

Nitrate Motion Picture Film Oral History Interviews

Paul Spehr

(00:00 – 02:13) Introduction – Paul Spehr’s education and background, and his early years at the Library of Congress.

MARY HUELSBECK: Today is Tuesday June 9th, 2015. And I'm speaking with Paul Spehr, who is the former assistant chief of Motion Picture Broadcasting and Recorded Sound Division at the Library of Congress. How many years were you at the Library of Congress, Paul?

PAUL SPEHR: Thirty-seven.

HUELSBECK: Thirty-seven. Okay. Could you start off by telling me a little bit about yourself, your educational background? How did you become an archivist?

SPEHR: Well, I backed into it. I was going to graduate school at George Washington University. This was after military service and working a little, and I got married, and I had a child on the way.

HUELSBECK: Mm-hmm.

SPEHR: So I had to get a job. And it was one of those times when there weren't a lot of jobs available. And I'd been doing research with Library of Congress, so I applied for a job working in the stacks at the library. And I had been there, I suppose, about six or eight weeks, pulling books and filling their requests.

HUELSBECK: Mm-hmm.

SPEHR: Before then actually, I was in the motion picture book storage area, quite fascinated with all the stuff that was up there.

HUELSBECK: Sure.

SPEHR: And my boss Bill Sartain came to me one day and said there was a job opening in the motion picture section, and would I be interested in applying for it. And I said I would and did, and I got hired. And I was hired as the section secretary.

HUELSBECK: Okay.

SPEHR: Which actually what I was doing was keeping all the records of the things that were being sent to the film labs.

HUELSBECK: *Okay.*

SPEHR: And it just built from there.

HUELSBECK: *Wow. So this, I'm assuming, is the late '40s?*

SPEHR: No. This was in 1958.

HUELSBECK: *Okay, 1958.*

SPEHR: Yeah.

HUELSBECK: *So you served during the Korean War?*

SPEHR: Yeah.

(02:14 – 04:49) Spehr's work with the Library of Congress nitrate film collections, particularly transferring material from the vaults in Suitland, Maryland to the motion picture lab in Washington, D.C.

HUELSBECK: *So at what point in your career did you start working with nitrate film?*

SPEHR: Well, almost immediately.

HUELSBECK: *Okay.*

SPEHR: I never worked at the nitrate vault. I was always in the main building. But I was hired under the first appropriation that the library got to preserve motion picture film.

HUELSBECK: *Okay.*

SPEHR: And this was basically for the paper print collection. And I spent much of my time working with that. But a portion of the money, I think it was \$10,000 at that time then, and the total amount that we had for it was \$60,000, plus my salary. And I think \$50,000 went to paper prints and then \$10,000 went to nitrate.

HUELSBECK: *Okay.*

SPEHR: But the nitrate was essentially the George Kleine collection. Some tail ends of Mary Pickford. And the lab work at that time was done by the Department of Agriculture, which had a motion picture lab in their office building in Washington.

And I wound up preparing some of the material. We, at the time, our nitrate vaults were in Suitland, Maryland, which was about a mile outside the District of Columbia in southeast Washington, so on the grounds of where the Census Bureau was and is.

HUELSBECK: *Okay.*

SPEHR: And we shared, we had one of three storage buildings there, which the other two, well, actually all three of them were assigned to the National Archives, with one of them being sub-assigned to the Library of Congress.

HUELSBECK: *Okay.*

SPEHR: I would go out. There was a staff that worked there regularly.

HUELSBECK: *Mm-hmm.*

SPEHR: And I would go out from time to time and do some work actually with film. And very often, I had to drive the film to and from the laboratory. It was before, I used to do it in my private car. A few years later, they decided that that was not kosher, that we ought to have an actual government transportation doing it.

HUELSBECK: *Okay.*

SPEHR: I think it was after a bus ran into the back of my car.

(04:50 – 09:14) Backgrounds of key personnel at the Library of Congress who educated Spehr about nitrate film on the job.

HUELSBECK: *Oh. Yikes. So did you know anything about nitrate film before you started working with it?*

SPEHR: No.

HUELSBECK: *So how did you learn about it?*

SPEHR: Well, it was learn-as-you-worked.

HUELSBECK: *Okay.*

SPEHR: Several of the staff people there, Warren Roger Britt and Louis Arnold in particular, had been working with nitrate film for several years. Roger was a World War II vet, and he had been assigned when he was discharged from the military, assigned to work with the motion picture section. So he had more than ten years experience working with nitrate film.

HUELSBECK: *Okay.*

SPEHR: Louis Arnold was a Hungarian refugee. He'd been in the Hungarian army in World War II.

HUELSBECK: *Mm-hmm.*

SPEHR: And he was not a, didn't like the Communist government and left Hungary.

HUELSBECK: *Sure.*

SPEHR: And worked for the American military, who helped him come back to the United States. Louis had a doctor's degree and wrote Hungarian novels and a lot of interesting things.

HUELSBECK: *Wow.*

SPEHR: But he had a hard time when he came over here, finding a job and was hired by John G. Stratford, who was a Hungarian film person, had worked with the German non-theatrical film business in the pre-World War II era. Had set up a film company in New York. And won a contract from the Department of Justice, who was trying to sort out all the captured German, Italian, and Japanese film.

HUELSBECK: *Okay.*

SPEHR: At the end of World War II. And literally tons of this came to the Library of Congress after World War II. And Stratford hired a whole crew of Hungarian refugees to help sort through all of this.

HUELSBECK: *Mm-hmm.*

SPEHR: A number of them spoke and understood German at least reasonably well. And their job was basically to go through and destroy as much of it as they could.

HUELSBECK: *Really?*

SPEHR: Yeah. Well, they would get multiple copies of the same film.

HUELSBECK: *Okay. Sure.*

SPEHR: And a lot of it was stored in New York because the vaults in Suitland were not turned over to the library until 1948 or '49.

HUELSBECK: *Okay.*

SPEHR: So there was very limited storage area for nitrate in Washington D.C. So there was a lot of travelling back and forth with it and paying very expensive storage fees for it. So Louis had, I think about ten years of experience playing with nitrate. Well, no, he had probably about five years handling nitrate film. So both of them knew what they were doing with it. And the program had been, the library's program had been set up by several people who had helped design the nitrate storage program for the National Archives.

HUELSBECK: *Okay.*

SPEHR: The first head of the library's program, John Bradley, had been in charge of a study on how to handle nitrate film. If you talk to Buckley Grimm, he's done a good bit of research on the backgrounds of all of that.

HUELSBECK: Okay.

SPEHR: So they were the people who gave me training in handling it.

(09:15 – 10:22) Fire concerns and the copy-and-destroy program at the Library of Congress, duplicating nitrate films on 16mm film safety stock.

HUELSBECK: Mm-hmm. And what did they tell you? Be careful? No smoking?

SPEHR: Well, actually, at the vaults there, this is a period when people smoked a lot, and I smoked back in those days. But we didn't smoke in the working rooms. I actually smoked in the office but nitrate was never brought into the office. In the handling area, yeah, everybody was very fire conscious, and the library was paranoid about nitrate film. That was the reason the program existed primarily, to destroy the film.

HUELSBECK: Wow. So were you transporting the film to the laboratory to have it duplicated before the nitrate was destroyed?

SPEHR: Yeah.

HUELSBECK: Okay.

SPEHR: But the program was at that time, we were copying to 16 mm film.

HUELSBECK: Right.

SPEHR: And the purpose of the program was, as it was I think even in the legislation, was to make copies and then destroy the nitrate. Replace it with the 16 mm copies.

(10:23 – 14:52) Growth of film preservation at the Library into the 1960s, including the background information about key personnel involved, and the establishment of the National Endowment for the Arts and the American Film Institute.

HUELSBECK: Yeah. So how did the approach of caring for and regulating nitrate change over your career, from the time you started to when you retired?

SPEHR: Well, that program continued through, well into the 1960s. We completed paper-print copying in 1964 or '65. And but the appropriations continued for that. And by that time, we had copied most of the early silent nitrate collections that we had. So that we turned at that point to dealing with the copyright deposit copies of mostly feature films, but also some short subjects. And this was a bit of a dilemma because we didn't have the very best material. We knew the

studios had negatives, and we had *Casablanca* and, you know, really the choicest from 1942 on, of Hollywood productions.

HUELSBECK: *Mm-hmm.*

SPEHR: So there was no, there were negotiations with the motion picture industry at this point to get copies of the film. And several of the companies were very willing to either sell or give us 16 mm prints to replace the 35 mm feature films. And by this time, we had become a larger section. And the library had hired John Kuiper to be our section head. He replaced Jim Culver, who was section head when I was hired, was not a person with any film background. In fact, Jim had spent his entire youth, until he was 19 or 20, living in India.

HUELSBECK: *Oh, wow.*

SPEHR: Where his father was a Baptist minister. And so he didn't see, he had not seen a lot of movies. And when he came back, he was hired by the Library, then went into military. And he had been assigned to deal with the collection because he was in the office that dealt with library storage problems.

HUELSBECK: *Oh, okay.*

SPEHR: And so that was his background. And he was having to learn film. Jim was very willing and very anxious to do as good a job as he could do, but he was not film historian.

HUELSBECK: *Sure.*

SPEHR: John Kuiper had a doctor's degree from University of Iowa and had been a film maker and a camera man. So John knew his way around film, not a background specifically in nitrate, but John had no problems in learning it. And very, almost immediately, well, within two years of John's arrival, the National Endowment for the Arts was created during the Johnson administration. And the bill that set up the National Endowment for the Arts, also set up the American Film Institute with a charge that the Film Institute would have a program to preserve film heritage. And they had done a study for, a nationwide study was actually done from Stanford University, I think, on how this should be done. I had the pleasure of sitting around with Gregory Peck, while they were doing this study.

(14:53 – 17:34) The change in policy to preserve nitrate collections and the involvement of the Hollywood studios and institutions like the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

HUELSBECK: *Yeah.*

SPEHR: The conclusion was, that AFI should not start their own collection. That what AFI should do is support the existing programs. And the program that was to be set up, was geared specifically for nitrate film because at that time, the best information we had was that nitrate film had a maximum life expectancy of about 50 years and that it would either self-destruct through deterioration or fire.

HUELSBECK: *Right.*

SPEHR: So the push was to identify as much nitrate as we could find and to preserve it by making copies of it and properly storing it. AFI's program put the Library's program into reverse. At this point we were now able to make a case that nitrate should be kept. And this was reinforced because a number of the Hollywood studios were quite willing to give up their negatives, their nitrate negatives. Part of this was initiated by the University of Wisconsin.

HUELSBECK: *Wow.*

SPEHR: Because a group of the alumni were, I think at that time, it was Trans America Corporation. They were officers within the organization and the company bought the Warner Brothers and then the RKO. We had been offered the RKO collection first. The RKO collection had been bought by a French company that wanted the television rights to it.

HUELSBECK: *Sure.*

SPEHR: They didn't want to have to pay the storage for the negatives. So they started negotiating with AFI, and AFI talked the Library into accepting RKO collection. Wisconsin, of course, had United Artists and a collection of Monogram pictures you can go through and see the overall record of that, and they probably should still have paperwork about it.

HUELSBECK: *Yeah.*

(17:35 – 20:25) The reluctance of institutions to construct nitrate film vaults and the establishment of the facility at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base.

SPEHR: But Wisconsin didn't have any place to store nitrate film. And nobody wanted to build nitrate vaults. In fact, at that time, nobody would consider building a nitrate vault.

HUELSBECK: *Why was that?*

SPEHR: Well, it's because the film was supposed to destroy itself.

HUELSBECK: *Oh.*

SPEHR: So you used whatever you had, and going into the expense of building new vaults was just out of the question. Nobody would consider it. In fact, that held true into the 1990s.

HUELSBECK: *Really?*

SPEHR: Oh, yeah.

HUELSBECK: *Wow.*

SPEHR: Nobody in the, well, there might have been one or two nitrate vaults built before the '90s, but off hand I couldn't remember it.

HUELSBECK: *Okay.*

SPEHR: Well, at any rate, here was the Warner Brothers' collection and those Monograms coming in, so we had to scramble for nitrate vaults at that point. And we looked around at quite a number of places. I remember flying into Chicago and going down to an ammunitions manufacturing center for the Defense Department. They wanted us to take over storage bunkers for bombs, which, of course, had no blow-out panels or anything of that sort. They would've just been piles of dirt.

HUELSBECK: *Right.*

SPEHR: Not bad in terms of temperature and humidity, but we decided not to go there. But what we found was the Air Force had closed down their film production center at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base.

HUELSBECK: *Okay.*

SPEHR: And there were a hundred vaults there, not in great shape but usable. And the Air Force was willing to upgrade them some. There were never ideal but they were better than our vaults at Suitland. Those vaults were temporary. They were built with cinder block, rather porous. Middle of the winter, it could be quite chilly. Because the wind could blow right through the block. In terms of how well they handled nitrate, they were fine.

(20:26 – 23:04) Working relationships with the National Archives at the vaults in Suitland and with the Air Force at the vaults at Wright-Patterson.

HUELSBECK: *Yeah. So what challenges did you have in managing those facilities, both in Suitland and in Ohio?*

SPEHR: Well, we always had split management. They were not our vaults. So we were, in Suitland, we were the tenants of first, the General Services Administration, which at that time was the administrator of the National Archives. National Archives, we had a relationship with them. The two organizations have always gotten along like jealous brothers. Mostly this would be on the managerial level. My top bosses would generally not want to cooperate with the National Archives. On a staffing level, we always got along very well so that the people who were working with the film got along fine. But on the upper managerial level, it was quite difficult.

HUELSBECK: *Sure.*

SPEHR: We would suddenly have a contractor appear. And he was going to do something that we had not been warned about it beforehand. You know, that kind of thing happened. And we had to get some, you know, try and work this out, so it happened less often. The Air Force was a

better managerial situation, but things happened. One time a contractor arrived and was going to put in a new roof.

HUELSBECK: Oh, my gosh.

SPEHR: And we couldn't do anything about it. He started putting it in, it was test roof, and it had a, I'm not sure what the material was, but when they laid down this new roofing material, it was sort of liquid, and then it rained immediately.

HUELSBECK: Oh, no.

SPEHR: And this thing turned into a mucky mess. And so we had to complain, and they had to take the roof off and replace it. And so this sort of stuff just happened.

HUELSBECK: Sure.

SPEHR: Yeah.

(23:05 – 27:34) Account of the fire at the National Archives vaults in Suitland, MD, in 1978.

HUELSBECK: Did you ever experience an emergency, such a nitrate fire or liquid gases?

SPEHR: Oh, yeah.

HUELSBECK: When was the Suitland fire?

SPEHR: The Suitland fire happened at the National Archives, the building immediately next to our building. And I was working in Washington when the word came in. And that there was a fire out there.

HUELSBECK: That was in the '70s, right?

SPEHR: Yeah.

HUELSBECK: Okay.

SPEHR: '77 or '78.

HUELSBECK: Okay.

SPEHR: '78 I think. I can get you the exact date if you need it.

HUELSBECK: Yeah. I can look it up too.

SPEHR: But, yeah, we got in the car and drove out immediately. And the vaults were still going of one after another. What had happened was, the one of the vaults ignited. And the fire

department in Suitland was alerted. This was not a government fire department but was the city of Suitland, Maryland fire department. They arrived almost immediately. And they, first rule that they had was that they should go in and check to make sure there were no people in the vaults. It happened sort of immediately after lunch. And I think there were only one or two National Archives' people there.

HUELSBECK: *Okay.*

SPEHR: We had about three or four in our vault. Our people were all able to say, they were all okay. National Archives couldn't identify, there wasn't anybody that they could talk to, to identify whether there were people. So the firemen went in and started opening all the vault doors. And they had to get out real fast because the fire started spreading. And the vaults were still going off when I got out there, which would have been easily half an hour or 45 minutes later.

And I can tell you that the Suitland vaults were designed with the blowout panel at the end of the vault. The Wright-Patterson vaults had a chimney. We never had a fire at the Wright-Patterson vaults, but the fire at the National Archives was quite impressive. There is news film of that. And I have a couple of photos of the building after it happened.

HUELSBECK: *Wow. So how did it, were the Library of Congress vaults close enough, or were they far enough away that . . .*

SPEHR: When we, between the two buildings was I suppose about 40' or 50', but the two offices faced each other, so that was our workroom and the office facing their workroom and their office. So no fire was involved in there.

HUELSBECK: *Okay. There was enough of a buffer?*

SPEHR: Yeah.

HUELSBECK: *Okay.*

SPEHR: The report on the fault for causing the fire, we were all pretty sure that the contractor was working in the vaults was at fault, but they couldn't any indication that anybody was smoking or anything like that. But the ultimate report was, they couldn't really identify exactly how. And I think they finally decided it was spontaneous combustion, and none of us believed that.

HUELSBECK: *Right.*

SPEHR: But I sat, came out and watched the testimony on this, and it was a situation, everybody pointing at everybody else and saying, well, I didn't do it, they must have done it. You know, and I don't think anybody wanted to have a serious critical conclusion come out of it.

(27:35 – 28:47) The immediate repercussions of the Suitland fire for nitrate work at the Library of Congress.

HUELSBECK: *Sure. So did anything change after that? Did any policies change?*

SPEHR: Oh, yeah. I was the acting head at the time.

HUELSBECK: *Okay.*

SPEHR: John Kuiper had taken the job up at George Eastman House. So I was the acting section head. And I was called into the librarian's and office the next day. We had, by that time, we a nitrate lab, and it was in the basement of the Library's Jefferson Building, with a storage vault for nitrate, some which had rather been carefully designed. But it was underneath the Budget Office. And so, and the librarian sat down, sat me down and said, your lab is closed.

HUELSBECK: *Oh, yeah.*

SPEHR: And any continuation of it has to happen not on the library premises. So we had to look around for where we could find, move the laboratory. And found a building at Wright-Patterson for it.

(28:48 – 32:57) The strict regulations governing nitrate film, particularly shipping, and the procedures for shipping nitrate film from the Wright-Patterson facilities, and the need for a change in attitude regarding the danger of nitrate.

HUELSBECK: *Okay. So based on your experience, do you think nitrate film is regulated and handled properly?*

SPEHR: Well, it's always been a problem. I think the regulations about handling it tend to be overwritten. Certainly the shipping is far too complex. It probably is okay, and the library safety officer got into trying to plan shipping because we were moving nitrate all of the time. But it worked out being at Wright-Patterson was very good because we didn't have to comply with the ICC regulations. We could ship them by, through the Air Force. And the Air Force was nearly as bothered by having some nitrate film. The Wright-Patterson is a SAC base. They are taking off and landing H-bombs regularly. So a little nitrate film, and we were shipping from Germany and Italy and Japan and moving it back and forth.

HUELSBECK: *So when did you see the regulations really tighten up?*

SPEHR: Well, they were tight from the beginning. You know, fires started very early on. And I've been reading through *Moving Picture World* and *Variety* in 1908, and there were major fires, several major fires then, yeah.

HUELSBECK: *Right. But when do you think the regulations got really cumbersome?*

SPEHR: I don't think they really got, I think they always were cumbersome.

HUELSBECK: *Okay.*

SPEHR: I don't remember anything being tightened up except there was more shipping by very large companies. When I started, almost all shipping would have gone by truck, and usually handled by a trucking company that handled some sort of hazardous material, and they tended to be rather loose about it. By the time I retired, most of the shipping was going by air and was being handled by companies that were multinational, and they were much fussier about it, so you had a tighter control there.

HUELSBECK: Okay. Are there any changes you would like to see to the regulations or care or education of nitrate?

SPEHR: I think people could relax a little bit more about it. But that's more, not in regulations, but in the way that the people who manage collections, are almost, I think all of us worked in institutions that, where somebody who was not experienced with the film, was making decisions for us. And we lived with panic in the library all the time. And trying to get them from, to relax about it to, I think in 60 years, 70 years handling nitrate at the library, they've never had a fire.

HUELSBECK: Yeah. That's a great track record.

SPEHR: Yeah.

(32:58 – 33:26) The endurance of nitrate film.

HUELSBECK: Yeah. Are there things based on your personal experience working with nitrate that you think people should know about nitrate?

SPEHR: Well, it lasts longer, but I think people understand it now. Up to the time I retired 20 years ago, the assumption was that it was all going to be gone by 2000. And it's not all gone, it's still there, and it's still showing up.

(33:27 – 35:41) The difficult of disposing of nitrate film and the procedures for disposing of nitrate at the Library of Congress.

HUELSBECK: Right. And finally, do you have any stories you'd be willing to share or anything else you'd like to add?

SPEHR: Well, the one thing that was always a serious problem, which we haven't gotten into in here, was how to dispose of it.

HUELSBECK: Oh, yeah. How did you guys dispose of nitrate at Library of Congress?

SPEHR: Well, for the period when they were destroying on a very heavy basis, the whole process of getting rid of nitrate film wasn't very well regulated at all. And we had contracts with people who came and picked it up. We always had a couple of barrels that had water in them. And as they went through and identified seriously deteriorated or badly or already copied that we were going to throw, we would put them in the barrels.

And then one time, it was almost monthly, somebody would come and pick it up. And people always say they were recovering the silver from the film. My experience is that nobody ever was recovering the silver, maybe in Hollywood. But I didn't know anybody who recovered silver from it. They burned it.

***HUELSBECK:** Okay. And did they have special incinerators where they burned it or . . .*

SPEHR: At one time, through most of the '60s, as far as we know. We were never there when they were getting rid of it. But they just took it out in the country, threw it, dumped it somewhere, trailed out piece of nitrate and lit a match to it and let it go. There was a story once that somebody put a metal plate over the top of it and then, of course, it threw the metal plate.

***HUELSBECK:** Sure.*

(35:42 – 36:52) Anecdote about the effects of buried nitrate on the quality of the soil.

SPEHR: I suppose my favorite nitrate story is, somebody who was doing a green study of Rochester came to the Eastman-Kodak and said, well, I understand that for over the years that all of the waste from making nitrate film was just buried around Rochester. And somebody said, well, that probably was true. And he said, well, you've got records of where this nitrate was put. And he said, no, we never kept any records of that. Well, how would you identify where it was? He says, oh, well, you get in an airplane, fly over, and where it's the greenest, that's where all the nitrate is.

***HUELSBECK:** Yeah.*

SPEHR: The woman who was at the National Archives, she grew tomatoes out front, and she would regularly put all the clippings and waste from the worktables on her tomatoes, and she had dandy tomatoes.

***HUELSBECK:** Well, thank you very much, Paul. We really appreciate you taking the time to talk with us and be part of this project.*