

Making a Case for the Donor Interview: Giving a Voice to the Doug Betts Silent Home Movie Collection

Caroline Forcier Holloway

This paper encompasses the often overlooked use of oral history interviewing as a tool to gain significant contextual information from archival donors and/or creators of silent home movies. Based on a case study, and with emphasis on methodology, this article will discuss the history of the Doug Betts Silent Home Movie collection, and the oral history interview I conducted with Norm Betts. The interview facilitated the creation of a 13 minute video I co-produced entitled, "Lure of the Lens: A Father and Son's Experience of the North" and made possible an accurate archival description.

In the past, more frequently than not, collections were acquired in various archival institutions without knowing a great deal of basic information such as provenance, donor background and details, and subject content. At the Library and Archives Canada (LAC), home movies as well as all other audio-visual records, are described at the item level. Due to lack of resources, many item level archival descriptions have remained extremely "skeletal" since the time they were first created on an index card over 30 years ago. This proves frustrating to the researcher who relies on basic description information. The historical context becomes especially distorted and the process proves more challenging when dealing with silent home movies.

Far and few between are the archival institutions that encourage donors and/or creators to participate in a recorded interview upon donation of their fonds or collection, and in particular, interviews with filmmakers of silent home movies. Without structured implementation and real commitment, any institution risks losing crucial details that could remain overlooked, forgotten, or lost forever.

In many cases, first-hand information from creators is not possible to obtain simply due to the reality of aging filmmakers. Mainstream sound on film was introduced on Super 8mm in 1973 by Kodak. Therefore the period from the 1930s to the early 1970s remains difficult to catalogue,

especially if the filmmaker did not provide annotations, or during filming did not use inter-titles or end credits. In the worst-case scenario, second-hand information cannot be obtained by any family members of the filmmaker. This dilemma is common yet frustrating to an audio-visual archivist.

In 2004, Norm Betts, a retired professional photographer, called me to discuss the possibility of obtaining donor copies on DVD of his father's home movies which he donated to the Public Archives of Canada (now called Library and Archives Canada) in 1973. The collection consists of a total of 23 film reels on black and white and colour silent 8mm gauge. After observing the sad state of the skeletal archival descriptions¹ linked to these films, I jumped at the opportunity to discuss the possibility of a donor interview, and Norm was instantly recruited as my principle interviewee.

Doug Betts, the creator of the films, was born in 1910. He was a mid-shipman in the Merchant Navy. He joined the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) as a constable in 1932, training at the Fairmont Barracks in Vancouver. Shortly afterwards, he was posted in the Yukon in Dawson and Whitehorse. He married Verda Jermyn in Carcross in 1937. In the late 1940s, he was promoted to Corporal. Norm Betts was born in Norway House, in Northern Manitoba. In 1954, when Norm was 9 years old, his father died at the age of 44. The films date from circa 1935 to 1939.

Richard Chalfen, in his article "The Home Movie in a World of Reports: Anthropological Appreciation", discusses the home movie as a personal

¹ The item-level descriptions in the MISACS database or on the LAC's on-line archival search tool ArchiviaNet have not yet been updated. With the recent information gathered from the interview, I intend to fully update the old skeletal archival descriptions. The following is an original skeletal archival description. *IDCISN*: 327745; *MEDIA* : F; *TITLE* : [*Life in the Yukon and Northwest Territories, No. 9*]; *RLSDTE*: 1927/1929; *SBJDSC*: *Footages of mountains, and a ranch*; *LANG* : Silent; *NOTES* : 1. Shot by R.C.M.P. Corporal Betts; *COLLNA*: BETTS, Norman; *ACINUM*: 1974-0155. Although a title is provided, the information is not accurate since Doug Betts was not posted to the NWT. The date range is not accurate either, as Doug Betts was not posted in the Yukon during that period, and the film edge coding revealed that the footage was taken in 1938. The updated subject description will read as: Home movie footage of hunting scenes including, hunting party (pack horses on trail); hunting mountain sheep; slain caribou; hunting camp; caribou in natural habitat; pack dogs and hunters.

document and stresses the fact that most people creating these films were ordinary and uncelebrated. He states, "...the home movie is created for personal and small group audiences, not for re-issue in documentary films...."²

From an archival perspective, home movies play a significant role in documenting history, culture, and lives and activities of individuals. Archives are fundamentally respectful of the original intent of creators, regardless of the personal or public nature of the archival documents. Archives that preserve home movies deal with the complexities relating to ethical issues and the copyright terms that serve to protect the films and filmmakers. Given the mostly personal content that is revealed in home movies, archives can still aim to promote their broader value or significance, and they in turn can be considered as primary source material in the context of the historical record.

From 1973, this home movie collection waited patiently until 1982 for its turn to see the light of day and to be copied to 16mm film as a preservation master and then to VHS video as the consultation format. It would be made available to the on-site researcher, but without pertinent information such as a subject description, would it be sufficient? Undescribed collections with omitted key search words are generally ignored by researchers, especially those working with a deadline.

Upon screening the films, I instantly discovered a wealth of unpublished historical silent home movies. Although the footage does not document the activities of a dignitary or person of great stature, it is remarkable that the majority of the collection contains footage that captures the rare and interesting, for that era and region, rendering this collection more historically valuable, than the common family gatherings and leisure-time activities typical of home movies.³

The ultimate goal of conducting an oral history interview with a donor and/or creator of silent home movies is to gather background information that can only be captured through this process, where it is not generally

² Richard Chalfen, "The Home Movie in a World of Reports: An Anthropological Appreciation", *Journal of Film and Video* 38, no. 3/4 (summer-fall 1986): 104.

³ Researchers find value in researching retro fashion and fads, and representations of eras gone by, from a more sociological standpoint. For the purpose of my analysis, I chose not to include the typical Christmas gift opening, the bike riding, the family picnics, and travel footage, also found within the Betts footage.

present in other forms of supporting textual or photographic documentation. This information could prove to be quite beneficial for future users of their material, especially when access is a prime key driver in so many archival institutions. As such, I see donor interviewing as a form of gathering material culture where similarly, the more we know, understand, and document an artifact and its creator, the more volumes it can speak to a visitor when displayed or digitized.

The interview

I felt that I was on unfamiliar ground as the interviewing process to me would seem less conventional and more abstract than the standard oral history interviews I had conducted in the past. I therefore inquired with several archival institutions about techniques for this type of interviewing. I was successful in finding only a related type of interviewing process. The Human Studies Film Archives at the Smithsonian in Washington, has recently developed annotation guidelines intended to encourage donors and/or creators to carry out self-interviews at home, as it has become increasingly more difficult for archivists to travel to interview the donor or to have the donor come to Washington due to lack of resources.⁴

Another type of annotation or interviewing project to document silent home movies is that of Northeast Historic Film in the U.S.⁵ This archive in Backsport, Maine, held a screening of a silent film which was shown several times for a local audience, with the hope of identifying people and activities featured on the screen. Undoubtedly helpful, this practice could prove challenging. It might solicit misconstrued or conflicting information from several differing sources, as there could be different audience members with varied recollections. The best way to record such information is also something that needs to be addressed.

Although this was probably not a new methodology, it became clear that I had to develop my own interviewing techniques, to suit my purposes. I decided that capturing Norm's voice only in an oral history interview

⁴ The Human Studies Film Archives (HSFA), Department of Anthropology, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, provided me with its film annotation instructions. It is in the process of reviewing these guidelines so that their donors can self-annotate their films.

⁵ Snowden Becker, "Family in a Can: The Presentation and Preservation of Home Movies in Museums", *The Moving Image* (fall 2001): 98.

while simultaneously screening the silent images with him would be appropriate since the project was about bringing Doug, the filmmaker's, images to life by means of his son's vocal memories as opposed to conducting a video oral history interview. The home movies being silent allow us to understand through the lens and to envision the filmmaker's thoughts expressed through a moving image.

I worked specifically with 6 reels from the collection⁶, because these depicted early Yukon activities, which is an important and under-documented part of our current holdings. The footage selected showed a personal and human side to the Doug Betts story: an avid cameraman who recorded life as he saw it, and who took his camera on various work assignments, as well as during recreation and leave. He captured early Canadian northern activities such as placer mining operations, activities of an RCMP officer including patrols by dog-sled, hunting parties, fishing, paddle wheelers and supply barges. I wanted the interview to reflect the thoughts of the person behind the camera, what and why he documented what he did, his curiosity as a newcomer to the North, and his appreciation for the natural beauty of the land.

Newsreels and documentaries promoting tourism or general northern activities are scarce for that era, which makes this footage significant. Archives rely heavily on this type of amateur footage to complement their holdings. As there is an increased demand for use of Northern-related archival material, the interview also improves the descriptive record and renders the collection more accessible to future users.

The preparatory steps for the interview were essential in assuring the donor's participation. They consisted of cueing significant visual sequences directly from the VHS videos of the copied films; keeping a list of cues and using well-described images or a shot-list along with the time-coding; sending the cued visuals list to the donor prior to the interview and ensuring that he reviewed this list just prior to the interview; sending the list of questions to the donor prior to the interview; reviewing the questions with him just prior to the interview, and signing the deposit agreement.

⁶ The chosen selection consisted of "Life in the Yukon and Northwest Territories No. 1, 2, 4, 5, 9, and 10", respectively; MISACS database, Doug Betts Home Movie Collection, Audio-Visual Division, Library and Archives Canada.

The set of questions I prepared for Norm prior to the interview focused mainly on activities featured on film and career-related and technically-related questions about Doug, either as cameraman behind the scenes or in the spot light. The following examples of questions I drafted were fairly effective in guiding myself and Norm during the actual interview⁷: “Can you provide more information about the dog sledding footage which is frequently featured?”; “Discuss the mining operations and provide geographical location”; “Do you recall if your father used a tripod for the panning of panoramic scenes?”; and “Share your thoughts on whether your father had previous experience with a moving image camera.”

The recording equipment consisted of a Marantz CDR-300 digital recorder, a Lavalier microphone for the interviewee, and a Sunriser power table microphone for myself. A fellow archivist was invaluable as sound recording technician. I was responsible for conducting the interviewing while manning the VCR that displayed the home movies. The oral history interviewing techniques that I drafted to document silent home movies and their donors and/or creators, are intended for general use. These recommend preparatory steps prior to the interview, as well as techniques to use during the interview. (See Appendix.)

As most of the films in the collection were shot prior to Norm's birth in 1944, would his recollections of the people and images be accurate for the interview? During the interview, I was pleasantly surprised that Norm remembered and recognized much of the footage from earlier days, and provided significant historical details. He displayed a keen appreciation of the film as both document and medium. He proved to be an enthusiastic candidate who had a good storytelling ability and a strong voice.⁸ Perhaps in this situation, the emphasis is not placed solely on historical accuracy, but also on images that conjure memories (i.e. not just the what, who and where but also the emotional significance.)

⁷ Norm, having read the tailored questions beforehand, was genuinely curious to screen the footage for himself and was able to provide comments regarding the general moving image technical process. During the interview, Norm, a photographer himself by trade, expressed a keen interest in his father's technical abilities behind the lens.

⁸ Norm was also able to identify a good portion of the footage. As for the names and places he could not identify, he will screen the DVD donor copies with his sister, and provide additional information.

In her article entitled, "The Galler Home Movies: A Case Study",⁹ Patricia Erens says, "Home movies provide one way of preserving family history, incorporating not only images, but also language (either through sound recording or through the commentary and family responses that naturally accompany the showing of almost any footage.)" In Norm's case, having seen the films as a child, he remembered most of his father's narration and family stories shared during the screenings.

The video

The video production, "Lure of the Lens: A Father and Son's Experience of the North" is a 13 minute video that I co-produced. It is a tribute to Doug and Norm's stories. The purpose for making a video production was to synthesize the interview information and present it in the most interesting and illustrative way possible. Also, it provides a double perspective about the father, Doug, who is the creator of the silent image, and the son, Norm, who is the donor, and the participant, of the sound project.

The video production is an abbreviated version of the oral history interview. The condensed highlights of the interview provide an interesting glimpse of the film collection. The film stands alone and the oral history interview speaks alone, supporting the film in telling the story, as well as complementing it.

Conclusion

Although the reality of daily archival functions might not always render the donor interviews as priority work, establishing interviewing techniques and guidelines can set an organized framework to conduct future oral history interviews with the donors and/or creators of silent home movies. I also intend to develop procedures relating to self-interviewing for donors who reside at a distance, and who are able to annotate prior to making the donation.

In terms of my remaining archival work, I will update the Betts skeletal archival descriptions. I will also catalogue the oral history interviews,

⁹ Patricia Erens, "The Galler Home Movies: A Case Study", *Journal of Film and Video* 38, no. 3/4 (summer-fall 1986): 15.

and the video production, to complement the original amateur footage on 8mm and the preservation elements made from the original film.

Norm Betts will also receive his DVD donor copies of the original films, along with a copy of the interview, and the video, so that he can have a movie night with his grandchildren while they get to know Doug, their great-grandfather.

The time invested in interviewing a donor builds rapport, provides a sense of belonging for the donor, solidifies pre-existing links, establishes a reciprocal and beneficial relationship, and is more rewarding than simply thanking a donor for his or her contribution to an acquisition and signing a Deed of Gift.¹⁰

The memories live on when retrieved from the film can and laced onto the intercine (a "flatbed viewer" for 16mm and 35mm film, equipped with a small projection screen and sound playback) for screening through a stranger's eyes (the archivist). The silent films may not have been screened for decades, since the final movie night when they were run through the donor's projector. The process of giving them a voice and the chance of being heard through an oral history interview is definitely a worthwhile endeavour.

¹⁰ In regards to an interview, donors of silent home movies living long distances from the LAC can be at a disadvantage, because of the travel expenses they have to incur in order to participate in an on-site interview in Ottawa. At the LAC, we discourage donors of potential archival home movies from screening their films on film projectors because doing so may cause irreparable damage to the sprockets or the emulsion. In addition, most negotiations to acquire film begin on a sight-unseen basis where neither the donor nor the archivist has pre-screened the footage on video. These common factors are taken into consideration for screening footage with a donor, and building a case for a potential donor/creator interview.

Appendix

Oral History Interviewing Techniques to Document Silent Home Movies and Their Creators

Caroline Forcier Holloway
Library and Archives Canada

I conducted an oral history interview to gain contextual information about a collection of silent home movies and its creator. My intent was to incorporate the information from the interview and update the existing archival descriptions. The techniques I prepared are adaptable while screening an original film or a video copy. Included are preparatory steps prior to the interview, as well as techniques to use during the interview.

Preparatory steps prior to the interview

Preparatory steps are essential in assuring the donor and/or creator's participation.

- Clearly state the purpose of the interview (i.e. gathering information to document and/or making collection more accessible, etc.).
- Obtain background info from the donor and/or creator, such as biographical info about themselves, geographical information and dates to help situate the interviewer in regards to birth, death, children, schooling, career, etc.
- Cue interesting visual sequences directly from the video or film.
- Keep a list of the selected cues with IN times or use well-described images along with the time-code on the intercline or the VCR, as this provides a point of reference for specifically selected images. The interview can take place without cues; however, you may achieve better results with some cues already identified.

- Send a list of cued visuals to the donor and/or creator.
- Send a shot-list of your identified visuals. The donor and/or creator can comment on the archivist's misidentification if required.
- Send a list of questions to the donor and/or creator. If the questions are not ready, send a list of draft questions. This is especially important when they haven't seen the footage in many years, and the interviewer has recently screened it in preparation for the interview. If they haven't seen the footage due to storage complications, conservation work, or other, it may help them to remember the content of the films.
- If donors and/or creators are unfamiliar with or uncomfortable participating in an interview, discuss the process with him/her and send him/her general information about the process.
- Discuss restrictions, moral rights and copyright with donor and/or creator. Although this may have done at the time of the film donation, it is wise to review it as you will both be involved in "creating" a new document (interview), that will most probably accompany the films.

Interview

- Ensure that one person is in charge of the sound recording equipment, and another is in charge of interviewing and manning the video or film equipment. The interviewee should not be involved in the technical handling since the focus of the interview is on him or her.
- Test the recording equipment prior to the arrival of the interviewee and with the interviewee present. A Lavalier microphone works well on the interviewee to capture clarity and loudness. A table microphone works well for the interviewer.
- Arrange the room so that the person manning the sound recording equipment, the interviewee, and the interviewer, can properly see the television monitor.

- With the donor and/or creator, review the list of cues and the list of questions, sign the waiver, review the interview rules (hand signals, and duration of interview, etc.).
- As a preamble, at the beginning of the interview, the interviewer should announce the date, the name of the interviewee, the cassette or CD #, and the cassette side A or B, or CD track #. This information should be repeated at the beginning of each new tape or CD, as well as at the beginning of each CD track or cassette side, and is useful as a point of reference.
- As interviewer, monitor the interviewee's visual expressions, as he/she has perhaps not seen the footage in many decades, and this may cause the interviewee to become emotional. Be prepared to PAUSE the video or film if an emotional or difficult situation arises.
- Allow the interviewee sufficient time to reminisce and reiterate. Be prepared to START and STOP the footage when necessary.
- Don't be afraid to PAUSE the image on the screen while the audio is capturing a story or a comment. It is the image that has triggered a memory and it should be captured at that very moment in time.
- Use FAST FORWARD and REWIND features on the video or the intercine (film) when necessary. If you are trying to establish an exact point of reference, use the visual time code on the VCR or the frame counter on the intercine, for best accuracy. Also include a descriptive note (i.e. John Smith is standing in the water, wearing a black bathing suit, and looking slightly to the left; two children are playing in the background).

If the donor and/or creator are unable to take part in an interview, the archivist should consider sending copies of the films on video or on another format, along with annotation guidelines, to ensure that the donors/creators are contributing in the best way possible.