

## Old Movies Don't Die — They Rot Away

By ALEX WARD  
Special to The Herald

Take it from film archivist Larry Karr, the sight is not pretty. First comes a slightly fading picture image, followed by discoloration. Then foul-smelling gaseous fumes. Goopy bubbles emerge and spread rapidly, forming a brownish, frothing foam.

When the foam dries, there's nothing left but a can full of fine powder. And that, movie fans, is the end of another nitrate film, one more piece of cinema treasure lost forever.

It's a disheartening sight that bothers no one more than archivists like Karr, who've spent years trying to find films and save them before they vanish, quite literally into thin air. Imagine the Impressionists using disappearing paint, and you have some idea of the cruel joke that is nitrate film. Movies have been called the 20th Century's greatest art form, but at their present rate of decay, a lot of them won't be around for future historians to justify that claim.

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**— Library of Congress archivist  
John Kuiper**

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The culprit is the nitrate negative stock on which all films up to the early 1950s were shot. Under optimum conditions nitrate films might last as long as 75 years, optimum conditions being a cool storage temperature and very little exposure to the heat of a projector.

If it isn't pampered, nitrate will shrink and shrivel, and in just a few years turn into the witches' brew described above. What's more, if it's stored in a warm room, nitrate is a fire hazard; it can ignite at half the temperature of wood, and its toxic fumes can be fatal.

In 1951, a process was developed that allowed nitrate negatives to be copied onto triacetate, a

more durable and safer stock with a life span equal to that of writing paper.

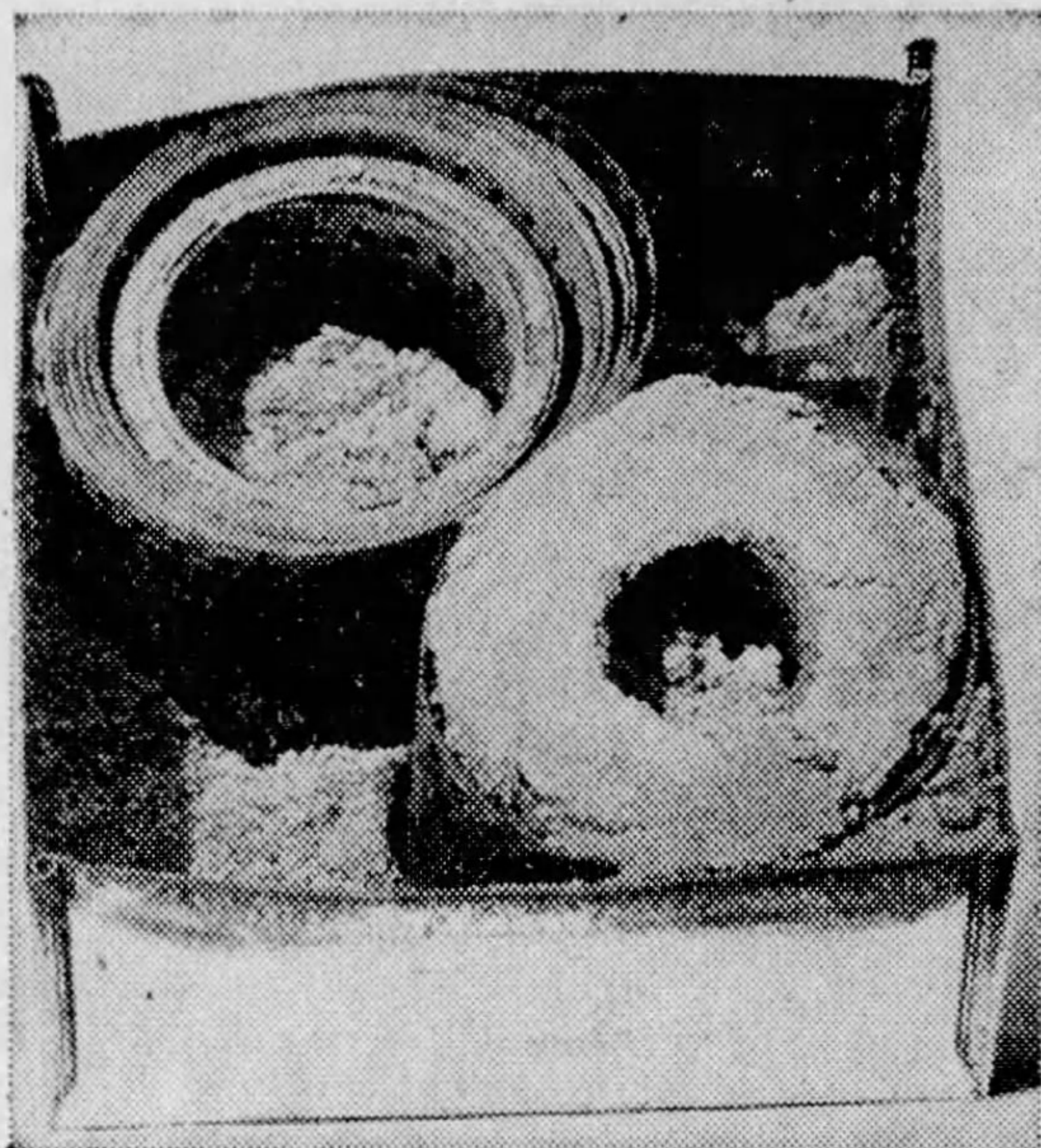
THAT development — to film archivists anyway — was tantamount to the discovery of penicillin. It meant that films made prior to the '50s, at least those that hadn't already deteriorated beyond recognition, could be saved. The race to find and transfer old titles has been on ever since.

Films like John Ford's "Stagecoach" and "The Grapes of Wrath" and silent classics such as "Ben-Hur" and "The Ten Commandments" (which includes one of the earliest color sequences) are among those that have been rescued and copied.

The obstacles that archivists have faced haven't been easy to overcome. Hollywood studios, unaware for a long time that they were turning out art worthy of saving for posterity, made few provisions for preserving their films. Once a movie was out of circulation, the studios generally felt it to be of little use, and in some cases they even systematically destroyed older films to retrieve the silver content in the nitrate, or simply to clear out

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— American Film Institute

**This Is a Motion Picture**  
... old nitrate stock film disintegrating

# Fame Means Freedom to Mark Hamill

By BOB THOMAS  
Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Luke Skywalker, the intergalactic warrior, is now repairing old cars in Burbank.

Sound like a comedown? Perhaps, but there he is in the auto shop of Burbank High School, dressed in coveralls with face smudged, laboring over a sick Corvette.

As anyone who has stood in line to see "Star Wars" knows, Luke Skywalker is Mark Hamill, a tele-

vision actor who suddenly found himself star of the year's superhit. He is now making "Stingray," with Hal Barwood producing and Matthew Robbins directing for MGM.

THE PAIR wrote "The Sugarland Express," "Bingo Long" and "MacArthur" and now are filming their own script. Based in part on their own high school experiences of not too long ago, "Stingray" casts Hamill as a high school misfit whose only interest is remaking

cars. When his prize Corvette is ripped off, he begins a wild chase to find it.

One hot day in Burbank, Hamill was relaxing in his dressing room-trailer, a far cry from the lean-tos he was given as a TV actor, but not as grand as his new status might suggest. But he denies that he really feels much change.

"The only time it really hit me was when Fox sent Harrison Ford and me on a three-week appearance tour," he said. "I had the whole works — TV and radio in-

terviews, fans at the airports, Fox officials to take care of every need, limousines, hotel suites.

"BUT AS SOON as I got home, it was like living in a vacuum again. I went back to the same house, I see the eight or nine friends I always see, I go to no parties, because I don't like parties.

"Of course there has been a difference in my career. The main advantage is that now I am able to say no to roles I don't want to do.

Some of the offers have been unbelievable. One outfit offered me \$250,000 to play a pioneer boy with a pet mountain lion. 'Whaddaya mean you don't want the part?' they said. 'We offered you \$250,000, didn't we?'

One result of "Star Wars" that displeases Hamill is some of the attention he has been getting in print.

"I've been called 'a California clone with brains baked by the sun,'" he complained. "As though I just fell into all this by accident!



Hamill in 'Star Wars' ... from TV to movie superstar

"WHAT THEY don't realize is that I have done more than 140 television roles. I started acting on stage in Virginia when I was seven, and I acted all the way through school, including two years at Yokohama and Yokosuka in Japan. I spent two years in the drama department at Los Angeles City College, where the competition is fierce and you have to earn your roles, as in a repertory company.

"I spent three seasons at the Renaissance Fair (a spring festival in nearby Agoura) doing eight shows a day, everything from Moliere and Shakespeare to slow-motion sword fights and mime."

Hamill also objected to a printed report that he stayed in school "because I didn't want to get my ass shot off in Vietnam."

"I never said that, and now I'm getting hate mail," he remarked. "Of course I didn't want to go to Vietnam, because I thought the war was wrong. But then, so did a lot of other people."

ALTHOUGH he can still play high schoolers with ease, Mark Hamill is 25. One of seven children of

a Navy captain, he grew up in California, New York, Virginia, Japan and elsewhere. A local production landed him an agent, and his pleasant looks and earnest manner earned him TV roles, including the movies "Eric" with Patricia Neal, "Sarah T." with Linda Blair and the short-lived series, "The Texas Wheelers."

"Star Wars" resulted from a "cattle call," a mass audition held by George Lucas and by Brian de Palma, who was casting for "Carrie." Hamill thought he was being considered for the latter film in a role that was played by William Katt. Two months later he was asked to test for "Star Wars," which at first he thought was "some kind of Flash Gordon thing."

# Postponing the Last Picture Show

FROM PAGE 1L  
storage space.

MANY FILMS believed lost have been unearthed in the possession of private collectors, who tend to guard the secrets of their collections as if they were King Solomon's Mines.

"For years," says Win Sharples, administrator for preservation and documentation at the American Film Institute, "a lot of archival work was carried out quietly. There was a lot of jealousy, a lot of hostility among different film archives. There wasn't much cooperation; everyone was operating pretty much on his own."

The last few years, however, have seen some significant changes. In the late 1960s, with funding from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Motion Picture Association of America and the Ford Foundation, the country's major film preservation archives — the Library of Congress, the George Eastman House, the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA), and the then-recently formed American Film Institute — accelerated their efforts to transfer nitrate films to triacetate.

WITH THE increased activity also came an atmosphere of friendlier communication and cooperation. "Up to that point," says Kuiper, head of the prints and photographs section of the Library of Congress, "there was a real crisis in film preservation. It was being done only on a limited basis, and not very systematically. Money was a problem. Very often, films were being transferred just ahead of complete deterioration. When there wasn't enough money, the films just rotted in the vaults."

And many times, according to Win Sharples, there was duplication of effort simply because of a lack of communication. Now there is an Archives Advisory Committee, with representatives from each of the major film archives, which meets three times a year to discuss mutual problems. A new member, the University of California at Los Angeles Film and Television Archive, has just been added to the group, and open lines are kept with such smaller collections as those at the University of Wisconsin and Anthology Film Archives in New York, and with important individual collectors, like William K. Everson.

IT'S IMPOSSIBLE to pinpoint just how many films have been made since the days of Edison, but any film archivist will tell you that a lot of them are missing. "There were just over 6,600 films made between 1920 and 1930 in this country," says Kuiper, "and only about 15 per cent of them still survive in any form. Of course, that figure may go up in the future as some more of them are found, but probably not by more than five per cent or so. In the years preceding 1921, there's even less left."

"What we haven't given enough consideration to is the preservation of triacetate films. They begin to fade too, after enough runs through a projector. Have you ever gone to the opening night of a film, then gone back to see it about four or five months later? There is a tremendous difference in print quality."

— Archivist Marshall Deutelbaum

The Library of Congress' own film collection dates back to January 9, 1894, but there is a huge gap in it, beginning in 1912 and ending in 1942, a period when the copyright laws allowed film producers to file a written description, rather than the film itself, with the Library.

Even so, the collection contains 90 million feet of film, 26 million of which has been converted from nitrate to triacetate since 1968. (An ordinary feature-length movie is about seven reels, or 7,000 feet.)

The American Film Institute, which has only been in existence for a decade, already has 14,000 film titles in its collection (which is stored at the Library of Congress), the Museum of Modern Art about 8,000 titles, and the George Eastman House about 12,000 titles.

IF SUCH figures boggle the average mind, they don't faze film archivists who have to deal with them. They are always on the lookout for more films. Larry Karr, the associate archivist at AFI and a man who could write a primer on the care and feeding of private film collectors, is beaming a lot lately over AFI's recent acquisition of the Marion Davies collection. The Museum of Modern Art has been acquiring films from 20th Century Fox studios; Eastman House has been getting them from MGM.

Eileen Bowser, curator of film at MOMA, says that the studios have been eager to help out now that they realize their films have historical value. Bob Rosen, director of the archive at UCLA, agrees. "The studios have gotten wise to the need for preservation," he says, "so they're willing to help in any way they can. Some, like MGM, have even done a good deal of preservation work themselves."

STILL the steady volume of films the few archives receive has created an unwieldy backlog, which in turn raises several questions. For instance, which nitrate films are transferred to safety film first? And, even though much of our film heritage has already been lost to deterioration, is there any point in copying all the nitrate that's been found? When does one say enough is enough?

"Well," John Kuiper responds to the first question, "there are several considerations, the most important being, which films are in the worst state of deterioration. We want to transfer those to triacetate (safety) film first, obviously, before it's too late. Then there is the matter of representativeness, trying to have films from every age and a

balance between, say, features and short subjects, so that there is a good cross-section.

"Then there is contemporary interest: What films are scholars and film enthusiasts interested in now? And what films we think will be of interest later."

AS FOR the amount of transfer, most preservationists are in agreement: All films, or at least one print of every film, are worth saving, so "enough" is never really enough. "We are selective," explains Kuiper, "but our selectivity comes in the acquisition process. We don't take everything that is offered to us, but our intention is to save every film we take.

"I think we have preserved most of what are considered the 'great' films today," he says, "but that's only by today's standards. In the next generation people may think other films are important for other reasons... We cannot predict critical patterns, so it's essential we save everything we can."

Transferring nitrate to safety film is a costly matter. Marshall Deutelbaum, assistant to the director at George Eastman House, estimates that it costs about 25 cents a foot, depending on the condition of the nitrate film. Preservation is now limited almost exclusively to black and white films.

It takes a while for a just-transferred film to become available either for exhibition in a theater or for scholarly research. At the Library of Congress, once a negative is copied it might, because of the volume, take up to a year for a print to be made and the film to be catalogued.

Perhaps Marshall Deutelbaum sums up the archivist's feelings best: "One hundred per cent preservation of the nitrate we now have eludes us, but most of us see it as a distinct possibility. What we haven't given enough consideration to is the preservation of triacetate films. They begin to fade too, after enough runs through a projector. Have you ever gone to the opening night of a film, then gone back to see it about four or five months later? There is a tremendous difference in print quality. If the problem gets bad enough we're going to have to consider the importance of copying those too.

"It's something that's going to worry us..."

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