

HOME MOVIE DAY 101

WHAT IT IS, WHAT IT WAS, AND WHAT IT SHALL BE

Home Movie Day, a celebration of amateur film started by a group of film archivists in 2002, occurs all over the world in mid-October. Like the celebration of a birthday, HMD is a very individualistic affair; each event is unique.

Do you have to be a film archivist to run a HMD event? No, but you *do* need to be experienced in the exciting realm of small-gauge film handling. Many HMD hosts are veteran film screeners, some are collectors, some are home movie makers themselves.

Home movies are generally shot on reversal film, which means the same piece of film that went through the camera is run through the projector (there is no negative). Inexperienced projectionists or poorly maintained equipment can lead to film damage. Since the only copy of the film is the one in the projector, damage is forever.

However, properly projected, the experience of watching movies on film can't be matched. The clicking of the projector, the unbeatable color of Kodachrome, the crispness of the image can't compare to a video. Running a HMD event isn't always easy, but it's very rewarding.

THE SET-UP

Find a location

You might be inviting strangers. If so, think twice about having it at your home. If you're only inviting people you know, go ahead and have it in your living room, which is, under normal circumstances, the most common spot for catching a home movie.

Some public places like libraries, schools, and churches have rooms you can use for free. Places commonly rented out for not too much money include VFW halls, community centers, small hotels etc. Bars will sometimes let you put on events, but you'll run into issues like some people hate bars, kids sometimes can't get in, and drunks might break your stuff and spill beer on your movies.

Use your connections. If you have friends at a movie theatre, bowling alley, or country club, hit them up for venue help.

If you don't have to pay for a venue, your costs will be low.

Venue Needs

No way around it, you need electrical outlets.

You need a dark spot for your screen. Many people put on HMD events during the day. If the room has windows, test out how projected film looks before the day of show. You might need a new location or blankets on the windows.

You need a table for your film inspection area, or at least an area where you can set up a table.

People like to sit in chairs, but you can make them sit on the floor if need be.

A restroom is highly desirable.

Geographic Location

Your venue should be relatively easy to find.

Parking or public transportation should be available, unless everyone can be expected to walk.

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

You will need *projectors*. Beg, steal, borrow. You should be ready to show 8mm Super 8 and 16mm (and 9.5mm outside the USA). You don't *have* to be ready for all formats, but won't you be disappointed if a lot of 16mm comes through the door and you can't show it! Do rigorous testing on the projectors long before mid-October. Do scratch tests, lubricate & clean the film path (see Treadway, <http://littlefilm.org> FAQ). Print out a copy of the indispensable HMD Projection Checklist by Dr. Leo off the homemovieday group, files section. Study it well!

Any backup equipment you can get is great. Film projectors have a maddening tendency to crap out at the last minute, and you need to be prepared.

Figure out how the film needs to be wound to come off the projector. Will your feed reel have the film coming off the front with the sprocket holes on the outside? Practice using your projectors.

Super 8 Sound is a possibility, but it's not super common, so don't worry about securing a sound projector. Super 8 Sound has a magnetic stripe along the side (it looks like audio tape).

Super 8 reels have larger spindle holes than regular 8. You may need to pick up some plastic adapters if your projector has just the skinny spindles. If it has fat spindles & it's a dual 8 projector, it may adapt by pulling the spindle straight off. If not, find another projector.

Also you will need:

- A desk lamp for your inspection area
- A flashlight
- Splicers for the formats you'll be showing (tape or cement, your choice). Do a lot of practicing before the show!
- Gloves – cotton film/photo type
- A loupe or magnifying glass so you can tell your head from your tail
- White leader in all formats
- You might need an adapter for fitting large holed Super 8 reels on a standard 8 spindle.
- Archival fine-nibbed pen for marking film leader with owner's name & head/tail
- Rewind cranks for 16mm & 8mm. 16mm cranks that clamp onto a tabletop are available. S/8mm rewinds can be made by taking apart a viewer.
- If you're concerned about content you can bring a dual 8/S8 viewer. For 16mm you can just use a loupe.
- A movie screen
- Projector stand of some sort
- Clipboard for sign-in sheet
- Pens
- Video camera, Super 8 camera, still camera. Document your event!

INFORMATION. WE WANT INFORMATION.

The most common question we get is “where can I get my film transferred to video?” Many times, people bring in film they haven’t seen in a while because they don’t have the technology to watch it at home. It’s easier for them to use a VHS or DVD. Do some research into transfer facilities in your area. The HMD site will provide a list of national labs, but most people will want to bring their film to someone local. Print up a list of reputable transfer houses, with an idea of the price range, noting that HMD offers the list merely as suggestions, none of the places are officially sanctioned.

Be prepared to talk about donating film to an archive. Find out who collects home movies in your area or state. Regional archives should be beefing up their home movie collections. Some places will do the video transfer in exchange for donation, which is a nice alternative for the penny pinchers, and an added reason to donate the original film (this is expensive, however, and should only be pursued in the case of an outstanding film). The Center for Home Movies (www.centerforhomemovies.com) will take all comers in the absence of a suitable local outlet.

Make photocopies. People like handouts, as we all know. Decide which documents (from the yahoo group files) you’d like to have available. Not everyone will want a copy of everything.

Decide what you’ll say during the event. You don’t have to give a formal speech if you’re not comfortable with that, but some talking to the crowd will be necessary. Check out the “Talking Points” on the HMD site. Don’t omit these two points:

- Don’t toss out your film after transferring it to video
- Consider donating the original film to an archive

HELP!

You have a space, you have projectors, now you need to find help. Help cannot be underestimated. HMD can be overwhelming if you’re on your own. Canvas your friends and co-workers for volunteers. They don’t have to have film handling experience, although it is convenient. If you’re the only archivist or experienced film handler, you should take the role of inspector / projectionist, but there are plenty of other roles to be filled.

A word of caution: you need *capable* volunteers. A common danger is a volunteer who can't work on his/her own, asks a lot of needless questions, and isn't good with the public. Sometimes you don't know in advance who this person will be, so get a lot of volunteers.

Positions include (note: you don't need a different person for each job)

- Someone to man the sign-in sheets & accept film
- Projectionists (it's good to have 2)
- Musician or DJ
- Moral support
- Water boy
- Driver to get your equipment to and from your venue
- Someone to keep track of how many people come
- 2 note-takers who will describe the films
- Publicity agent
- Graphic artists (for flyer / poster help)

Train your staff. If you have volunteer projectionists, unless they're seasoned, you should run through some format changes with them.

Tips for note-takers: Name of film's owner / decade or date of film / color or B&W / description of film

WHAT'S THE PLAN, MAN?

HMD is what you make it.

Before you publicize, decide on your parameters. What formats? Any video? How narrow is your definition of "home movies?" Are student films acceptable? How will you deal with pornography? What if someone brings some Castle features edited for home use? How long will the event be?

HOW DO PEOPLE KNOW ABOUT HMD?

Turnout often depends on exposure (along with the weather and competing events). Basically, the more people who know about your event, the more people you can expect to show up.

The Media & the Press Release

We can't always get on TV or the radio, but we can always try. Press releases should be sent to local news & cultural program departments of local stations. HMD is a good local newsworthy event: history, film, preservation.

Your local paper is an easier sell. Use your press release to appeal to the arts editor for a story. At the very least, you should get into the Events listing section.

If you know in advance about any of the specific films you'll be showing, describe them in the press release. Also, photographs or film scans are useful. The HMD files will include a press release you can tailor to your event.

The internet!

Craigslist.com, available in most areas, has an events listing section. Any other virtual community bulletin boards are helpful.

Flyers and Posters

Some people still live in the 20th century and actually read *pieces of paper* (also known as *broadsides*). Make your flyer eye-catching (an arty friend may come in handy here): a simple graphic with a minimal amount of informative text (don't forget the website!).

For instance:

HMD

Date time location

Bring your film on (these formats)

For more info www.homemovieday.com

You may have to flyer areas more than once, as flyers tend to disappear. Make use of bulletin boards at the usual places – cafes, grocery stores, Laundromats, schools, etc. Don't forget to flyer your venue!

HMD postcards

You'll want to get a bunch of these and include your local info on them. You can make sticker labels using a computer or copy machine.

Mail out the postcards and leave stacks in appropriate places. Also have some available at the event as souvenirs.

Consider sending invitations to local historical organizations, the press, friends, neighbors, family members, local celebrities, filmmakers, museums, cinemas.

The Publicity Machine

Your venue might have its own publicity machine. Libraries, rock clubs, movie theatres all have calendars. Get listed! Some places have mailing lists you might be able to infiltrate.

Work with another local historical or filmy institution. Maybe they'll help you publicize. If you're going to suggest people donate to a certain collection, for instance, it will be in that institution's interest to help you out.

****Be aware that crazy people are drawn to free events in public areas. This could add to your event's atmosphere!**

THE FILM CHECK-IN

If you can arrange to have people bring their films in a day ahead of time, or at least an hour ahead of time, you will not regret it. Inspecting the film takes a lot of time. Whether or not you can do this will depend on your venue. If you can't be there the day before the event to accept film, maybe you can accept it at your place of work, if it's accessible.

You'll find most film arrives heads-out, so inspecting it means rewinding it twice. Inspecting during the screening can be a little awkward, plus it means you'll miss some of the films!

During the film check-in, it will be important to have some volunteer handy to accept and label films. All films must be labeled with the owner's name and phone number. Your volunteer can also intercept chatters who are keeping you from your work.

Checking in the film

1. Someone arrives with film. Label their film with their name and phone number. Have them read & sign the *release form*.
2. If they hand you a lot of films, ask them to pick out their faves for the screening. You are the curator, so it's up to you what gets shown, and to make sure one collection doesn't dominate so much that you can't show anything else. Remember, a few 50' reels of super 8 (3 minutes each) is quite a different kettle of fish from 1200' of 16mm (30 minutes).

3. Inspect the film. Your first line of defense is your nose. A film that smells strongly of *vinegar* is in trouble. *Camphor* (mothballs) is not a bad smell for film (it was used as a plasticizer). Wind through the film & attach leader to head and tail as needed. Label heads / tails. The projectionist needs to know which way is up! Repair damage. Note any scratches. You need to know if you're scratching someone's print during projection!

Inspection danger signs include

- vinegar odor
- brittle & curled film
- many damaged perforations

** Don't get hung up on a damaged film. If it's more than you can repair, give it back to the owner and don't show it.

4. Check for shrinkage. Film shrinks with age and deterioration. The kind of shrinkage that will cause problems with projection should be pretty obvious. Be suspicious of warped films. If you don't have a shrinkage gauge, compare the film with fresh film or fresh leader. Check 20 sprocket holes. If they're off by a whole perf, reject the film. (See Dr. Leo's Projection Guide for details.)

5. Make sure the film is heads out and coming off the reel ready for projection. It's important to be familiar with how the film needs to be wound on the feed reel for projection. You don't want to be starting films upside down or inside-out. This can be very confusing for double perf 16mm.

A SATURDAY IN OCTOBER

Setting up

Set up your room before people arrive. Eat - it's going to be a long day. Set up projection and run some film. You'll want your screen as high as possible so everyone can see. If you need to, put your screen on a tabletop to gain height. You'll want both 16mm and S/8mm projectors set up at once on 2 projector stands, if possible.

Set up your inspection table. Even if you've asked people to drop film off ahead of time, you might have some people show up day of show with film in hand and you want to be ready.

Set up a literature table. Make sure you have pens for the mailing list.

Running the show

How you run the show is totally up to you. Most people start with an introduction covering what the event is all about, how to get film shown, order films will be shown, etc. I like to ask the person whose film I'm going to show if they have anything they'd like to say about it. Some don't, most do. Some narrate during the film: "That's my wife, that's Boston Common, the Coconut Grove sure was crowded that night," etc. These are occasionally emotional times. Some people will show films of dead loved ones, and maybe they haven't seen the film in a long time.

You might want to explain things during the film. For instance, "this is Kodachrome which Kodak has just discontinued. It's a great archival film for its colorfastness." Or "this film has been damaged by water" "this film was overexposed," etc..

There are some points that should be brought up during the show, regardless of the formality of your presentation.

- archival donations
- storage at home
- video transfer
- don't throw away your film!

Many archives are interested in collecting home movies. These may be regional collections (Rhode Island Historical Society, for instance) or wide film collections (Center for Home Movies). If there is a regional collection in your area, point people toward it.

Home storage conditions are important for the survival of the material. The basic mantra is *cool and dry* – no basements or attics, stay away from radiators and sinks. See www.fimforever.org for more storage information and details.

Video transfer is a good idea for a number of reasons. Although we don't expect the video format to outlive the film (have you tried buying a laser disc player lately?), transfer to video for access is convenient and cuts down on the handling of the original film. The fewer times the film is run through a projector, the better. Many people these days are more comfortable running a VCR or DVD player than a film projector.

People may have questions. You can take them throughout the event, or wait until the end, whatever's better for you.

If anyone shows a film that really stands out, approach them about donating it to an archive. Also, one of these days we'll have a best of HMD 1&2 DVD, and maybe we'll do another someday. It's good to have some titles to recommend.

WHAT WILL MY HMD EVENT BE LIKE?

I can't predict what will happen at your HMD. I do know someone will show up (even if it's only your friends & relations), movies will be shown (even if they're just the ones you brought), and HMD will draw to a close.

The attendees will do what you tell them. Figuring out how you want to run things should help you get an idea of what it will be like. If you tell them to bring their film in ahead of time, they will. If you tell them to wear black armbands in honor of the demise of Kodachrome, they will.

When it's over, what are you left with besides an empty feeling of relief? Hopefully, you will have some addresses to send info to next year, you'll have seen some great films, you'll have made some connections, and most importantly you'll have inspired some people. You'll definitely have some experience under your belt.

AFTERMATH

Take your volunteers out for some kind of treat they can all enjoy. Talk to them about their opinions of the show. You should all figure out what went well, what needs to change for the next event. Keep these notes somewhere you'll find them for your next HMD. Write up your HMD report and post it to the homemovieday group.

And then spend some time making some home movies!

Vive l'amateur !

~Liz Coffey
June 23, 2006