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Tributes to Bill O'Farrell

Rosemary Bergeron, Sam Kula, Ken Weissman, Charles Tepperman,
Nancy Watrous, Karan Sheldon

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6. See also Robert W. Welkos, "A Mystery Revisited; A Building that Figured in the Unsolved Death of Actress Thelma Todd Is for Sale," *Los Angeles Times*, May 29, 2002.
7. Cecil Smith, "'Insight' Calls God to Account," *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 27, 1980.
8. Frank Desiderio, e-mail, June 12, 2008.
9. Pioneering Los Angeles television station KTLA donated the Ampex AVR-1 to UCLA in 1992. KTLA has partnered with UCLA in numerous preservation projects, including the preservation of the color videotape used for the 1958 NBC special *An Evening with Fred Astaire*. The work resulted in technical Emmy Awards for the UCLA Film & Television Archive, Ed Reitan, Don Kent, and Dan Einstein in 1988. The Archive's Ampex AVR-1 was relocated to CBS in 2002.
10. David Keleshian, e-mail, June 18, 2008.
11. The "Church and State" relationship between UCLA and the Paulists was humorously labeled "Strange Bedfellows" by Dan Streible for the Orphans 6 program, where *Insight* was coupled with Mark J. Williams screening an episode of *The Orchid Award* (ABC, 1953) starring Ronald Reagan and Liberace.



Bill O'Farrell, March 23, 2006, Columbia, South Carolina, at the Sixth Orphan Film Symposium. Courtesy of Rick Prelinger.

Tributes to Bill O'Farrell

ROSEMARY BERGERON AND SAM KULA (Library And Archives Canada)

Bill O'Farrell brought an amazing level of energy, passion, creativity, and a decidedly unbureaucratic approach to his work at Library and Archives Canada (LAC). He was always a strong advocate for the particular needs and interests of moving image preservation amidst the competing priorities of a large archival institution where film and television were just a part of the mandate.

Bill's career at LAC began in 1975. At the age of twenty-one, he was already an experienced laboratory hand, having worked summers at Crawley Films, where his father worked for over forty years. Family lore has it that Bill and his sister had several uncredited roles as toddlers in dad's documentaries. Crawley Films was Canada's most successful private-sector production company in the sixties and seventies. One of Bill's proudest

accomplishments at LAC was the acquisition of the Crawley Collection when the company was sold in 1982.

When Bill joined the LAC, the "laboratory," headed by Roger Easton, had a staff of five, with the safety films stored in the basement of an old office building in downtown Ottawa. Bill learned fast. He never stopped learning and acquired a university degree while on the job. He helped plan and execute several vault moves to increasingly better storage conditions. By the early 1980s, Bill was head of the film lab and still improving his skills. Everything he had learned about vault construction, vault management, and moving image laboratory practices went into his contributions to the design of the Gatineau Preservation Centre which opened in 1997. The film, video, and audiotapes preserved there today function as a testament to his years of service.

Bill was always as interested in content as he was in conservation. Mention a collection name and he would be able to describe its acquisition, condition, and value. He was continually researching early film production and frequently advised his colleagues about potential acquisitions. Bill spent so much time

assisting in other people's writing projects that he never got around to committing to paper the extensive knowledge he had acquired about the history of film in Canada. The electronic archives of the AMIA listserv are enriched by Bill's detailed postings about preservation and history. In 1997, Anthology Film Archives recognized his work with its Film Preservation Honor.

One of Bill's most celebrated technical achievements was the Dawson City Collection. In 1978, a cache of more than five hundred films was discovered buried in the permafrost in Dawson City, Yukon. They had been there since 1929. Bill always thought big when it came to saving film and he came up with the idea to call in the Canadian Air Force to fly the films to Ottawa. The films turned out to be one of the most exciting discoveries in the history of film archives. Bill developed new techniques to stabilize the films, which had suffered emulsion damage. Then he worked out a means to repatriate American titles to the Library of Congress.

Many of Bill's adventures in acquiring nitrate films for the national collection involved Bill Galloway, one of the most colorful characters ever to work in archives. Bill had dozens of harrowing tales about overnight trips riding shotgun for Galloway with a trunk full of nitrate. Many of these were associated with their successful efforts to acquire Canadian stories held in the Fox Movietone "archives." Visits to Fox's nitrate vaults in upstate New York always seemed to involve encounters with guard dogs or snakes!

Bill O'Farrell's accomplishments above and beyond his responsibilities as Chief, Moving Image and Audio Conservation were so numerous that he appeared to have two or three jobs. The projects were as varied as the world of moving images. Whether it was restoring the melodrama *Bush Pilot* (1946), securing 35mm copies of Canadian footage from the Paper Print Collection at the Library of Congress, or reconstructing the ethnographic film *Nass River Indians*, from footage shot in 1927 by James Sibley Watson Jr., Bill applied the same high standards and sensitive response to the material. *Nass River Indians* required digital frame scans achieved with a heavily modified commercial film scanner. The project epitomized Bill's awareness of and willingness to apply new

technologies. It also typifies his total involvement with the image whether it was hockey footage, feature films, or obscure documentaries that recorded some aspect of Canadian life. He greatly enriched the national collection and a left legacy of technical achievement in the preservation of moving image heritage.

KEN WEISSMAN (Library Of Congress)

I've been trying to remember the very first time I met Bill O'Farrell. I'm pretty sure that it was back in the mid-to-late 1980s—1987 I think. We met in Hollywood on the campus of the American Film Institute (AFI). The AFI was hosting a diverse group of folks involved in film preservation for a series of meetings it called the "Preservation Technicians Seminar." There were representatives from all over the United States, lab types as well as archivists, along with a small contingent from Canada.

I remember that I was immediately struck by Bill and his colleague Roger Easton. They were both very friendly yet somewhat shy, and had that self-deprecating manner that I have found to be typical of many Canadians (and for which I have come to truly love and admire them). They formed quite the comedy team, with Roger inevitably playing the straight man to Bill. Roger was Bill's boss, but they never stood on ceremony. I remember thinking how great it was that they obviously had a symbiotic partnership in their work—which was my first meaningful lesson in managing people I work with. I also recall that Bill and I hit it off immediately. I made sure that I sat near him whenever I could during the conference. There was just *something* about him . . .

We kept in touch over the next few years, although somewhat sporadically. Keep in mind that this was before e-mail and the Internet had taken off, and my career with the Library of Congress was in its infancy—so I actually had to work and couldn't spend all day on the phone, like I seem to nowadays. I felt like our relationship took off at my first AMIA conference in Boston in 1994. Bill was an incoming AMIA Board member and chair of the Preservation Committee. I was honored that he sought me out and asked me to attend his meetings. Little did I know what he had in store for me!

In AMIA I found legitimacy for my chosen profession, and in Bill I found both a colleague and a mentor. We spent hours together at the conference talking about our jobs and our organizations. We both loved the financial stability that our archives had (relatively speaking), which allowed us to work on so many projects. And the vastness of the two collections always kept us on our toes as new and exciting discoveries seemed to happen daily. We also bemoaned the fact that it was easy to get lost in the shuffle of such large bureaucracies, that our respective divisions always seemed to be considered second fiddle to those “paper” divisions. But it was also clear from our conversations that Bill loved the National Archives of Canada (NAC) and was absolutely committed to saving Canada’s film heritage. I credit Bill for clarifying to me the importance of a nation’s film heritage and for showing me how important it was to be an advocate for its preservation.

Over the next few years we met mainly at conferences, though we spoke often and of course when e-mail became ubiquitous, we communicated a great deal that way. I found myself more and more impressed by the scope of Bill’s knowledge, and his unique way of handling situations (and people) with humor and grace in order to achieve goals. He cajoled me into agreeing to become his successor as the chair of the AMIA Preservation Committee. I was unsure that I had the ability or the professional standing to be effective. But Bill assured me that I did, and of course he was right. He did the same thing when I was approached about running for an AMIA Board of Directors seat. Both positions provided me with experience and credentials that helped me grow professionally as well as personally. I am forever grateful for his influence and support.

Occasionally Bill and I were able to collaborate on projects directly. During my tenure as the chair of the AMIA Preservation Committee, the group was looking for a project to benefit the entire membership. Bill suggested we try to obtain a shrinkage gauge that could be loaned out to AMIA members at no charge—a perk for being a dues-paying member. After phone conversations to call in favors and some “influence peddling” within our respective organizations, we figured out a way to get it done at essentially no cost to AMIA. That

shrinkage gauge is still available today, and is very much a part of Bill’s legacy to the field.

Fast-forward a number of years. I received a call from one of Bill’s friends, who indicated he had taken ill. Apparently he had blacked out, and when he awoke found he couldn’t speak. Bill soon began to mend. We were able to talk again as if nothing had ever happened, and Bill reassured me that everything was fine. No big deal, just another bump in the road, another challenge to overcome. At the 2002 AMIA conference in Boston, it seemed that he had truly persevered. After taking a medical retirement from the NAC, the last few years of his career were spent consulting, helping out other archives, and donating his time to their causes.

I last spoke to Bill O’Farrell a couple of weeks before he passed away. I did almost all of the talking, as his speech was again severely impaired. It was a surreal experience. I find it terribly ironic that the part of Bill’s body that had served him so well over the years—the speech center of his brain—was the area that ultimately betrayed him. He could understand conversations fine, but found it difficult to speak beyond a word or two. We shared a few laughs, and I told him that I was going to try to visit him in Ottawa soon, all the while having tears stream down my face. Unfortunately Bill took a dramatic turn for the worse. I canceled my trip so as to not intrude on his family’s time with him. I’m comforted by the fact that his suffering is now over, the end was peaceful, and that he was surrounded by loved ones. Of this I’m certain—although his physical presence will always be missed, his influence within AMIA and the Canadian and international film preservation communities will continue, a legacy that I am extremely proud to help carry on.

CHARLES TEPPERMAN (University Of Calgary)

I know I’m not alone in feeling a great good fortune in having benefited from Bill O’Farrell’s mentorship. He played an active role in mentoring many people, young and old, students and archivists. While it would be impossible to do justice to Bill’s broad influence and many (many) words of advice, I’d like to try to distill

his wisdom, as I understand it, into a short list of suggestions, a few words to live and work by.

1. Doing film history should be fun. Sure you have to put in countless hours at the archive, and you have to take it seriously. But if you're not enjoying your work, and if you don't have fun with it, Bill would say you're doing something wrong.

2. Let curiosity be your guide. Working with Bill was always a pleasure because you never knew where it might take you. (Literally! One time it took me on a seventy-two-hour road trip from Ontario to South Carolina!) Film history and conservation work is most fascinating when you're willing to follow the evidence, follow your curiosity, and embrace your capacity for learning.

3. Inspiration won't wait. If you've got a good idea, get started on it. Right away. You can take care of the bureaucratic parts later. Bill's favorite story to tell about his own mentor, Bill Galloway, was that he traveled across Canada collecting films before the NAC had even agreed to house a film archive. When Galloway showed up in Ottawa with truckloads full of Canada's film heritage, there was no longer any question about whether or not the Archives should collect films.

4. Film history belongs to everybody. Bill was no fan of the kind of jargon that might push non-specialists away from what they should know about film history, and indeed how they could contribute to it. Bill's enthusiasm about old movies was also an enthusiasm about storytelling, whether it was explaining the historical significance of a particular film to a lab technician, or describing the painstaking process of film conservation to audiences at a film festival.

5. "Stir the pot." This is my favorite O'Farrellism. "Stirring the pot" means making mischief; but Bill's particular brand of mischief involved producing surprising and unexpected bits of historical evidence. Bill thought that if you discovered something interesting that you could share with another archive or researcher—a new document or film that you knew they would love to know about—you should tell them about it; or, better yet, send it to them immediately, without much explanation. "Stirring the pot" also

means seeing beyond your own, personal meal and contributing to the larger, communal soup. If we all "stirred the pot," think how much quicker we'd advance our common goals in film history and conservation. "Stirring the pot"—I can't think of a better way of describing Bill's playful intellectual and professional generosity.

NANCY WATROUS (Chicago Film Archives)

I called Bill at the suggestion of Charles Tepperman, who was assisting me in the transport of five thousand films from the Chicago Public Library to our newly created nonprofit Chicago Film Archives (CFA). Bill said to me after our making mutual acquaintance, "You know, Nancy, you're housing a bunch of heavily used library prints. . . . Are you crazy?"

"Bill, would you be on my board?" I asked.

"You bet!" he said. "Now this is what we're going to do. . . ."

Bill could pick up on the subtlest of issues involved in creating and developing an archive, and he examined all of them with me. In the face of what sometimes seemed insurmountable obstacles, he kept me in the game. There was almost no topic I could discuss with him for which he could not identify the challenges and the potential opportunities, long before I could. He'd move from the personal to the global with ease, from the theoretical to the practical without blinking. Bill expanded my perspective on our field and showed me how to change the perceptions of those outside of it.

When CFA was barely a year old, Bill was our ultimate ambassador, introducing us to Ascent Media and cultivating their trust in our fledgling organization. He recruited Rick Prelinger to speak at our first benefit. In the midst of a significant job change and her election to the presidency of AMIA, Janice Simpson took note of us, again at Bill's behest.

He lent confidence and brought playfulness to issues we faced. While I was shouting, whistling, and waving my arms at contractors

working on the roof of our nine-story converted warehouse, Bill suddenly appeared by their side as he quietly and convincingly explained why it's essential they cover the air conditioners before continuing to sandblast the building. Bill encouraged colleagues to send Midwest films to CFA. Whether he was in Ottawa, Ontario, or Bucksport, Maine, Bill took part in our staff and board meetings, the voice of calm that spoke through the new speakerphone we purchased just so he could participate. Most importantly, Bill began to teach me how to navigate those complicated relationships with donors. He spoke to them (always gently) about their responsibility to the films they shared with the archive, even after their donation. He created a zone where everyone involved in the transaction understood and felt good about what we were doing together.

Often when a telephone chat with Bill was pending, I would sit back and prepare myself for the long journey that would touch upon people I didn't know, industry politics I didn't care about, and occasionally the pertinent issues surrounding CFA and its collections. After an hour or two of serious talk, when we were preparing for a landing, he would invariably circle around our discussion, giving me a larger and more intelligent picture of what we were to do here in Chicago. And as we touched down, I realized this picture was informed by these people I didn't know and the politics I didn't care about.

Bill was smart, kind, generous, and humble. And just as clearly as he understood the difficulties of our profession, he also saw the thrill of it all.

KARAN SHELTON (Northeast Historic Film)

Brilliant. It was one of Bill O'Farrell's favorite words, an interjection offered with the enthusiasm that was one of his signature qualities. "Brilliant!"

Bill brought us more life and light than sometimes we knew what to do with. He made things real on every level: he advised on the construction of Northeast Historic Film's (NHF) cold storage building and wouldn't let us doubt

the enterprise. Other people told us what to do and how, Bill told us why. In the winter 1999 edition of our newsletter, *Moving Image Review*, he advocated enlarging our archives' cold storage facility well beyond the proposed plans. "Storage vaults invariably fill up very quickly, especially if they do it right—and I think they are going to get it right—the stuff is just going to descend upon NHF," he ventured. "They also have one of the most creative outreach programs anywhere, which will soon include screenings in the restored Alamo Theatre. When the films begin, if you listen closely, you'll hear a collective cheer from all the NHF friends who feel connected to this accomplishment."

That year Bill became an official advisor to NHF, guiding us on acquisition of non-film materials and encouraging our acquisitive impulses. He wrote to keep us on course as he acknowledged previous donations. His e-mail to David Weiss and me on the first of December advised: "Your study center will become a mecca in its own right, if you continue to build it the way you have to date. The library has quite a few unique volumes, and I was knocked out by the stuff that David Bowers, for example, has donated . . . Finally, please DON'T use any collection guidelines, policy, rules, etc. to reject prior to proper appraisal. The main point here is never to reject something sight-unseen, based upon a phone description."

At NHF's first Summer Symposium in Bucksport, Maine, in 2000, Bill demonstrated his deep knowledge of amateur film history, presenting examples on film and in three dimensions. He brought a 9.5mm Pathex movie, *Hints*, an introductory reel for home projectionists, which he had blown up to 35mm (and later shared at the Reel Thing technical symposium in Los Angeles). He also screened *Seaside Holiday*, a content-appropriate 1934 Crawley Film production shot in York, Maine, as well as movies from the Amateur Cinema League (ACL); and to accompany the ACL works, he passed around a rare artifact, the Hiram Percy Maxim Memorial Award—a hefty spherical trophy that was the highest honor of the annual ACL competition in 1939, won by Judith and F. Radford Crawley for their film *L'Ile d'Orleans*.



Bill O'Farrell (in plaid shirt) with Eric Schaefer, Jim Henderson, and Tricia Welsch to his right, and Alan Kattelle and Kathryn Fuller-Seeley to his left, in Bucksport, Maine, at the 2000 NHF Summer Film Symposium. Bill holds the orb given to recipients of the Maxim Memorial Award for amateur movie makers. Courtesy of NHF.

In 2001, Bill was a guiding force behind the Small Gauge Symposium held as part of the AMIA conference in Portland, Oregon. He rallied the troops for the Edison Home Projecting Kinetoscope union catalog. When the organizers started to hyperventilate, he'd figure out what to do next. He again helped organize a screening at the Reel Thing, "Restoring 22mm Edison Home Kinetoscopic Records to the Silver Screen," a program that elicited a note of thanks to Bill, which he shared with me: "Most people who see restored motion pictures have no idea of the painstaking labor and ingenuity required to restore unique materials, like the 22mm film format."

Preparing the opening talk I would deliver for the Small Gauge Symposium, I sent my draft to Bill on October 30. By November 1, he had read it and replied in an e-mail, "Have added some wrap-up thoughts. Just ideas." The words he sent are classic Bill, as alive as an e-mail can be, exemplifying his way of thanking others, of looking backward to the essential and forward to the possible, of being sweet, funny, and brilliant. He gently suggested that I include these sentiments in my talk (and I did).

How can we express our appreciation and thanks to everyone who has helped make the Small Gauge Symposium possible this week? Sure, please single them out and say something to them. That would be nice. But probably the best way to do that is to take what happens this week and apply it to your work, to your collections and to your consciousness.

If you think twice about maybe taking a look at the next offer of 8mm home movies, then perhaps we've made some headway. If you don't really have a decent viewer, then perhaps finally getting one might be a new priority. We already know that many of these images are cherished by the creators and owners. If we can change our own awareness and capacity, the images we haven't been looking at will very likely yield unheralded treasures. I think emphasizing, or repeating that phrasing might be effective. That's the key isn't it? Nobody is really looking at these films.

Small gauge films are important, but only if they are collected, preserved

and are made accessible. The national strategy efforts recognized that small gauge film remains a major shortfall in our national collections.

Eleven short years after the vote to incorporate a professional association occurred here in Portland we should pause to think about how we have progressed in that time. We have built a relevant and vital association. It should come as no surprise that AMIA was asked to take the lead on the small gauge initiative. We're doing important work here again this week, and we should all take great pride in that. This is also our first

"themed" conference and it's nice that we're having it back in the town where it all started.

So that's the framework and the history, and the answer to "why small gauge?" this year.

To paraphrase Sir Winston Churchill, the Small Gauge Symposium in Portland is not the end of a process. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is perhaps the end of the beginning.

Welcome back to Portland. And happy birthday to AMIA. To celebrate we've baked a very tiny cake for you. We hope you enjoy it. Brilliant.