smoke rises from burn pile in
CU          partially cleared field; man lights
            brush pile with burning papers; flame
            in brush pile.
```

Figure 5. Logging sheet.

Indexers devised the logging system to provide an accurate written overview of films for patrons who are unable to visit the collection, or for those who are looking for specific information from a lot of footage. Once patrons have identified films of interest in the catalog-index, they can request copies of the logging sheets from the archival film office in Fairbanks. While the index references the beginning of scenes, the logging sheets break scenes into individual shots and, thus, provide a detailed, sequential description of each film. In addition, the logging sheets offer technical data on film condition scene by scene, which assists filmmakers in selecting appropriate footage for films in progress. The logging sheets can eliminate the unnecessary expense of time and money required to travel thousands of miles across Alaska to access the collection or to acquire copies of films that are not needed. In addition, the logging system can serve as a research tool in the field, enabling a researcher to tie an informant's anecdote about filmed material to the exact sequence of footage where it occurs.

Sensitive to the needs of research specialists as well as nonprofessional Alaska citizens, indexers of the Alaska Archival Motion Picture Program developed an efficient, user friendly system for accessing filmed information. The program is achieving its purpose--to preserve and catalog a growing collection of films, including historically precious, old, un-edited footage and professional studio productions.

APPENDIX A
SUBJECT GUIDE

This is a sample portion of the Subject Heading Guide.


```
SUBJECT HEADINGS -
  Subheadings -
  /Formal/           /Nonformal/
--------------------------------------------------------------
```

AGRICULTURE

> Farm
> Farmers

  Fur farming:

> Harvester
> Tractor (s)
> University of Alaska Agricultural
>   Experiment Station

AIRPLANES
  Airfield (s):

> Airliner

  Airport (s):
  Airstrip (s):

> Biplane
> Cargo
> Float-plane
> Fokker

  Military:

> Pilot briefing film
> Seaplane
> Single-engine (s)
> Ski-plane
> Small airplane
> Twin engine

ALASKA RURAL SCHOOL PROJECT
ALASKA STATEHOOD
ALYESKA PIPELINE
  Construction:
ANIMAL TRACKS
ANIMALS - BEARS
  Black bear:

> Cub (s)

Fish
   Grizzly:
                    Kodiak bear
   Polar bear (s):
ANIMALS - BEAVERS

APPENDIX B
COVER SHEET FORMAT

The computerized version of the cover sheet format as it
appears on screen

```
                    Page 1 of Cover Sheets
FILM  :     :               DATE  : /  /  :     LOGGED BY:    :
TITLE:                                                        :
   :                                                          :
SUBJECT:                                                      :
      :
DATE OF FILM  (DATE1):  :    (DATE2)  :  :    (DATE TYPE)  :  :
    PHOTOGRAPHER:                                            :
           DONOR:                                            :
DONOR'S ADDRESS:                                             :
      COPYRIGHT:                                             :
       PRODUCER:                                             :
LOCATION OF ORG:                                            :
DATE OF ACQUISITION:  /  /  :    ACQUIRED BY:               :
SOURCE OF DOCUMENTATION
:                                                           :
RELATED INFORMATION
:                                                           :
NUMBER OF REELS:   :   FRAME PER SECOND:  :    LENGTH:      :
35mm-SAFETY:  :   BLACK & WHITE:  :   CAMERA ORIG:  :  SOUND:  :
35mm-NITRATE:  :COLOR:  :RELEASE PRINT:  :TITLE FRAMES  :   :
16mm    : : TINTED   :  : PRINT MASTER   : :SUPERIMPOSED
SUPER-8mm : : POSITIVE   : : VIDEO TAPE  : :  SUBTITLES:     :
REGULAR 8mm : : NEGATIVE          : :
```

FILM
IMAGE QUALITY_____
```
                        FOCUS:                              :
                     EXPOSURE:                              :
      NITRATE DETERIORATION:                                :
          CAMERA TECHNIQUE:                                 :
```
FILM CONDITION_____
```
      DRYNESS & BRITTLENESS:                                :
   SHRUNKEN SPROCKET HOLES:                                 :
      SPROCKET HOLE DAMAGE:                                 :
   NUMBER OF TEARS OR RIPS:                                 :
     NUMBER CEMENT SPLICES:                                 :
     NUMBER TAPE  SPLICES:                                  :
        LOGGING REMARKS   :                                 :

                        :                                   :
          WARPED FILM EDGES:                                :
                SALVAGEABLE:                                :
```
REMARKS
```
   :                                                        :
   :                                                        :
```
   EXTENT TO WHICH THIS FILM DUPLICATES OTHER FOOTAGE
   IN COLLECTION
```
   :                                                        :
```

Each area between the colons ":" is a data input
area. In the computerized system, the cursor moves
only within these areas, and jumps between them with
each carriage return. Page 2 automatically appears on
the screen after page 1 has been completed.

Steven Walsh is the head indexer for the Alaska Archival Motion Picture Program. He has a M.A. in anthropology from the University of Alaska concentrating on the history and culture of the St. Lawrence Island Eskimos. During the summer of 1986 he attended the Northern Libraries Colloquy in Lulea, Sweden where he delivered a paper on the indexing system discussed in this article.

David A. Hales is an Associate Professor of Library Science at the University of Alaska-Fairbanks. He holds a M.L.S. degree from Drexel University and a M.A. degree in folklore and folklife from the University of Pennsylvania. Over the years he has compiled several indexes and been a consultant for other indexing projects.

Judith Diamondstone worked as editor on the Alaska Archival Motion Picture Program from 1984 to 1985. She has worked in northwest Alaska producing public information materials and on St. Lawrence Island, Alaska as co-researcher on a historical literacy project. She is currently a doctoral student at the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

For more information, please contact Steven Walsh.