The motto of the International Federation of Film Archives is “To Preserve, To Show”—in that order, and with that punctuation. Undoubtedly, this organizational mission was formulated by the members of FIAF after the same sort of exhaustive deliberation that indecisive actors give to their line readings: To preserve comma to show? To preserve and to show? To preserve in order to show? To preserve period to show period? Indeed, under ordinary film archive circumstances, Preservation and Access have related to one another like Love and Marriage in the song that Frank Sinatra made famous. The first one leads to the second; preservation makes access possible, even inevitable. Archives may value the two processes equally, but they apply them sequentially.

Nevertheless, as an archivist whose greatest enthusiasm is reserved for amateur films and home movies, I am also aware of how vernacular motion picture materials challenge the underlying assumptions of traditional film preservation work. Amateur footage has defining characteristics—it is enormously plentiful, each reel is unique, and the bulk of it is in the care of individuals, not institutions—which render the traditional “preserve first, access later” archival strategies impracticable. An inversion of this paradigm for home movies—or better yet, an approach that puts preservation and access on parallel tracks—may be the only productive solution. Home Movie Day, an international event founded and run by film archivists, is an ongoing exploration of the access-in-order-to-preserve concept. Along with new digital delivery options and video technologies, Home Movie Day is changing archives’ and individuals’ appreciation of accessibility as an essential part of the preservation process.

Home Movie Day: A History

During the Small Gauge and Amateur Film Interest Group (SGAF) meeting at the 2002 Association of Moving Image Archivists (AMIA) conference in Boston, much of the group’s discussion concerned the problem of preservation for home movies. The previous year’s AMIA conference in Portland had focused on small-gauge film preservation issues with great success. Regardless, SGAF members present in Boston unanimously acknowledged that archives’ funding was insufficient to do full film-to-film preservation on the historically significant home movie materials they already held—and these archived films were themselves a fraction of the potentially significant materials. Our concerns were compounded by the knowledge that archivists and the actual owners of home movies had differing perspectives on preservation. Whereas archivists were increasingly aware of the preservation needs of small-gauge film materials and of films’ durability in comparison to videotape and digital media, owners of those materials were more likely to be convinced that their home movie films were technically obsolete, inferior in image quality, and could be disposed
of without consequence after being “preserved on DVD.” Finally, the effort to impress upon families the urgent need to preserve potentially historic home movies has often been hampered by owners’ lack of familiarity with the films themselves—their contents, their provenance, and their power. When VCRs came into homes in the 1980s, 8mm and 16mm home movie projectors usually went out; as a result, by 2001 an entire generation of people had lost touch with their own family films.

Could any of these problems be solved just by increasing the number of people who saw their home movies and talking about film preservation as a family—not just archival or institutional—undertaking? Five of the SGAF members debated this question over lunch after the interest group meeting. Brian Graney, Chad Hunter, Dwight Swanson, Katie Trainor, and I all decided that it was a concept worth at least testing, and the idea of Home Movie Day (HMD) began to take shape. The HMD founders saw barriers to access as being the primary barriers to preservation: If people didn’t know what their films looked like, they would have no sense of the cultural heritage that would be lost if those films deteriorated beyond salvation. Visibility becomes value; value becomes care; and care over time equals security, we reasoned. The event was conceived of as a sort of open house for home movies—in contrast to FIAF’s “To preserve, to show,” Home Movie Day’s first press releases proclaimed “If you bring it, we will show it.”

Each of us pledged to host an event in our hometowns of Albuquerque, Rochester, Bucksport (ME), New York City, and Los Angeles, and we agreed on a shared event date of August 16, 2003 for all locations so that we could maximize our promotion and outreach efforts. (The date of 8/16/03 is something of an archivists’ in-joke, 8mm and 16mm film being the two most common home movie formats.) We shared our plans with the film archive community via the AMIA-L listserv and invited colleagues to join us in planning their own local bring-your-own-film screening events on that date. Somewhat to our surprise, the idea struck a chord with film archivists in and outside of North America, and the first Home Movie Day was a truly international event, with venues in Mexico, Canada, and Japan joining more than a dozen additional sites in the U.S. Attendance at some events surpassed one hundred people, and as reports from each venue’s hosts came in, it was clear that Home Movie Day was a hit. HMD became an annual event that followed the original open-house formula, and since that first year it has continued to grow. In 2006, more than fifty cities participated worldwide, from Little Rock to Vienna and Nagano, Japan. A special series of HMD06 screenings and public events was organized in New Orleans, where films were at considerable risk from the region’s typically high temperatures and humidity long before the flooding and havoc that followed Hurricane Katrina. For New Orleans residents, viewing home movies of the city and the surrounding region as it had been in the past was especially meaningful, and the screenings underscored how preservation of even the most innocuous footage of streets, houses, and local lifestyle can be important.

**Home Movie Day’s Structure**

A typical HMD event has two major components—film inspection and film screenings—which actually reproduce in miniature the preservation/access pattern of the archive world. HMD events are free and open to the public. They are usually coordinated by one or more local motion picture archivists, film programmers, lab technicians, or filmmakers who have experience with small gauge film care. The official HMD equipment checklist for new hosts suggests having projection and inspection equipment for the three most common home movie formats (16mm, regular 8mm, and Super8). At least two venues in the past have also featured 9.5mm projectors. (This format was much more common in Europe and the British Commonwealth countries, but 9.5mm films have turned up in American families’ collections, too.) The focus of Home Movie Day is on filmed home movies rather than home video, for two major reasons: small-gauge films are much more likely to be inaccessible to their owners for lack of equipment and familiarity, and HMD can accomplish more with a projector and a take-up reel than with a VCR and monitor. The organizers of HMD also emphasize the durability of properly stored film in comparison to videotape and digital media and intend the event to have an associative
effect—the preservation tips and tricks for film (keep your materials cool and dry, label them clearly, and make high-quality access copies) work just as well for videotapes. Venues are usually set up with an inspection-and-prep area where films are assessed and, if necessary, repaired prior to screening. Owners of films are encouraged to physically follow their materials through the inspection process, looking over the prep volunteers’ shoulders as they work with the films. Film handlers use this opportunity to convey information about the film format, probable age (if this is not known by the owners), and overall condition of the material. Films that are shrunked, damaged, or otherwise at risk are never projected but will often be used as an opportunity to share with all participants some real-life examples of common problems such as vinegar syndrome, water damage, color/dye fade, brittleness, or shrinkage. An increasing number of HMD events actually solicit submissions of films at the host archive leading up to the date, so that the laborious inspection and prep process can be conducted in advance; in these circumstances, the HMD event itself consists of a continuous screening of the submitted materials and may or may not have an on-site inspection process for participants who bring their films in the day of the event.

A large percentage of HMD participants—from 30–90%, varying by venue and year—do not bring films at all, but merely come to watch. Because many (if not most) home movies have a strong regional character and significance, HMD is positioned through its publicity materials as a community event, open to everyone. Historical societies and museums hosting HMD events usually promote them through their member newsletters and with press releases distributed to local news outlets. Local hosts distribute postcards and flyers at local bookstores, live music venues, senior citizens’ centers, churches, and other community gathering points; in recent years, community-events blogs have been added to the press distribution lists. The official HMD postcards and promotional materials incorporate colorful imagery and emphasize that individuals need not bring films to participate. At the events themselves, all participants are active in the experience, whether or not their films are on the screen. The great majority of home movies are silent, so audience members are encouraged to make comments and ask questions while footage runs. Dialogues between home movie owners and the friends and strangers watching their footage help convey the historical and documentary significance of each reel beyond its narrow family context.

Historical societies and regional archives are among the largest collectors of amateur footage and often participate in local events by bringing examples of materials from their collections to screen for the HMD audience. This form of access and outreach has a number of positive effects. First, it raises the profile of local collections of home movie footage and presents the archivists and their local communities as mutually helpful resources. It also provides a collection development opportunity for archivists or curators to solicit footage from owners, encouraging them to donate their materials.
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so that they can be made accessible to researchers in an appropriate regional or historical context. Additionally, regional collections sometimes acquire their home movie materials inadvertently as part of collections of personal papers, photographs, or corporate records. Those reels may have a vague, collection-level context but they are minimally identified otherwise. HMD participants—especially those who are area natives—can also help identify locations, individuals, and events in these “mystery reels” from archive collections.

In 2005, the original HMD founders created the nonprofit Center for Home Movies to oversee the ongoing HMD project and seek funding for kindred initiatives, such as a traveling version of Home Movie Day—a Home Movie Mobile—to reach those areas of the country without established annual HMD events. And in early 2007, the Center for Home Movies will release Living Room Cinema, a DVD compilation of films (re)discovered during the first two years of HMD events. This compilation was created to represent the breadth and diversity of home movies created over the last eight decades, standing in contrast to canonized amateur footage, such as the National Film Registry’s Zapruder film, David Tatsuno’s Topaz Diary, or Sid Laverent’s Multiple SIDosis. Further HMD compilations are planned and should serve as useful counterparts to written academic works on home movies, twentieth- and twenty-first century cultural history, and media preservation.

Home Movie Day: Access Leading to Preservation

Increased public access via Home Movie Day screenings has had a demonstrable impact on the preservation status of a number of individual films. At the 2006 New York City HMD event, held at Anthology Film Archives, a stunning reel of 16mm wedding footage from the early 1960s, found in a secondhand projector, inspired one audience member to track down the couple featured in the film. The groom was boxer Jose Torres (the world light-heavyweight champion in 1965), and he and his wife Ramona were still alive and living in New York. They were contacted with the news that their film had been rediscovered on the exact date of their 45th wedding anniversary. The film has since been transferred to video, and

A collection of 9.5mm home movies in their original cartridges.
the original reel was donated to the Anthology collection by the filmmaker. Filmmaker Robbins Barstow of Wethersfield, Connecticut was such a hit at the 2004 Boston Home Movie Day with his 1936 amateur Tarzan adventure film (with scripted live commentary that included a spirited Tarzan ululation) that word of his work traveled to the Library of Congress. A selection of Barstow’s many outstanding amateur films was added to the Library’s permanent collection in 2006.7

Even when they are not subsequently deposited with archives, films that make their way to a HMD event are quite likely to gain new life within the families that own them. A man came to the first Los Angeles HMD in 2003 with two small, pillbox-shaped reels that were part of a collection of some 85 reels he had inherited. He was not even sure whether they might be film or some other medium entirely. These reels turned out to be 9.5mm home movies shot primarily in Thailand and Sri Lanka during the early 1930s, when the man’s grandfather was working to establish one of the first medical schools in Thailand. They contained previously unseen footage of the man’s mother and uncle as very young children, making them a priceless piece of family history. The owner of the footage had all 85 reels cleaned and repaired by a reputable lab, made high-quality Digibeta transfers, and later created an oral history record with his mother to accompany the films—all steps that would be taken by archives with the means to do so, and all factors that will contribute greatly to the films’ continued survival and future scholarly value, should he choose to donate them to a research collection at some later date.

Projection: Access That Risks Destruction

While great care is taken at Home Movie Day to ensure that films are in optimal condition before they are projected, providing access to unpreserved original materials does entail some serious risks. One reason that commercial films demand a preservation-before-access approach is that the best preservation elements are simply not viewable. Original camera negatives, duplicate negatives, or fine-grain masters, for instance, are unsuitable for projection. If none of these better preservation elements exist, then extant release prints are likely to be rare or unique, and possibly physically damaged, as well. Access is completely impractical before new projection prints are made from preservation masters. Preservation of some sort will also be necessary before video masters can be made from surviving positive elements that are shrunken or damaged. Most home movies, on the other hand, were shot on reversal stock; that is, the original film that passes through the camera is processed to become the positive projection element without any negatives or duplicates. Reversal originals are unique, so projecting them exposes the material to risk of a more serious sort than projecting a feature release print of which there may be many duplicates. Even though film was made to be projected, improper projection can do far greater damage to film—reaming out sprocket holes by the dozen, burning jammed film, or scratching fragile emulsion—than storage under adverse conditions or any other form of mishandling.

During the earliest HMD planning sessions, local hosts and archive colleagues expressed their misgivings about projection. Film archives that projected unprocessed originals from their own collections would be called negligent (or worse) within the film preservation community, so why were we—all of us trained archivists who should know better—proposing to do just that to films we did not even own? We realized that archives and private owners weigh different factors in the decision to project the films they own. For archivists, projection of unprocessed materials risks violating a public trust. For the general public, however, having a trained archivist take charge of projecting a unique home movie is a new and better choice than what is normally available. What alternatives do home movie owners who just wanted to see their films typically have? Cheap and careless drugstore telecine operations would give them low-quality DVD or VHS copies, reinforcing the idea that home movies are of inferior visual quality and possibly damaging the originals in the process. Reputable labs that deliver high-quality transfers of small-gauge film would charge more than most people are willing to pay to just get a look at their home movies. And on the rare occasions when the owners of films still have a working projector, the chances of damaging the film in a
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dirty, malfunctioning, unfamiliar, or incompatible machine remain quite high.9
We resolved that projection under the circumstances of a Home Movie Day event would be a calculated—and carefully controlled—risk. Films had to be inspected and prepared by experienced handlers; projectionists would use clean and well-maintained projection equipment; films in dubious condition would not be screened; and all participants bringing film for projection would be asked to sign a waiver emphasizing the unpredictable nature of older films, which would protect the HMD event and its organizers in the event of inadvertent damage to the material. Economics and the scope of the preservation challenge for home movies mandate an approach that minimizes risk and maximizes access. Must this be done in the form of a dispersed international bring-your-own-film festival, like Home Movie Day? Certainly not. Archives could offer a periodic (weekly or monthly) drop-in time slot for inspection and screening of home movie materials from the local community. High-end labs could offer potential clients access to viewing equipment, so they could see portions of films before committing funds to transferring them. These efforts would certainly provide low-risk environments for accessing film materials, albeit with a considerable commitment of resources. HMD, however, as an annual public event, reaches not only film owners but also other interested people without films of their own; it gathers specialized equipment and preservation expertise at a central site; and it is done at minimal cost of time or capital for participating archives, labs, and volunteers.9 Even if new technologies made high-quality digital video transfers of small-gauge films available quickly and cheaply—and currently, there is no such technology—HMD participants still get important extras: preservation know-how from trained archivists, expert appraisal of their own materials, and the chance to see exactly what makes home movies on film such magical documents. The HMD audience itself is another benefit; the interest that strangers take in family footage helps the films’ owners shift their perspective on the materials, appreciating them as documents of a shared history, and something more than family mementos.

Scholarship and Online Access to Ephemeral Media
Along with the archive community’s increased efforts to preserve amateur film over the last decade, and Home Movie Day’s influence on access and preservation within the home and on a regional level, the digital environment will exert a continuing influence on access to ephemeral media, and therefore on preservation of these materials. Research and scholarship on home movies, home video, amateur film, and other formerly marginalized genres will see great changes—most of them positive. The Internet Archive Movie Collection10 offers full downloads of thousands of ephemeral films, most of them from the middle decades of the twentieth century, a period ripe for media scholarship. YouTube (www.youtube.com) offers a staggering range of amateur, personal materials in addition to commercial footage from various sources and is widely (if incorrectly) regarded as a comprehensive source for all footage of any description. These and other sites have demonstrated that delivering large quantities of motion picture footage online is technically possible and financially manageable, and they will be a proving ground for further advances in motion picture indexing and information retrieval.11 They will also be a substantive aid to those who write about specific moving image materials. Whereas influential works on home movies from past decades, such as Patricia Zimmermann’s Reel Families and Patricia Erens’s case study of the Galler family films, were largely page-bound pieces, using a few frames to illustrate important points about the content and form of the specific moving images under discussion, newer articles such as Devin Orgeron’s piece on anonymous family vacation films refer readers directly to a digitized, downloadable version of the material from the Internet Archive or other sites.12 Nevertheless, lessons learned within the archive community through the preservation of amateur films—namely, that their sheer quantity, variety, and frequent anonymity are barriers to preservation as significant as their obsolescent formats—have implications for home video and digital media of which scholars and preservationists alike should remain mindful.
The Pendulum Swings toward Video

Home Movie Day has demonstrated that altering the sequence of access and preservation processes can have positive effects for ephemeral films like home movies. For these reels, at the very least, thoughtful provision of access does no harm. While the preservation-first ideal can restrict or eliminate the possibility of access, especially in non-archive settings, we must also acknowledge that preservation of and access to moving images are processes that need to be balanced and cooperative. Increased scholarly and familial interest in home movies and ephemeral films may both stem from and stimulate new modes of access, but preservation will not always be a concomitant pursuit, as it is in the case of Home Movie Day. As history has shown, new technologies that increase access to some media can also hasten the obsolescence of older formats, sometimes culminating in a preservation crisis. When 8mm and 16mm home movie cameras and projectors gave way to camcorders and VCRs, several decades of vernacular recordings were rendered invisible to everyone, including scholars. The enthusiasts and collectors who resisted the transition to video are a somewhat mixed blessing for small-gauge film. Archivists have relied heavily on fanatics’ exhaustive knowledge of the medium’s material and cultural history; collector Alan Kattelle’s book *Home Movies: A History of the American Industry, 1897–1979* is both an indispensable technical resource and an obvious labor of love. At the same time, archivists deplore the existence of a collectors’ market for ephemeral films, having seen many intact family collections (even long single reels) broken up and sold piecemeal on eBay, their context and integrity sacrificed in the hope of higher bids for the individual reels.

Increasing reliance on online access via sites such as YouTube is potentially blinding viewers and owners of amateur footage in the same way to a different segment of our media history; videotape that is not digitized and posted as part of this initial wave of interest may be consigned to the same closets, attics, and trash bins from which Home Movie Day is trying to rescue old films now. James Parrish, the host of Home Movie Day in Richmond, Virginia, told a newspaper reporter “We’re not anti-video; we’re pro-preservation.” While Home Movie Day’s current focus is on film, at some point in the next decade HMD events may well include VHS, Hi-8, and DVCam playback equipment alongside the 16mm, 8mm, and Super8 projectors. It is sad but true that the couple whose wedding was shot on digital video and stored on a cheap DVD today may find in five years that their precious footage is actually less accessible than their parents’ 1980 wedding footage on VHS tape, or their grandparents’ 1955 wedding footage on 16mm or 8mm film. And heaven help them if they posted the video to YouTube, using it as a free long-term repository for their footage.

Relying on privately owned and commercially driven video hosting sites for access to media means moving even further away from the necessary balance point with preservation. Sites such as YouTube have no public accountability and make no commitment to maintain (free) access to the materials they host; they offer a potentially huge audience but, unlike archives, require nothing in the way of preservation first for the media they host. In fact, since converting film or analog video to digital currently still involves some loss of image quality, providing access solely through these outlets is neither benign nor neutral but could be considered to be actually destructive of the original image. Digital downloads of home movies via the Internet may be a case of the pendulum swinging too far towards access, and completely away from preservation. Home Movie Day grew out of archivists’ desire to preserve film materials that were at risk because they were inaccessible; now, video materials are (or can be) widely accessible, but largely unpreserved. The new goal will be an online environment, and a community of media owners and curators, that is pro-video without being anti-preservation.
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Notes

1. The five co-founders were at that time affiliated with the New Mexico State Records Center & Archives, the George Eastman House, the Northeast Historic Film, the Jacob Burns Film Center, and the Japanese American National Museum, respectively.
2. We are indebted to Lynne Kirste of the Academy Film Archive for the original suggestion, although for practical reasons HMD has been held on the second Saturday in August ever since. The next 8/16 HMD will be in 2008.
3. A contemporaneous history of HMD can be read in the AMIA-L archives from 2003 to the present, starting with our original announcement: http://lsv.uky.edu/scripts/wa.exe?A2=ind0303&L=AMIA-L&P=R13653&i=3
6. Inclusion on the Registry guarantees neither preservation nor accessibility for films. Conspiracy theorists have seen to it that digital video copies of the Zapruder film abound online, making it among the most accessible home movies in history. Sid Laverents’s Multiple SIDosis is also available from various online video hosts, and the filmmaker himself will personally sell you a VHS copy of any of his films: http://www.angelfire.com/movies/SDAMC/Multiple_Sidosis.htm. David Tatsuno, who died in late 2006, donated his original films to the Japanese American National Museum, which preserved Topaz in the 1990s with funding from the National Film Preservation Foundation; however, the film has never been distributed in any format, and access copies can only be viewed at the museum.
7. Barstow analyzed the historical and cinematic context of his Tarzan film (and its 1970s sequel, which featured the same actors enacting a similar story some four decades later) at the 2005 Northeast Historic Film Summer Symposium; his complete remarks can be read online at http://www.oldfilm.org/nhfWeb/ed/05Symp/05Symp_Barstow.htm
8. Many households made the switch from 16mm to regular 8mm in the 1930s, or from 8mm to Super8 film in the mid-1960s, but very few home moviemakers have kept suitable projectors on hand for all gauges over the years.
9. Home Movie Day events usually take advantage of borrowed, donated, or otherwise freely available screening spaces, equipment, and helping hands; cash donations to the project have never exceeded $5,000 in any given year, even with up to 50 cities participating.
11. The Internet Archive hosts footage from many archives and other nonprofits free of charge, so the institutional owners’ only direct costs are for digitization.