

Nitrate Motion Picture Film Oral History Interviews

Jess Daily

(00:00 – 05:34) Introduction – Jess Daily’s background working as a projectionist at the University of California–Los Angeles and a brief history of UCLA’s practice of projecting nitrate film.

AMY SLOPER: So it's Tuesday, May 12th [2015], and this is Amy Sloper, film archivist at the Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, and I'm speaking with Jess Daily, film projectionist, as part of the Nitrate Oral History Project. So, Jess, I'm just going to start with the first question and let it go from there. So can you tell me a little bit about your background, how you got started as a projectionist, what drew you to this type of work, and a little bit about how you first started working with nitrate and learned about the dangers or potential dangers of working with it?

JESS DAILY: That's a tall question. I grew up loving the movies, and I was from a small town in Alabama, and the only way to see movies was basically to go to the movie theater. But when I was in high school, my dad knew the owner of the local TV station, and we used to bring 16-mm feature films home, because my dad had a projector, and we'd show them in our living room, and I was very fascinated with that.

And so when I came to UCLA, to graduate school in film directing, I needed a job. And I was always fascinated with the projection world, although, I had never done commercial 35-mm projection, only 16-mm at the TV station. And so I befriended a projectionist, a union projectionist here in Los Angeles at the Music Hall Theater in Beverly Hills. He took me under his wing, against union rules, and taught me everything he knew. He was a wonderful guy. We were friends until he passed away.

And so I was in school at UCLA at the time, and I needed a job. And so I thought I would maybe work in theaters as a projectionist part time in the evenings and weekends and make some extra money. It turned out the first full-time projectionist job at the UCLA film school opened up at the same time. I applied for it and got it.

So I was the first full-time projectionist there, and that grew in, as the years went on, into being the chief. And I had about four guys working under me, all for one theater, the James Bridges Theater, which used to be the Melnitz Theater. And that was the home of the UCLA film and television archive.

And it was an extremely busy theater. We used to run 75 hours a week of film, and this was before VHS even, much less DVDs or digital cinema. So we were running film all day long and half the night, seven days a week. And we ran some nitrate film. At the time I started at UCLA, it was 1973, and the archive had started in 1971, so it was new also. And then most of their collection was nitrate at that point, and so they wanted to see it, and we wanted to run it, so we started projecting it.

It was not legal, I suppose. That led to the remodeling of the projection booth in Melnitz Hall in 1979 to bring it up to the NFPA standards, but also our standards. We realized we had to write our own rules to make it safer than it ever had been before, because the film was older, it's more flammable, etc., etc. And so we basically learned about the dangers of nitrate film by doing it.

We had a couple of small fires. Both of them were just before I started working there. And both of them contained, was in the projectors. The projectors were Norelco FB20s, and they were, of course, built in the '60s, and all projectors then were built for nitrate film. So we remodeled the booth, brought everything up to legal standards plus our own standards, and we projected a lot of nitrate film after that and never had an incident. We were very careful. All the film was inspected carefully.

The archive would not release to us any print that was not, they did not feel was safe to project, and we would, of course, not project anything we felt was unsafe. We always had two operators for every nitrate show. We had, we wrote our own safety regulations in the booth. And to this day, that's still the best, I think, nitrate booth I've ever seen. That's a long answer.

(05:35 – 08:11) UCLA's projection booth safety standards and Daily's involvement in writing projection booth safety recommendations for the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) and the Association of Moving Image Archivists (AMIA).

SLOPER: No, it's great. I have some follow-up questions that kind of lead into the next part. Because you did mention, the next question is how did you learn about the safety regulations and best practices, and you kind of mentioned that already. But I want to hear more about those standards that you guys came up with to go above and beyond the NFPA standards and how you, just kind of what knowledge you were using to come up with those and just more about that.

DAILY: Well, I think it was basically common sense. I'm actually reworking all of those for AMIA, because we're making, let me back up for a minute. I have written additional NFPA recommendations for nitrate projection booths. The following items are not covered under the current NFPA 40. And then in addition to that, I have written AMIA recommendations for nitrate projection booths, which we don't feel like they belong under NFPA 40, but they're recommendations. They're not, you know, regulations.

So I guess it was just common sense. For example, let me just read you a couple that illustrates that. Projectionists are required to be trained in the safe handling and projection of nitrate film. That makes sense, doesn't it? But that's not an NFPA regulation. They are required to possess a current projectionist's license issued by the local fire marshal or other regulatory agency. We felt this was important to, especially in a school, that we not have unqualified people, whether they be students or employees, handling nitrate film. It's too dangerous.

Two licensed projectionists are required to be in the booth during a nitrate show. One is required to be at the projector that is running at all times. That's not an NFPA regulation, but that just makes sense because of the dangers of the film. If one guy is trying to run a show with two projectors doing changeovers, he cannot pay attention to a problem quick enough to avoid a fire. I could go on and on with these. Do you want more?

SLOPER: Yeah, sure, they're very interesting.

(08:12 – 10:06) UCLA's projection booth safety standards continued.

DAILY: Only licensed projectionists shall be permitted in the booth during a nitrate show. That makes sense, because if there's a fire, you don't want anyone else to get hurt, and the licensed projectionists are trained as to what to do in case there is a fire. Nitrate film may be examined in the booth by licensed projectionists but may not be inspected there. Nitrate film is to be inspected in an approved facility other than the booth and delivered to the booth in a safe, projectable condition. Unsafe nitrate films shall not be projected. That's self-explanatory, I believe.

While nitrate film is in the booth, it is not to be exposed except for examination and threading. It must be kept in shipping cases and enclosed rewind film bins or projectors with closed magazines. That's in case one reel catches, it doesn't catch all the rest of them. Operating rules and regulations regarding the safe handling and projection of nitrate film and procedures to take in case of a nitrate fire shall be posted in the booth. That makes sense.

Then we had, we worked out a delivery and pickup schedule so that nitrate film stays in the booth the shortest amount of time as possible. The booth exhaust fan must be operating when nitrate film is being projected. That's a system for replacing the air in the booth at, I think, a 50% rate, if I remember correctly. In other words, the air in the booth has to be 50% fresh at all times, and that's because the fumes from a nitrate fire are toxic. That's a good summary. I could tell you more, but . . .

(10:07 – 12:24) The UCLA projection booth standards in comparison to the NFPA 40 standards.

SLOPER: No, that's good. I mean, so essentially, you're writing a set of standards that adds this whole other, it's a lot of like handling, just common sense handling things that go way above and beyond just the safety standards.

DAILY: Exactly, and I ran across this issue many times in my career, but especially since I've left UCLA. It seems like everybody wants to build a nitrate projection booth all of a sudden, which I didn't think ever would happen. But they'll say, oh, we, but we followed the NFPA standards. It's safe. My answer is, yes, you followed the standards, but it's not safe.

SLOPER: Mm-hmm, so have the NFPA standards changed a lot since you first started in the '70s?

DAILY: No, the standards we used to convert our booth in 1979 were the ones written in the 1940s. And I don't, I think that we have, through AMIA, a few have changed, and I think we're working on changing a few more, but basically, no. I can't be specific, because I'm not that familiar with what the current ones are.

SLOPER: Sure, but ultimately, like it sounds like what I'm getting from your answers are that the standards are very specific to kind of very specific safety around the film itself and not about like the more nuanced parts of dealing with traveling with nitrate, like getting it places, how long it's sitting places, like who is touching it, who is handling it.

DAILY: Right, it . . .

SLOPER: Yeah, which is arguably just as important, yeah.

DAILY: It is just as important. To me the standards were more about the building, the construction of the booth, the fire doors, the portholes, the electrical. Well, all that's very important, but that's, to me that's only half the picture.

(12:25 – 14:53) Recounting a story of a nitrate film fire in the UCLA projection booth.

SLOPER: Okay. Well, let's move onto the next question, which you also have already touched on a little bit. Have you ever had to deal with a nitrate fire or other type of nitrate disaster in the projection booth or outside the projection booth as well?

DAILY: No, I heard very graphic and detailed stories about the two small fires that happened in the bridges booth a year or so before I started working there. So I, personally, have not. I know those stories, if you want to hear them.

SLOPER: Let's hear one of them, actually.

DAILY: Okay. They were running a print that had been inspected, and a splice came apart in the gate, and which meant the first half of the film went to the take-up reel. The second half of the film rested in the gate longer than it's supposed to and caught on fire from the heat from the lamp. And so the projector had a buckle trip switch, which shut the machine down as soon as that happened, but not fast enough to stop the fire. And it also, the projector had magazines, so the fire went up, but it did not go into the magazine at the top, which is where the rest of the film was, which had not been projected yet.

So the, basically, the 2' or 3' between the gate and the upper reel were burned. The projector also had a door, so the projectionist did not get hurt. But his story was that he, it happened in a flash, of course, and he just opened the door and kind of knocked the ashes out of the way, and they couldn't use that projector for a few days until they replaced some of the gate parts. And, of course, they lost a few feet of film. Well, that's exactly what's supposed to happen in that projector in case of a fire, so it worked.

The only other time I've been associated with a nitrate fire is that during the training of my projectionist, and for our license test, we always took about a 3' piece of a scrap of nitrate film outside the booth and lit it on fire so that they could see how fast it burns.

(14:54 – 17:46) The usefulness and effectiveness of safety regulations and best practices for handling and projecting nitrate film.

SLOPER: Let's see. This, the last question is really like a lot of stuff you've been covering already. But so based on your experience, you have what, now, 40, over 40 years of projection experience?

DAILY: Yes.

SLOPER: *Do you think that the safety regulations and best practices are appropriate and effective, and are there particular regulations that you have found to be especially useful or not useful?*

DAILY: Well, the regulations that are in effect now are not adequate, I think. That's why the nitrate committee of AMIA is attempting to upgrade the NFPA and also attach, I don't know if attach is the right word, but at least publish recommendations from AMIA for safe handling of nitrate film. The, certainly, the content of the current regulations are important. I just think they need to be added to, not necessarily changed, but at least added to, when we talk about some of that.

The other problem is that, with all due respect to all the fire departments throughout the country and the world, most fire department officials don't really know anything about nitrate film. This was the case at UCLA with our fire marshal, and he basically said, you guys are the expert. You tell me what you think, how this should be worded. And we did, and he supported us.

So I think that's another issue that those of us handling nitrate film have to recognize, and that is you're going to a regulatory agency for approval, but they're not really qualified to make judgments about nitrate film. You are. They're not. That's been my experience. And as far as any regulations that have been especially useful, I think they're all important. I wouldn't really single out one over the other. And I think they all should be followed, and I think they should be added to, which we've already talked about.

You know, nitrate film, and I'm sure you know this, can burn underwater. It cannot be extinguished. It can spontaneously ignite. And the older it gets, the more flammable it gets. So it's not something to take lightly. If you're going to handle it, especially if you're going to project it, you'd better know what you're doing.

(17:47 – 19:25) The importance of regulations for and the careful handling of nitrate film.

SLOPER: *Right, and, I mean, I think the aim of this project is kind of to demystify a little bit what the, you know, people hear the stories. Well, it can just, it will just start on fire if you touch it or if you open the can. And, like, well, there's a balance between the horror stories and the reality, yeah.*

DAILY: Oh, yeah, absolutely.

SLOPER: *Yeah, and we're, and I think on that, with that in mind, is there anything else you want to add like about, I mean, you, and you've been very honest that, about the fact that you haven't had any, you haven't experienced any kind of disaster in your long career working with this film. And do you think that just comes from an understanding and a, you know, just being careful, being, like, yeah?*

DAILY: Yes, I think so. I think if you, you know, if you follow all the suggestions and regulations, and you're careful, you probably won't have a problem. But my fear was always, and my insistence to my staff was that we're going to follow every reg. Even though we have the ability to ignore some of these regulations or standards, we're not going to. We're going to follow

them to the letter, because if we do have a fire, I don't want anyone to say that we didn't follow the rules, because that would be bad for the entire industry.

(19:26 – 21:22) Witnessing the aftermath of a nitrate film fire in the old UCLA nitrate film vault.

DAILY: There was one vault fire that I went to visit the scene the day it happened. It was at the UCLA nitrate vaults, many, many years ago, before they moved into the nice ones they're in now. I didn't see the fire, but I was there just a few hours later. The fire sprinklers did the most damage. But it was, a guy was sitting on a bench inspecting a reel, and it just went up on him, probably from static electricity. So I recommend the grounding of all equipment because of that.

***SLOPER:** Yeah, and I guess that's something that we're not really covering fully with this interview, but there are, there's a whole other set of considerations just with inspection and handling that has nothing to do with projecting storage.*

DAILY: That's right.

***SLOPER:** Yeah.*

DAILY: No one was hurt in this fire, but, you know, there was, the guy was pretty upset.

***SLOPER:** I can imagine. Well, we've . . .*

DAILY: Yeah, and it . . . the interesting thing was too, you don't think. I mean, I'm not afraid of nitrate. I'm not afraid of opening the can. And I think that we do have to, you know, realize that we have to handle this stuff. It's going to be around for a long time. But this fire was one 2,000' reel, and this was in a very old film vault building downtown LA called the Vermont Vaults. And it was back when they built rooms, you know, with 12' ceilings. And the fire sprinkler was 12' above it or, I guess, maybe 10' above that table, and it set off the sprinkler from that distance. So it was quite a big flash.

(21:23 – 22:47) Recounting another story of a film fire in the UCLA projection booth.

***SLOPER:** So we're actually through all of the scripted questions we had. But I just wanted, we have plenty of time, if there's anything else you wanted to add or another, any other stories you want to tell.*

DAILY: Well, I'll tell you about the other fire that happened in my booth, before I started there.

***SLOPER:** Sure.*

DAILY: Once again, a splice came apart during the show, and there were very small openings around the door over the projector and between where the lamp house and the projector joined. And so the splice came apart after the gate, so nothing stopped in the gate, and the film kept

running. But the film, instead of going to the take-up reel, went out of one of those slots and into the lamp house. So as the film was running, it was being burned up.

SLOPER: *Wow.*

DAILY: So because of that story, I made sure there were no openings like that where that could happen again. So every projector should be, that runs nitrate, should be checked for small openings that the film could be shot through should a splice come apart.

(22:48 – 24:09) How past experiences and stories have been used to shape current practice for projecting nitrate film.

SLOPER: *Yeah, I guess it's, there's a value, a high value to hearing these stories that happened before you, because it, you know, you can, even if it's never happened to you, personally, you can anticipate and learn from them just to prevent more from happening.*

DAILY: Correct, yes. And I spoke with someone at the Library of Congress about their projectors, because that's supposed to be a nitrate projection booth there. You know, I don't think they've ever shown any nitrate there. And they don't have doors on their projectors. And someone said, well, if there's a fire, it's not going to go to the magazines, because they do have magazines for the feed reel and the take-up reel.

And I said, well, that's probably true, but what about that 3' of film in between? You know, didn't you see *Cinema Paradiso*? I mean, that could flash in your face and blind you. Oh, I never thought about that. Well, and I guess there are a lot of suggestions and regulations and standards that really need to be put out there, which is very, it makes me very happy that I'm on this nitrate committee for AMIA, because I think we're going to do that.

(24:10 – 25:19) A lack of fear of nitrate film.

SLOPER: *Mm-hmm, I don't know if, I just want to go back to kind of the beginning of the conversation. Other than those, the two stories you had heard about the fires in the booth at UCLA before you started working there, did you have any other concept of, like had you heard other stories? Well, there's Cinema Paradiso, of course, but did you, were you scared? Were you, did you have a fear of the film before you started working with it?*

DAILY: No, it's interesting. I don't remember being scared at all. I think the people I worked with and the people that began to work with me in the booth and the people that were at the archive, it was all new to us, and we probably weren't scared enough. You know, with experience, you learn to respect the material more. I have another nitrate story.

SLOPER: *Great.*

(25:20 – 26:20) Recounting a story about showing nitrate film on a ship during WWII.

DAILY: This was told to me by an electrician at UCLA who has long since retired. But he used to do some work for us in the projection booth. And he said, oh, yeah, I used to show film. I said

where did you show film? Oh, it was on the deck of a ship during World War II. And I said, hmm, I said, I'll bet that was nitrate film. He said, oh, yeah, it was.

And I said, did you ever have any fires? He said, yes, one time the reel caught on fire. They probably didn't have magazines. I don't know what kind of projector he had, something portable, I'm sure, if it was on the deck of a ship. And I said, what did you do? He said I just jerked the reel off and threw it in the water. And he said I could see it burn all the way to the bottom.

SLOPER: *Wow.*

DAILY: That story has stuck with me.

(26:21 – 29:13) The positives and potential dangers surrounding the current popularity of projecting nitrate film.

SLOPER: *Mm-hmm, I think that's it for my questions for you.*

DAILY: Okay.

SLOPER: *Oh, no, I do have one more question, actually, and this is just about a comment you made that there are a lot of people now who are wanting to, you know, be able to project nitrate, get their booths kind of retrofitted. And do you think, do you feel confident in the fact that this is happening and that the standards, and especially with the standards you're adding, the AMIA recommendations to the NFPA standards, that this is a positive thing, that people can handle it and . . .*

DAILY: I think it's a positive thing. I'm excited about it. I'm concerned that people won't follow the recommendations and have a serious fire, in which case fire departments will be alerted, and then, you know, they'll shut everybody down or something. But I think these nitrate projection prints need to be shown, because they won't be around forever.

And you've heard people talk, I'm sure you've heard people talk about the nitrate prints look different from anything else or better than anything else. And I think there's really something to that, especially if it's a really, really nice print. And I've shown a lot of nitrate film, and there are some really gorgeous prints at UCLA, and they need to be shown. I just hope everybody is as cautious about it as I think they should be.

SLOPER: *Right, yeah, I mean, that's a really good point that the, if one bad thing happens, it really tarnishes the whole community.*

DAILY: It does.

SLOPER: *Yeah.*

DAILY: Because especially with fire departments not being familiar enough with the material to really make a reasonable judgment about an incident, they might just overreact and say, okay, no more of this stuff in this city, you know.

***SLOPER:** Mm-hmm, well, is there anything else you'd like to add, Jess?*

DAILY: Boy, I think we've covered it all.

***SLOPER:** Well, I just want to thank you so much, again, for offering to speak with us and share your stories and your own history with dealing with nitrate. And I think it will be a great addition to the other stories and just the statistics we're compiling.*

DAILY: That's great.