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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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 empty phys. 

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Fame Means Freedom to Mark Hamill

By BOB THOMAS

Los Angeles, Calf.--Mark Hamill, the actor of the new television series "Star Wars," is
making a name for himself in the show business world. Hamill, who was born in
Seattle, Wash., is one of the rising stars of the television and film industry. His role in the
series "Star Wars" has brought him widespread acclaim and has established him as a prominent figure in the entertainment industry.

The actor is known for his versatile performances, which have earned him numerous awards and nominations. Hamill's portrayal of the character Luke Skywalker in the "Star Wars" franchise has become iconic and has solidified his status as a beloved figure among fans worldwide.

In addition to his work on television, Hamill has also appeared in several feature films, including "The Last Starfighter," "X-Men: First Class," and "Star Trek: The Next Generation." His diverse range of roles has helped him establish himself as a talent to watch in the industry.

Despite his success, Hamill remains humble and approachable, always ready to engage with his fans and share his passion for acting. His dedication to his craft and his commitment to his craft have earned him the respect of his colleagues and audiences alike.

"Mark is a true professional," said one of his fellow actors. "He always gives his best and never takes himself too seriously. His infectious energy and positive attitude make him a joy to work with. We're all lucky to have him on our team."