

## **Ron Standerfer**

### **Reader Views**

Whatever happened to all those newsreels we used to watch in the movie theaters when we were kids? Or those training films they made us watch when we were drafted or enlisted in the military? How about those carefully crafted films depicting life in America during the Twentieth Century; some dating back to early 1900s? I'm sure many of us would like to see them again just to see what life was like in those days. The good news is that many of those films are alive and well, tucked safely away in the care of the federal government. The bad news is that finding a specific film can be a difficult and frustrating task. Until now.

In one fell swoop, "America's Film Vault: A Reference Guide to the Motion Pictures Held by the U.S. National Archives," by award-winning author and film-sleuth Phillip W. Stewart has leveled the playing field for historians, film buffs, and curiosity seekers. How significant is his new book? Consider this: for the first time ever, the whereabouts of over 360,000 film reels that document a century of American and world history have been assembled in book form. As a matter of fact, it is safe to say that some of the best-kept history secrets are buried deep within Stewart's book.

Considering the scope of "America's Film Vault," I expected the review copy to arrive on a hand truck bearing a book somewhere in size between the Manhattan telephone directory and the old fashioned dictionaries that sit perched on large walnut stands in the libraries. To my surprise, it was quite modest in size; about 280 pages. But what it lacks in size, it more than makes up for it in sheer volume of information it contains between the covers.

Finding a specific title amongst the 360,000 or so films listed is relatively simple. For ease of search, the book is divided into five sections: Civilian Films, Military Films, Donated Films, Title Index, and Subject Index. Each film section begins with an overview, which provides general information concerning what type of films the searcher can expect to find there. Of the three film sections, I found the Donated Film section to be the most fascinating, mainly because it contains a treasure trove of newsreels. The subjects of these newsreels vary from the mundane to stories of epic proportions. Here's an example of the former that was filmed by Universal Newspaper Newsreel: "Runaway Train Plunges Down Mountain: New Castle, PA - 210,000 tons of coal spilled, 32 cars wrecked, but nobody is hurt. Some of the derailed cars hung on the edge of a steep embankment."

Can't you just picture this?

So far "American Film Vault" has been warmly received by those in the know. For example, according to William T. Murphy, former Chief of the Motion Picture, Sound, and Video Branch of the National Archives, "America's Film Vault" is, "...a convenient overview of National Archives and Records Administration's motion picture holdings, one difficult to obtain from any other source."

“ American Film Vault” is the third book Phillip Stewart has written as part of The Historic Footage Project. You can learn more about this project by visiting his website. Meanwhile, I am prepared to accept the challenge he laid down on the cover of his book; namely, “If you’re ready to play detective, take a crack at the combination, and investigate the bowels of the vault, you need a guide map...and this is it! Discover “reel” treasures with “America’s Film Vault.” I can’t wait to get started.