

Nitrate Motion Picture Film Oral History Interviews

Ken Weissman

(00:00 – 04:09) Introduction – Ken Weissman’s background working with motion picture units for the United States Air Force.

MARY HUELSBECK: Okay. So today is Tuesday, June 16th, 2015. My name is Mary Huelsbeck, and I'm speaking with Ken Weissman of the Library of Congress. Ken is the supervisor of the film preservation laboratory for Library of Congress. So, Ken, why don't you start off by telling me a little bit about yourself and how you became an archivist.

KEN WEISSMAN: Okay. That's fine. Okay. So I've actually worked for the Library of Congress, it will be 34 years this September, this coming September. And prior to that, I had roughly four years of post production work in various film related areas, most notably when I was in the United States Air Force, which is really how I got started in motion pictures. I was selected to work as a, what's called a continuous photo processing specialist, which is the Air Force name for people that run automated or semi-automated film developing equipment primarily. They also do printing and things like that.

But the one thing that was a bit unusual about my experience in the Air Force is that I was actually assigned to a motion picture unit. And that's, there's only a few of those that the Air Force had at the time. Or as most of my colleagues and fellow trainees were assigned to cognizant technical groups, which are, it's a totally different type of machine and specialized in wide films of relatively long length, 100' or 200' of film, but unlike a motion picture film, which can be several thousand feet in length.

But like I said, I was assigned. Actually I did a program called Swap where I was, when I was in tech school, and we were learning all about photo processing, when we got our orders for our first permanent duty assignment, I was originally scheduled to go to England at RAF Alconbury. And a classmate of mine was a native Californian, and she was assigned to go to Vandenberg Air Force Base in California. And she asked if I would swap orders with her so that she could get out of California. And I said sure, yeah. I've never been to California, so what the heck, right?

Well, it turns out that the assignment in California was actually in a motion picture group, the 1,369th Audio-visual Squadron, which provided photographic coverage and motion picture coverage of the space launches out of Vandenberg Air Force Base. So I was, you know, totally by happenstance, got involved in motion pictures. And this is, like I said, typically post production work for myself because we developed the films and printed them, timed them or graded them, some people call it.

So that was the area in which I worked. And then my second assignment was actually on the other side of the mission, so to speak, was actually in Hawaii at Hickam Air Force Base. The space launches that occurred out of Vandenberg typically sent satellites into polar orbit. And every now and then, those satellites, especially the spy satellites would come back down. And

the mission at Hickam was to catch those spy satellites and then get the information, the data that they had collected. And once again, our unit had provided the motion picture coverage for those missions.

HUELSBECK: Okay. And you were in the Air Force, what, from '77 to '81? Is that correct?

WEISSMAN: That's correct.

HUELSBECK: Okay.

(04:09 – 06:27) Weissman's background continued: Getting hired at the Library of Congress' film preservation laboratory at Wright Patterson Air Force Base, Dayton, OH.

WEISSMAN: Now, I mean, I got, I went in in March of '77. But I actually didn't get to my first duty assignment until September or so of '77. So it was a few months later, after basic training and tech school. And then that's how I got started in motion picture work. And then when I got ready to get out of the service in '81, you know, you've got to love your mom, right? So she's scouring the newspapers for jobs that her kid might be able to do when he gets out of the service so he doesn't have to live at home. And the . . .

HUELSBECK: She didn't want you to move back home?

WEISSMAN: Well, no. She didn't mind me moving back home. But she didn't want me to be there firmly entrenched. And it worked out just fine. But the interesting thing about that timing was that the Library of Congress was getting ready to open its newly established film preservation laboratory out at Wright Patterson Air Force Base, which is near Dayton, Ohio, which is where I was from.

So, you know, another set of happy coincidences, if you will. And like I said, the timing was just about right because she saw this ad in the Sunday paper and mailed it to me because these were well before the days of e-mail and all that other stuff and the Internet. So she mailed it to me. I got it in the mail like on a Thursday. And the applications had to be submitted by the following Monday. So I very hurriedly put it together, Fed Ex-ed it off to the Library of Congress and didn't hear anything for six months.

So got out of the service, was working in private enterprise in Dayton at a company that didn't do motion picture work but did photographic coverage and presentations for sales conferences and things like that. And then all of a sudden, I get a phone call from the gentleman who was to become my boss at the Library, asking me if I was still interested in the position, and did I want to have an interview? And I said yes and went to the interview out at Wright Pat. And a few weeks later, I was hired to be one of the people that opened up the lab at Wright Pat. And as they say, the rest is history.

(06:28 – 09:13) Weissman's first experience with nitrate film in the Air Force, learning about nitrate working for the Library of Congress, and the often apocryphal nature of the stories about nitrate fires.

HUELSBECK: Now had you had any experience working with nitrate before that?

WEISSMAN: I did not. The only, actually my only interaction with nitrate film prior to that was, once again, it was at Vandenberg Air Force Base when all of a sudden, we're working one day, and all of a sudden all of the fire alarms go off. We exit the building as we would want to do in the fire alarms. And a rumor very quickly circulated that some, quote, unquote, idiot had brought in some nitrate film to the film library. And, oh, my God, how could they bring such a dangerous substance into our building knowing it was either likely to just catch fire or explode, you know, those kinds of things.

So that was my initial experience with what was allegedly nitrate film. I presume it actually was. I didn't ever see the film. But because the unit in which I worked had a revolving library for, you know, any of the Air Force units could check out films and things like that for their own use. So somebody apparently brought a roll of nitrate film and caused the building to be evacuated. And then the bomb squad came and took it all, took it away. And so everything was cool after that. So that was, like I said, my first raw experience with nitrate film at a distance.

And of course, when I first starting working for the Library, we had nitrate film all surrounding us basically. And then I learned very quickly that, A, it's not going to explode if you look at it cross-eyed. And B, it's not any more likely to catch fire even than the average piece of paper on your desk is. So there's a lot of, you know, misconceptions and panic that is associated with the word that is really kind of . . . and if you think about it, you know, it was used in the industry for the, you know, professional film making industry, for over 50 years, and hardly anybody ever died, you know.

You know, there's occasionally this story or that story about a roll catching fire, or certainly in projectors, it's a possibility. But most of the stories, if you look at them closely, most of them are apocryphal, so there's no, very little in the way of any kind of, you know, scientific evidence that's ever been gathered. But you have stories about a guy, you know, a projectionist was rewinding a roll of nitrate film in the booth, and it ignited as a result of static electricity, only to find out that the guy was actually standing there smoking as he was doing it. And probably the cause was an ember from the cigarette dropped onto the film and caused it to catch fire, but if it even caught fire, you know, you just don't know so.

(09:14 – 10:57) Personnel at the Library of Congress film preservation laboratory, and the impact of the nitrate fire at the National Archives in Suitland, MD, on the Library's handling of nitrate film.

HUELSBECK: So then how did you learn about nitrate? Was it all on the job training?

WEISSMAN: Yeah. It was pretty much on the job training. We had a number of pretty experienced people that came from Washington to start up the lab in Dayton. My boss, for example, was old time film guy. He used to work for the Ansco company in Binghamton, New York, which at the time he was working for Ansco, it actually a pretty rigorous competitor of Eastman Kodak.

HUELSBECK: And what was his name?

WEISSMAN: His name is Rudy Buchel, B-u-c-h-e-l. Unfortunately, he passed away a few years ago. So he's not available to talk to any longer. But he was our supervisor. And he and Arnie Downs, who was his probably most trusted confidant, I guess is the way to, had worked in, the Library did have film lab in the, I believe it was in the basement of the Jefferson building. But when the National Archives had their fire out in Suitland, Maryland in 1977-ish, they closed the nitrate lab down for the library. In fact, they essentially banned nitrate film from being on Capitol Hill as a result of that. The Library certainly abandoned it, and I believe most other agencies did as well. So and it was because the spectacular fire that had occurred at the National Archives vaults in Suitland.

(10:58 – 12:39) The role of human error in nitrate fires, and the tendency to overreact to the dangers of nitrate film.

WEISSMAN: And certainly, nitrate film is flammable, and it needs to be respected. And there's all kinds of ways it can catch fire, but if you, you know, in its normal handling of it, it's not going to spontaneously combust. It's not going to ignite for no reason. There's virtually every story of a nitrate fire, if you look into it, it tells you exactly why it caught fire, because it got heated by some manner, shape or form that it shouldn't have been and/or some person did something stupid or several people did a number of things that were wrong, and that's what caused the fire. But just like most fires, you know. It's human error as much as anything else, so.

But in handling the nitrate, we very quickly learned that the overreaching principle is it is film. And you need to handle it just like you do virtually any film, being aware that it is, you know, flammable. And so that's kind of always in the back of your mind. And I think most people find that if they respect it, you know, it's just fine.

You know, you think about it, your everyday life, what are you driving around in your car? You know, you generally got anywhere from 10 to 20 gallons of highly flammable and explosive gasoline right behind you. And people don't give it a second thought. But you bring a roll of nitrate film in a building, and all of a sudden, they evacuate it and call the bomb squad so anyway. A little bit of an absurd reaction.

(12:40 – 18:32) Changes over time to National Fire Protection Association's *Standard for the Storage and Handling of Cellulose Nitrate Film (NFPA 40)*, and to the practices of shipping, storing, and disposing of nitrate film, particularly regarding air handling systems in film vaults.

HUELSBECK: *So how has the approach of caring for and regulating nitrate changed over the years? I mean, you know, shipping, handling, what changes have you seen over the years?*

WEISSMAN: Well, the biggest changes I've seen aren't so much in the code, the *NFPA 40* code, although there have been some significant changes in the storage, long-term storage of nitrate film. I think probably, at least as far as archives go, probably one of the biggest things that has happened is a difference in approach as far as, for example, the library never used to ship nitrate film between the months of March and October. You know, you could only ship it during the winter. So that has changed.

Now we try not to ship, you know, in July. We certainly urge our clients to not ship during the extremely warm summer months. But it's not so much because of a fire risk, but rather

more so a risk towards the content of the collections, you know, getting the film warm. And especially if it's already an aged nitrate film that, you know, has some level of deterioration within it happening. And if it warms up, then it gets warmer quicker. You know, it starts to deteriorate quicker. I misspoke there. But there have been some changes in the code.

Like I say, the most notable ones being for long-term storage vaults. You can now, there used to be a requirement that each vault had its own separate air handling system. There could be no interconnecting ductwork, anything that could help, at least in theory, a fire spread from one vault to the next. So essentially, each vault was its own self-contained building, if you will. There have been some relief in that. I believe it started with the 2001 code. It may have been the 1997 where they actually allowed you to have interconnecting ductwork as long as there were appropriate fire dampers and things like that installed.

And that's been a big change because for our facility, and for the facility out at UCLA, certainly those two, which were built after. Well, actually, ours was built, and it kind of resulted in this code change because we asked for a variance. And we did some fire damper testing and things that essentially then became adopted by the NFPA as an accepted alternative to separate air handling systems for each vault. You could have interconnecting ducts as long as you had these very robust fire dampers and appropriate levels of alarm and things that caused them to shut. So that was really helpful. Without that, it would have been a very, very difficult sell and very expensive to both make the vaults, but even more importantly, to maintain them.

If you talk with the folks at the Museum of Modern Art, and their experiences with their vaults and the fact that they essentially have to, are now going through and re-changing all of the air-handling systems in each vault, it has become a nightmare to maintain for them. So I believe that, I don't think, I think Eastman house vaults were built under that code as well so. But that I'm not absolutely certain of. But it's, you know, it's a, that's really been I think probably the main change that I can think of.

There have been some changes in shipping regulations that allow you to essentially ship nitrate film in a cardboard box as long as it's a DOT approved shipping container. And those have to meet certain certifications for burst testing and things like that so that if a box is dropped, you know, all the film won't fall out of it, roll out all over the place and cause a problem. So, you know, there have been some changes like that. But I would say the most significant one was the long-term storage in the common area and like systems that you can now have, making it really possible to build a modern vault that can be used for nitrate film.

HUELSBECK: *Okay. And what about disposal, have regulations or the way you dispose of nitrate film changed?*

WEISSMAN: Not significantly that I can think of. I mean, you still have to, you know, put it under water while, deteriorated film has to be put under water while it's awaiting disposal. And then, I believe what eventually happens, it's typically incinerated, but it can go to a landfill as well. So I think, and I don't think that's changed. I think, I don't recall any changes in that since I've been particularly aware of the *NFPA 40* nuances. But I could be wrong on that too so.

HUELSBECK: *Okay.*

WEISSMAN: If someone says differently, I'm perfectly willing to consider that as a possibility.

(18:33 – 21:42) The practical difficulties of constructing vaults to meet all fire hazard and explosion prevention protocols, using an example of electrical fixtures in vault corridors.

HUELSBECK: Okay. Have you ever experienced an emergency with nitrate such as a fire or a buildup of gases.

WEISSMAN: No. I haven't. And in fact, one of the requirements for building on nitrate storage facilities, I find really kind of silly, especially for certain applications. Okay. So Let's say you have a building that has a number of vaults. And then there is a, each vault, of course, is required to be fully sealable and closed off, and can now have common ducting as we've already talked about. But there may be a hallway, of course, that allows you to go from, grant you access to the vault, a central corridor, if you will. It's required that each of those, any electrical fixtures within that corridor, which would include lights and light switches and things like that, meet Class 1 Division II explosion protocols.

And I just find that ridiculous because the typical off gassing that nitrate film does is not flammable at all. What those are really designed for is to prevent, if fumes from a fire get into the hallway, then in theory, if someone would then turn a light on or off, there could be an arcing in the switch, which could then cause those gases to explode. And that's theoretically possible. But if the nitrate vaults are built to the spec that the nitrate vaults are required to be built, that can't happen because those gases will not get into the hallway.

So, you know, it's, and I've actually seen facilities where the interpretation by the authority having, the local authority having jurisdiction, which is typically the fire marshal of the locality, you know, where the vaults are located. You know, they interpret that differently. So it's, you know, some people, I've been in nitrate vaults where there are no things in the corridors.

But our local authority said that all of our systems had to meet these Class 1 Division II explosion standards which resulted in actually as a practical matter, resulted in us not being able to bring nitrate film in for about six months while they changed the strobes for the, you know, the visual part of the fire alarm system. You know, because some people are deaf, ADA requires them to have a visible strobe right?

HUELSBECK: Right.

WEISSMAN: And those strobes could not, were not and did not meet Class 1 Division II standards. They actually had to engineer and build strobes that did and then install those. And that took about six months before that occurred. You know, so I just found it weird that, you know, that was even such an issue. But it was. So who am I to question?

(21:43 – 24:52) Regulatory jurisdiction at the Library of Congress and Wright Patterson Air Force Base.

HUELSBECK: Now being a federal facility, is there any conflict between the federal regulations and the local regulations?

WEISSMAN: Not, I wouldn't say that. We are a federal facility 100%, absolutely. We're on federal land. The management of the facility is not done by our agency but rather another federal agency called the Architect of the Capitol. And most of the discrepancies, and for lack of a better

term, pissing contests that occur, are as a result of, you know, that one federal agency versus another federal agency, and their fire marshals versus our fire marshal.

And everybody is saying that, oh, no, that's my property and not necessarily agreeing on approach. We had that at Wright Patterson too where the Air Force, we were on Air Force property there and an Air Force-owned building, Air Force supply, and the Library paid rent essentially. And yet the Library tried to exert its influence. The Air Force, for the most part, wouldn't have any of it. But it put me in a rather awkward position at times . . .

HUELSBECK: Sure. Yeah.

WEISSMAN: . . . trying to manage the situation. But, you know, for the, I don't know that we've ever had a problem with a local authority. You know, the county or city, that's here in Culpepper, nor did we have any issues that I'm aware of out at Wright Pat. Although Wright Pat had pretty much staked a claim in the towns and county that surrounded Wright Pat or that Wright Pat was actually located in, absolutely acquiesced to the Air Force and said, yeah, that's your property, you know, you run it by your rules.

And if something comes off of your property and causes us a problem, then we're going to have words. But and that occasionally did happen. But for the most part, the Air Force is actually really sensitive to the locals. And unless it was something that involved a national security issue that they felt strongly about they pretty much followed the local rules. And the same here, our Architect to the Capitol landlords are actually very, very attuned to the local authorities and will bend over backwards, in fact, to the point sometimes where I say, you know what? Every now and then, you've got to rattle the big federal stick and say, we're going to do it this way anyway.

Because it's not really an issue. You know, if it's really, truly a safety or a safety hazard or a pollution hazard or something like that, there's absolutely never any question. We follow the rules. But, you know, occasionally there are really things that don't matter. And it's more a matter of policy, and acquiescing to their wishes in those cases seems to be a mistake. And we don't do it too often, but we have in the past. Anyway, that's more of a political thing where they don't want bad press. They don't want an article in the paper saying, oh, look what the feds are doing up on Mount Pony, you know, that kind of thing.

HUELSBECK: Keep everybody happy.

WEISSMAN: Yeah. Exactly.

(24:53 – 25:35) The size of the Library of Congress nitrate film collection.

HUELSBECK: So how big is the Library of Congress nitrate collection?

WEISSMAN: We estimate it at somewhere between 130 and 140 million feet. That's our official estimate. I don't think it's quite that large. But it's probably approaching that.

HUELSBECK: Okay. And was all of that at Wright Patterson?

WEISSMAN: Most of it was. Well, actually, yeah. In the latter years of Wright Pat, it was all at Wright Pat. Because they did close the Suitland vaults down and moved everything out to Wright Pat at some point. So it was all at Wright Pat, and it was all moved here. Now we've acquired additional nitrates since we've gotten here, but everything that was at Wright Pat was moved here.

(25:36 – 29:22) Cataloging and organizing the nitrate collection at Wright Patterson Air Force Base, and the logistics of moving the collection to the National Audio-Visual Conservation Center in Culpepper, VA.

HUELSBECK: Okay. So you talked a little bit before about shipping. Could you talk a little bit about shipping of a mass quantity of nitrates to the new facility?

WEISSMAN: Yeah. That was a really, really interesting exercise. It's really a challenging logistics problem because the goal was, we had our collection computerized at Wright Pat. We actually, prior to moving it, went through and essentially replaced all of the cans that needed to be replacing and had everything bar coded prior to the move. But even with that, when the Wright Pat's were originally loaded, which, of course, was late '60s, early '70s, well before any kind of computer inventory systems were typically available, everything was loaded in such a fashion so that if we didn't know specifically where a roll of film was, we could generally have a good idea because all of the Columbia stuff was in a series of vaults. All of the Universal was in another series. All of the Warner Brothers, etc., and then it started off with all original camera materials. And then we had fine grains in another series of vaults.

So, you know, we had it organized by various categories that allowed us to, even if we didn't know specifically in a vault, let's say, of course, all this was on a file card system. So a file card would say that, you know, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* was in Vault 39 Section 2, Shelf 3 through 5, for example. And those numbers are just off the top of my head.

But we had it categorized down to that level so we could pretty much walk, you know, pull out the catalog card and know exactly where it was in the vaults and go find it. Or sometimes the catalog cards got misplaced or misfiled or just got lost, or the information on them wasn't current because something got moved. And but we could still, you know, narrow it down to a certain range of vaults and usually within shelves in that vault and find it.

So what we wanted to do, when we were getting ready to move the collection out of Wright Pat over here to Culpepper, is maintain that at least to some degree. You know, because there's, you know, every now and then, your computer is not on, or you don't have access to your online databases. And we still wanted to be, if necessary, if for whatever reason we lost our databases for more than a few minutes, and we absolutely positively needed to be able to find something, we wanted to be able to do it.

So we designed a moving protocol that basically unloaded the shelves at Wright Pat in more or less the same order and then reloaded those shelves here in Culpepper so that things pretty much replicated the order in the way they were in Dayton. Now, of course, everything is in a computer database. We know each cubicle is bar-coded. Each role of film is bar-coded. As long as we have access to our database, we can find, we know exactly where it is.

HUELSBECK: Right.

WEISSMAN: But if the, you know, if we were to have, you know, a mass power outage that lasted for hours or days even and for whatever reason, or just, you know, some kind of, Library of Congress got hacked like OPM did, and we lost our databases, they had to be taken offline, we could still find things if we needed to.

(29:23 – 31:18) Shipping the nitrate collection to the facilities in Culpepper.

HUELSBECK: Okay. What about actually shipping them? Did you use refrigerated trucks?

WEISSMAN: We used refrigerated trucks. Now as it turns out, that turned out most probably a little bit of overkill because most of the move occurred in February and March. So the weather was cool anyway. But we did move them in refrigerated trucks. And each, one of the approved DOT shipping containers is a steel drum. So we took each film in a can and put it inside, over packed it in a steel drum. And it's amazing how few film cans actually fit in a 55-gallon steel drum. It's like 14 or 15, 2000' cans. So needless to say, we moved a boatload of drums.

I mean, we kept recycling the drums. So we essentially bought enough drums for I think three semi loads. And a semi doesn't hold as many drums as you would think, you know, because they're pretty sizable. And, of course, they could only be on one layer. They couldn't be stacked readily. So we, I think, I want to say we bought like 120 drums or something and just, you know, recycled them. You know, we'd load, I want to say a semi held like 42.

And then, you know, moved 42, 42 drums were on the way from Dayton to Culpepper while 42 were being loaded in Dayton and 42 were being unloaded in Culpepper and just kind of, you know, rotated it around that way so. And it worked out really well. I want to say we got the entire thing moved in about 10 or 12 weeks. It was pretty impressive, actually. And didn't lose anything, and everything got put on, you know, got put on the shelf as expected. It was really a remarkable exercise in logistics.

(31:19 – 33:31) Accessing the Library of Congress film collection, and physical ownership versus intellectual property rights.

HUELSBECK: Nice. So how often are the nitrate films accessed? I mean, what are . . .

WEISSMAN: There are some things that probably have not been off their shelf since we moved it here. And then there have been other things that have either come up to our lab several times or have gone in and out of the vault for various reasons. Keeping in mind that even though we might have gift agreements and deposit agreements with the, and we do for virtually everything we have, we don't own the intellectual property rights for very much.

In fact, a very small percentage of the films do we actually control the rights to. So what that means is, for example, Universal's films that we store here are all under deposit agreement. And if they want to borrow something, they, you know, they have the right to do that. Likewise, Sony Pictures Entertainment, who owns the Columbia film collection that we, we own the Columbia film collection. But they own the intellectual property rights to it. So even though we own the physical property, it was a gift, an outright gift from Columbia to the Library of Congress, Sony owns the intellectual property rights. So once again, they have rights to access the material.

Now we work, you know, closely with the various people in the various preservation departments of the studios and try to mold them into and get them to understand archival sensibilities, and but when push comes to shove, if they want it, they typically can get it, and that's fine. I don't begrudge them that at all. In fact, they do a lot of good work when it comes to preservation. So many times, we're able to actually get copies. Now not so much on film. Now it turns out to be either DVDs, Blu Rays, or in some cases files. But at least we get access materials in part, in exchange for basically being the caretakers of their materials. An exception to that is Disney in the respect that they actually supply us with funding for staff.

(33:32 – 35:22) The rarity of loaning nitrate prints for projection.

HUELSBECK: Oh, nice. Do you ever still loan prints for projection?

WEISSMAN: Yes, we do. We have a pretty active projection program. We do not loan nitrate prints for projection typically. Although, I believe we did send a title or two to the recent nitrate motion, nitrate show out at Eastman House.

HUELSBECK: Okay. And is that because just of the age of the film or because people, very few theaters have the correct projectors . . .

WEISSMAN: Oh, virtually, you mean as far as for nitrate film in general or?

HUELSBECK: Yeah.

WEISSMAN: Yeah, well, first off, for nitrate film, to be able to project nitrate film, you have to have a certified booth. And to my knowledge, the only ones that do in this country are UCLA, us, and Eastman House. And David Packard, actually, his Stanford Theater actually has a nitrate certified booth. So they are very few and far between to begin with. But the other thing is, we're not going to loan a nitrate print for screening that we don't already, that we haven't already preserved.

And then on top of that, even if we have preserved it, and even if we have a print, there's a good chance it's actually not going to run through a projector anymore because it's just so old, and there are issues potentially with it. So we don't, you know, we have probably thousands of nitrate prints, and of that, maybe tens are actually in good enough condition to actually run through a projector safely with any kind of reasonable assurance so. Maybe 100, but I doubt it's that high.

(35:23 – 39:43) Changes that should be made to NFPA-40, the differing priorities of the NFPA and the archival community, and the necessity of balancing fire safety concerns with the preservation of the collection itself.

HUELSBECK: Yeah. So are there changes you'd like to see in regulations or the care of nitrate or education?

WEISSMAN: I think we're moving in the right direction. I don't know if you know Rachel Parker on our staff or talk with Rachel. But she's our liaison with NFPA, and she's been pretty,

you know, boisterous in working with Heather Heckman and I think you guys out at Wisconsin, to try to get the, some semblance of reason to some of these NFPA-specified things that are no longer applicable because time has passed them by in some cases, and technology has improved.

And try to get things more, like the common ducts between vaults. I mean, that was a thing where back in the day, when they passed those regulations, made perfect sense because they didn't have fire dampers and alarm systems that could seal off a vault really effectively. So but now, we do. So let's take advantage of that. And so we've had some success, but there are still some things.

I mean, my biggest gripe with NFPA is that many of the people that are on the NFPA-40 Committee have never seen a roll of nitrate film, really have no knowledge of it. They're chemical industry folks. And while they may have a great body of knowledge about chemistry works and fire issues, unless you, film is different in some ways, similar in many ways, different in some significant ways.

And the one thing that they're not concerned about is the fact that we are as concerned about the material itself as we are about fire safety and facility safety. Collection safety is a priority as well. And that's not what NFPA does. And I understand that. But if we can just at least impart some of that wisdom upon them and where it makes sense, continue to evolve the regulation to deal with that, that's great, and then we can move forward.

Because what happens is, for example, NFPA says a long-term storage vault doesn't have to be cold essentially. It doesn't really require certain temperature limits or limits that are good for archival storage really. Because they say that's not their role. And we understand that. However, what happens is, people look at that and say, well, I don't have to store my film in this condition because NFPA says it's okay. Well, that's not really the issue, okay. The NFPA says it's okay because it's not a, because A) it's not their responsibility or within their scope to deal with how to properly store a film collection. They're only concerned about making sure that if it catches fire, it doesn't kill people or burn a facility down or minimizing the risk for both of those. They don't really care whether it's 100 degrees or 5 degrees as long as that doesn't impact, you know, fire safety.

But as archivists, and as we are, so but what that means is that you cannot apply the NFPA temperature guidelines to an archival logic, because it doesn't meet it. It doesn't meet that rigor. So and that's where archivists really need to educate their people in their areas that are the facilities' people to understand that, yeah, NFPA says it can be 68 to 75. But that's not good enough for archival storage, okay. So don't build yourself an office building temperature-wise. Build yourself an archival vault temperature-wise.

And so that, and that's really what I see as an archivist's job is that education element, to make sure that people understand NFPA safety, archival storage concerns come under different codes. And look at everything. And then decide. And let's face it, everything comes down to money. And figure out what you can do to be the best caretaker you can for the collection, as well as the buildings themselves.

(39:44 – 41:07) The importance of good archival judgment when dealing with deteriorating nitrate collections.

HUELSBECK: Okay. And last but not least, is there anything based on your own personal experience working with nitrate that you think people should know about nitrate?

WEISSMAN: Don't be afraid of it, basically. It is film at its heart. Respect it. Don't panic if you see something that's deteriorating. You know, use your archival skills to determine whether or not you should leave that material in or whether or not it can be safely duplicated. And if so, duplicate it and then make a decision as to whether or not you take it out of the main roll just to keep the rest of the material around as long as possible.

Because nitrate deterioration is not a serious safety issue for people or buildings. It is an issue for the safety of the collection, the collection materials. So if something is starting to actively deteriorate to the point where you cannot only smell it, but see it, you need to really deal with it. And that can be freezing it at least temporarily, but it's got to be a little bit more active process. Decide whether or not it warrants duplication. If it doesn't warrant duplication, then dispose of it safely.

HUELSBECK: *Okay.*