

Home Movie Transfers – Issues and Options



This document is provided as a starting place for those who wish to have their original home movies transferred to a newer medium for viewing or preservation, and provides an understanding of some of the issues and options involved in choosing a transfer service to work with your films.

Transfers: Access & Preservation

When planning to have your films transferred, you should be aware of two goals you may be pursuing. The desire to have your films on a modern format that may be easily viewed today, such as dvd, is a need for “Access” copies. The desire to ensure that your films will be viewable 20 or 50 or 100 years in the future and beyond will require a “Preservation” strategy. If you consider that today’s dvd’s are unlikely to be readily playable in fifty years (VHS tapes, not yet fifty years old are already becoming difficult to view), you will see that making Access copies of your films today does not ensure their long-term Preservation – and that advertisements proclaiming “Preserve your films on DVD!” can be misleading.

Your simplest strategy for long-term Preservation of your films is to care for your original film elements. In this sense, making Access copies so that you do not damage your originals through repeated projection on old equipment contributes in itself to long-term Preservation. All transfer services listed here must agree to promote the preservation of original materials by returning them to the customer after transfer and recommending their safe storage in a cool, dry environment.

Eventually, all acetate film (along with any other medium) will decay to a state where it is no longer projectable or capable of being transferred. The clearest symptoms of decay are a vinegar odor and warping. If your aim is to extend the life of your images beyond the expiration of the originals, you will need to strike “Preservation” copies of your films – copies that have the best chance of remaining viable into the indefinite future. Given the rapid evolution of media formats and the often unknown durability of tapes, disks, and computer hard-drives themselves, it is difficult to foretell which media will prove most enduring.

Previewing your Films for Transfer

If you are yourself adept at handling and projecting film, you will be in a good position to preview your material and place it in an appropriate order for transfer, perhaps even indicating how you would like the footage to be “chaptered” on a DVD. Or, if you have a relatively small collection of well-labeled material, you may be able to provide the transfer service with directions as to how you would like the material to be presented.

Often, however, inheritors of films find themselves with a large quantity of unlabelled film reels and no means of previewing the material. Rather than having the entire collection transferred at significant expense and in a random order, it would be ideal to find a way of previewing the films so that you can note the content, identify the footage of most significance, and arrive at a plan for both Access and Preservation needs.

If you have a family projector along with your films, it may not be difficult to get it working, especially if you still have a user's manual. However, it is very possible to damage home movies by projecting them on a dirty or misaligned projector, or by failing to thread the machine properly – and if a film already has any damage or weak splices, or if it has shrunken beyond the tolerances of a machine, further damage is assured. Small hand-cranked film viewers / editors can be somewhat gentler on film elements if clean and used properly but here too, care must be taken in order to avoid scratching or mangling your films. If you intend to preview your film using projectors or viewers, explore this excellent reference site for film-handling guidelines: <http://littlefilm.org/>

Another approach would be to find a film archive in your area, or perhaps a university film department that might be able to lend a hand. If there is a Home Movie Day in your area, you might contact the organizers to see whether the projectionist or a trained archivist in your area might be available for hire and assist you with previewing your films. It might also be worthwhile to ask a local transfer provider for help in previewing your material.

Selecting Content for Access and Preservation

Whether you are interested in transferring your films for Access or for Preservation or for both, you may be faced with difficult questions as to what footage to include in your transfer. Some services will allow you to pay for both a complete / raw transfer as well as an edited version.

For Access Copies, consider your immediate AUDIENCE. Whether you are intending to show the films to friends, or family, some other group, or simply want to enjoy them yourself, select the materials that will make those screenings most illuminating or entertaining for the interests and tolerances of your audience.

For Preservation Copies, consider POSTERITY. Posterity is a broad term that takes in the totality of individuals who might take an interest in your film materials in years to come. While you might regard a full hour of baby footage as too much to inflict on your friends, those babies themselves may find every moment of great interest in their adulthood. Extended out-the-window footage of a drive through a distant state may try your patience, but it may be of great interest to historians of that region – or to grand-children newly discovering the romance of the highway.

Selecting Formats for Access and Preservation

For Access Copies, consider your likely VIEWING DEVICES. How will you be watching the transfers? Currently, DVD is the most common option, allowing you to screen films on your television or computer. You might, however, like to have your films delivered on a hard drive or other digital storage medium that enables you to import the footage to a computer editing program that allows you to edit them yourself. Or perhaps you are drawing the line at VHS. For access purposes, seek a transfer service that will deliver your films in the format you desire for immediate use.

For Preservation Copies, consider LONGEVITY. Just as your grandparents' photo albums may have survived decades of neglect up in the attic, 8mm and 16mm films have proven remarkably durable over time, with many original films from the 1920's still viable for transfer and viewing today. When record albums began appearing on compact discs (CD's) in the 1980's, many consumers thought the days of scratched LP's were over and that CD's would "last forever" – but scratched CD's turn out to be more annoying than scratched LP's, and any Netflix subscriber knows that DVD's freeze just as often as VHS tapes jammed – and none of these formats are as easy to repair as a broken 16mm film.

Professional film studios and archives continue to believe that re-printing films, frame-by-frame, onto fresh polyester film stock, while costly, remains the most secure strategy for long-term Preservation, so if you have material of exceptional significance and the funds to devote to their care, you should seek out a reputable lab that offers photochemical "film-to-film" processes. A transfer to Beta-SP tape format is a popular alternative, though the longevity of that medium is more suspect. Digital approaches have the virtue of ease of reproduction: once the film is transferred, multiple copies of copies can be made without loss of image quality, yet the danger is that media formats change so quickly in the digital age that one must be vigilant to "migrate" the digital files to each successive format or risk losing your material to obsolescence. Storage on a digital hard drive may seem a promising approach, but no one knows how easy it might be to plug that drive into a device in the year 2075 and access its contents: the material upon which the data is stored could degrade, the hardware to access it could be hard to come by, and the software to decode the outdated digital file formats may be long gone. In contrast, a film element held up to the light of the sun will still display an image – and should be suitable for scanning with whatever technology emerges in the future.

For Preservation purposes, it is vital to capture an *uncompressed* digital transfer of your films. DVD's typically "compress" the data contained in the original film in order to fit the content on a single disk. The results can be excellent for viewing purposes, but they are inadequate for subsequent migrations to other formats. No digital format will have *more* information on it than the original film. Compression loses visual information. So Preservation copies must maintain the greatest possible range of data from the original, which means uncompressed digital files.

A Wider Audience for your Films

The Center for Home Movies advocates the preservation of films within the household. Often called “family films,” home movies are likely to have their greatest meaning for immediate family members. Even if no one in the family currently takes an interest in these personal documents, a future spouse or child may find them of enormous significance.

In addition, you may be surprised to learn that your home movies can hold great interest for a much wider public, including local historians, international scholars, and artists. Popular celebrities or historic events that appear in your films would be obvious examples, but in fact it is the record of normal human beings being simply human in everyday circumstances that may be of most historical value. Imagine how our knowledge would be enriched if we had original movies of home life in the 1700’s or 1850’s, whatever the circumstance of the subjects! In a hundred years, and even today, your home movies contain unique and precious documentation of a way of life – from the cut of fashionable clothing to the eroding contours of a beach. The mere *backgrounds* in your films may be of historical interest, even if the main subject is out of focus. And home movies can offer a real-world comparison to the fictionalized versions of our history conveyed through popular films and television programs.

Commercializing your Films

You may encounter film transfer services that offer free transfer work in exchange for the rights to incorporate your footage in their own documentary projects or in their stock footage libraries. Typically, you will be asked to sign over the rights to your footage to the transfer house so that they can use the footage in their own projects or sell clips from your films in turn to other parties looking for footage of a certain kind for their work. Often, the saved expense of having the films transferred will make this sort of arrangement worthwhile. However, there are a few important issues to keep in mind.

**Who keeps the originals?* The best answer here is that *you do*. Otherwise, if your transfers become damaged or if a newer format comes along, you may be left with nothing. If the transfer service offers to “archive” your originals for you, that may mean nothing more than stacking them in a shoebox their basement.

**How will my footage be presented?* If you sign over broad rights to your films, you may have no grounds to complain if your footage is used in ways that distort their original context, or that present your loved ones in unflattering terms. Even so, the various individuals appearing in your films would retain privacy rights that might provide a grounds for objecting to uses *they* find objectionable, but if you get to the point of hiring lawyers to settle the problem, you will wish you had simply paid cash for your transfers.

**What is Fair Value of my film?* Some transfer houses may offer free transfers only if they find your material “of sufficient interest” to their project. Such an expression of interest might lead you to wonder whether your films are of even greater interest or monetary value – say, if it turns out you happen to have a new angle on a major political assassination or some other subject of intense popular interest. It can be difficult to “value” your film material on the open market, but you might reasonably ask yourself whether a transfer house seeking rights to your films are giving you fair value for them by merely providing transfers – which of course are also the same transfers they will use in exploiting your material, in which case they are only “giving” you the original cost of the blank media upon which they deliver your movies.

You might consider asking whether they will agree to the transfer-for-rights arrangement *before* seeing the footage – or, if they express interest only *after* seeing it, whether you can exercise rights to approval for use, or negotiate a royalty for stock footage exploitation. Again, being paid with the simple cost of the transfers may be a perfectly reasonable, even generous arrangement, especially for a non-profit archive that may not find a use for the material for many years – but you should be alert to the possibility that your footage may have significant value, particularly if the transfer house has seen it and you have not.

Archiving your Films for Posterity

First, you should think of the meaning your films might have for your immediate family. Stories of grown children lamenting that their parents “didn’t think we’d be interested in those old movies and threw them away” are all too common. Also, you would do your inheritors a great favor by inventorying and documenting the content of your films, identifying people, places, and dates, either in writing or on an audio tape, which you could store with the films. (By now you probably see that pencil on paper or typescript stands a good chance of surviving longer than cassette tapes or digital audio files on a thumb drive.)

Secondly, you might think of arranging for your films to be donated to a reputable film archive that would preserve them and, to the extent you are comfortable, make them available to future generations of scholars and historians and enthusiasts. Your films will inevitably contain powerful visual evidence of life as you lived it in your time and place, and you might consider bestowing these records on an archive that specializes in this sort of historical preservation, either in your lifetime or in a will if you have no inheritors interested in the material. Often arrangements can be made ensuring continued access to the films for your family members, or restricting the use of your films for certain purposes.

If you have home movies you have exhausted your local or state options for donating films without finding a suitable recipient, the Center for Home Movies may be able to assist you in finding a good home for them.

Three broad categories of Transfer Services

Providers of film transfers will make use of a wide range of technology and may charge a correspondingly wide range of prices for their services. While you can learn about the specific equipment each provider uses on their own web-pages and promotional material, it will be useful for you to be aware of some broad distinctions between transfer technologies.

1 Basic Service : In this simplest of arrangements, the film is projected on a reflective surface such as a screen or light-box and re-photographed by a digital camera. Results will vary according to the quality of the equipment and skill of the operator, but can often be perfectly acceptable for Access purposes. Any competent operator should be able to avoid the ‘flickering’ of the image that can sometimes result from this technique. These services are unlikely to handle sound films effectively, if at all, recording sound “off the air” during projection along with ambient noises, projector noise, etc.

2 Advanced Service: Somewhat more specialized equipment is required in order to re-photograph the film directly off the surface of the film, with a camera or digital CCD pointing directly into the projection light rather than at a reflected surface. Each frame of film is captured individually, and some systems include light metering that adjusts the exposure levels “on the fly,” reacting to fluctuations in image brightness from shot to shot. Other systems are no better than “Off the screen” systems in this regard, requiring an operator to manually adjust brightness in reaction to what he or she sees, often with uneven results. The captured images are then converted to the desired format by means of a video card or computer and recorded onto your desired medium. Some systems may be able to record an optical or magnetic soundtrack directly off the film.

3 Full Service: Professional film laboratories possess a wide range of technology for capturing and converting various media to new formats, including the re-shooting of film onto fresh film stock or ‘blowing up’ a smaller film format, say 8mm, to a larger one, 16mm. They can also offer a wider range of options for optimizing image quality including the use of a wet-gate device that will remove many of the thin black scratches that often mar well-worn films. Many such labs have extensive experience working with badly warped or damaged or shrunken films that other services find intractable and may also handle a wider range of obsolete formats such as 9.5mm and 28mm film. Such labs also typically have advanced techniques for capturing and optimizing soundtracks.

These broad categories are provided as a starting place for understanding your options in selecting a transfer service, and do not necessarily correspond to the quality of work you can expect from any one of them. For instance, it is very possible for a “Basic” transfer gained by shooting a film off a projection screen to be superior to a more “Advanced” transfer on an Elmo transfer unit whose camera is positioned such that it inadvertently cuts off significant portions of the frame on the

left and right of the screen. Dirty equipment or shoddy practices at *any* level of service may lead to results inferior to those of less expensive vendors. It is your responsibility to ask questions and seek references before choosing a transfer provider just as you would a carpenter.

Questions You Might Ask

Q: What is the price of your transfers? (Most will provide a price based on footage and on the type and quantity of copies.)

Q: Does the price include cleaning and repair of my films before transfer? What method of cleaning do you use?

Q: What kind of equipment do you use for film transfer?

Q: What % film shrinkage are you able to handle? Does your machinery use a claw pull-down mechanism like a traditional projector, or a sprocket-driven system? What is the likelihood that my films might be damaged during transfer?

Q: Does your transfer equipment capture the entire film frame of the originals? Depending on the format to be delivered, will you have to crop the frame at the top or the sides? Will you “stretch” my film images to fit on my widescreen television? (Any technique that distorts or crops the original image is *not* recommended).

Q: At what frame-speed (fps or *frames per second*) will your transfer my films? Will you adjust the frame rate to approximate, as close as possible, natural motion in my films? (Many projectors are set to run at the rate of 24 fps because that is the standard speed for sound film. However, many silent home movies were shot at a slower speed, commonly 18 fps, which will look unnaturally jerky if transferred at the faster rate.)

Q: Do you provide sound transfer as well? By what technique?

Q: Does your system include any tools for “correcting” shots that are over or under exposed? Do you provide color-correction for faded films? At what resolution will your equipment capture my films?

Q: How will my films be “chaptered” if delivered on a DVD or computer medium? By a fixed time segment (every 5 mins), by film reel, by content (perhaps to my specifications?) – or not at all?

Q: How long will the work take? How will the films move from my home to the lab and back?

Q: Will you be keeping any copies of my films? For what purpose, and for how long?

Q: Will you return my original films along with the transfers? (The answer to this must be “Yes” – please alert the Center for Home Movies to any listed service that seeks to retain your originals, even in exchange for cash or other considerations).

THE CENTER FOR HOME MOVIES