

AMIA the association of moving image archivists

2000 Silver Light Award Winner: Howard Walls

The following speech was given by Charles Grimm at the 2000 AMIA Los Angeles Conference to introduce Silver Light honoree Howard Walls.

'I would first like to thank the Members of the Board, and the Awards committee for providing me with this opportunity to speak to you this afternoon.

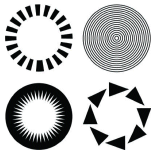
You know, when I was first approached about introducing your Silver Light Award recipient, one thought immediately came to my mind, "How can I make sure I convey to you the accomplishments of our honored guest?" The more I thought about it, the more the reality of the moment hit me. In many ways this is so perfect. Here we are, entering a new century, faced with new challenges in the Archival world. It is the perfect time to revisit what got us here.

In August of 1942 Howard Lamarr Walls gained access to a vault containing vintage rolls of film copied onto paper. Who would have thought where it would eventually lead? These paper rolls would later become known as the Library of Congress Paper Print Collection. Mr. Walls too was faced with a new challenge. What now, he must have thought? For there was no precedent for him to follow, The Library of Congress had itself relegated these historic artifacts to relative obscurity by filing them as typical registration records.

It would have been easy, quite easy for him to say; nothing of value here, close the vault door, and move on. His next step was key, taking samples of what he had found to Librarian of Congress Archibald MacLeish he tried to impress upon him the value of these seemingly innocuous rolls of paper images. While MacLeish felt they had value, he also knew he had no way to fund a project of this nature. Once again, there would be no reason for that door to close and seal these long neglected images to the same fate of their brethren. Here is where I think Howard Walls had one of life defining moments. Immediately, he presented MacLeish with a viable option, offering to catalog this material in his own time. MacLeish graciously accepted, and provided space to do this important work. Working late into the night, after his regular shift as copyright clerk had ended, He began the daunting task of crosschecking these Paper Prints against the copyright logs to provide information such as title, date, and Production Company.

In an internal Library memo dated a scant 2 weeks after he had gained access to the vault Alvin Kremer (Keeper of the Collections) writes to the Librarian of Congress. " I have talked to Howard Walls concerning his burning interest in the movie films which are stored in one of the cellar vaults. Arrangements can be made to remove and store them in the room now housing the rolls placed there at your direction. Walls is strongly of the opinion the L.C. should do something about these films. According to him they are the finest collection of films in the country and he puts tremendous value on them. He wants to do a great deal of work on them once they are removed, but he is desirous of having another place in which to do such work. Before he goes any further I think you should give him an area, for I am certain the administration would want to guide, rather than be led."

Indeed, they were being led, within the next year; Mr. Walls had begun to investigate the possibility of transferring these "paper prints" back to celluloid. It was Mr. Walls good fortune to make the acquaintance of Carl Louis Gregory, then Motion Picture Engineer of the National Archives.



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Gregory, a pioneering cinematographer had a few years earlier designed an optical printer for the express purpose of copying shrunken and brittle film. This printer was modified to handle the opaque prints, and Mr.'s Walls and Gregory successfully copied this material, which later found its way in Richard Fleischer's "Flicker Flashbacks" series for RKO-Pathe'. How ironic it was the early in his career, Mr. Gregory, as an employee of the Edison Studio, produced some of these same "paper prints" four use as copyright registration. In actuality, he was in some cases preserving his own work, only 35 years later.

By 1945, the Library had created a Motion Picture Division. During this period Mr. Walls worked to expand the Library's holdings by contacting such pioneering personalities as Harold Lloyd, Mary Pickford, and others looking to acquire materials related to their careers and the early days of the Motion Picture Industry for the Divisions collection. In 1947 due to a reduction in funding the Library's Motion Picture Division with a staff of 18 employees was liquidated. With its activities ceased, Mr. Walls was given an option by then Librarian Luther Evans to retain a position within the Library. He felt he could not abandon efforts to preserve these artifacts.

Once again through his perseverance, Howard Walls kept these images alive. Cashing in his pension check (all 1200 dollars of it) he traveled to California, where he felt he would have an opportunity to continue on his preservation efforts. He contacted the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, not only did he convince them to pick up the mantle of this project, he was hired as the first Curator of the Academy Film Collection. He worked to build up the Academy collection, negotiating acquisitions of films, books and related materials. He interviewed such pioneers as J. Searle Dawley, and Blanche Sweet, items still part of the Academy's special collection.

Upon leaving the Academy in the early 1950's he was contracted by the Library of Congress to produce the book "Motion Pictures 1894-1912, From the Copyright Records of the Library of Congress", an important reference work listing films from the earliest segment of film history yielding data such as Title, Date, Copyright Number etc. He continued working for various companies directly and as a consultant on archival issues of the day.

The most impressive part of these accomplishments is that they took place over 50 years ago; in a time before the word "Preservation" became accepted as part of our everyday language in Motion Pictures. He set the stage for us, it is important we realize, that the material we work to preserve is not here by accident. It is through the efforts and perseverance by men such as Howard Lamarr Walls that we are granted this opportunity to secure our Moving Image Heritage for future generation to experience.

Over time, his accomplishments have faded from public view, much in the same way the images he worked to preserve. It is therefore fitting, that our organization, having as part of its mission to " Advance the field of moving image archiving" has today recognized the importance of his pioneering efforts in the field of Moving Image Preservation.

It is indeed my pleasure to present to you, your recipient of the year 2000 Silver Light Award, Mr. Howard Lamarr Walls.'