Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research

Nitrate Motion Picture Film Oral History Interviews

Janice Allen

(00:00 – 06:29) Introduction – Janice Allen's father's background working in the film industry and collecting films.

AMY SLOPER: *[This is Amy Sloper, DATE] 2015, and I'm speaking with Janice Allen as part of the Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research Nitrate Film Project. So, Janice, just to get started, I was hoping you could tell me a little bit about your background, including when you started working with film and in a film lab, and what drew you to that type of work.*

JANICE ALLEN: Well, I was born into it. I, my father was a film person. I should go back a little bit, just to give you a kind of a round picture. He was born in 1910, and he grew up in Rochester area, Rochester, New York, where Kodak was. And let's see, I just want to try to make this as concise as possible. But he, his parents, he wanted to be in the movie business in his teens, I guess, and his parents were dead set against it, because back then, that was a sinful occupation, being in the film, movie-film business, considered by many.

But, you know, his father was a photographer who had a studio on the main street of Rochester, New York, in 1903, actually. I looked that up in some city directories, and that was actually listed there. And my father worked for Kodak briefly. He started a company in the mid-'30s. I'm jumping the gun a little bit, because before that, he got involved with film by getting a job with a film promoter.

Back in those days, a lot of towns didn't have their own theaters, a lot of the smaller towns. So it, kind of like a fair, they would set up a movie in a town just for a limited run. They would put up a tent, and they'd put posters all over town, and they'd set up projectors and a screen and run movies. And I believe this was silent movies. It was that time period. And these were, of course, B movies. It was like second or third run.

And so he, you know, was hired to help out with these presentations. A lot of them probably were probably exploitation films. But they ran all different kinds of things, but they were older films, just like today and the B-run, you know, it, films that had already run the first run, and so they were a few years old. And part of his job was to edit them. He would, he was instructed to edit out anything in the film that would date it, so the people didn't know they were looking at an old film so much, you know.

And part of his compensation was to keep the pieces that he edited out of these films. And, of course, this is nitrate print. So that was kind of what started him collecting film in the, probably the late '20s. And he continued with that, and he started a Bell and Howell agency in Rochester. He was the distributor of Bell and Howell equipment, and he did, he put on shows himself.

He, you know, in the mid-'30s he started a company there called John E. Allen, Inc., and he would distribute films of all kinds. He would go out and do projection service, which was a big thing back then. You know, he would, it's something you don't even think about anymore,

but people would hire you for projection service, and just like today in a stadium, you might get hired to put on a digital screen display.

And he would, he traded film. You know, he was a horse-trader of film, and he was a collector. And he got involved with, one of his friends was James Card, who ended up being the director of George Eastman House in Rochester, who has one of the larger collections of nitrate film in the country.

So he, I came to learn years later, I knew he was selling and moving a lot of feature films and films of all kinds, and this was all nitrate film. And between him and Jim Card at the Eastman House, he was responsible for building a vast amount of their early holdings, from what I'm told. And, you know, back then, you just, there was no restrictions on nitrate. It would often come in, I mean, to speak of, you know, it would often come in on by rail. We were living in New Jersey in the '50s, and I remember, you know, I was born in 1950.

I remember going down to the local train station. You know, it was a little town of probably 6,000 or 8,000 people, and we had a railroad track right through town, and REA Express I think they called it, Railway Express, something like that. So it would come through and drop your packages of whatever it was, and his packages were more often than not nitrate film.

(6:30 – 8:30) Allen's experiences growing up around nitrate film.

ALLEN: And so I basically lived with it all my life, you know, since I was, before I lived next to a nitrate vault in the '50s, throughout the '50s, pretty much. I mean, we moved to that location in Park Ridge, New Jersey in 1950. And he built, he would, at that time he was working in New York. He was a production manager at an animation studio.

But he was, on the side, he was still, you know, horse-trading films and collecting, and he had a vault with a very large amount of film. And he was storing film for people. It was not a spec vault, I should say. It was not a vault that was, this was in New Jersey. I don't even know what the laws were. You know, in New York, they were pretty strict as to construction of a nitrate vault. In New Jersey, it was pretty loose, I think, in the '50s.

And so he had a fairly good-sized building that was pretty well packed with film, and he was storing it for other people as well as his own. And I started, actually, probably touching film when I was about five. I believe I actually was splicing nitrate film on a Griswold splicer at the age of five, just for fun. And that was, you know, that was 1955, so we're talking a long time ago.

(8:31 – 11:23) Allen's father's background continued: Supplying footage for television documentary productions and establishment of lab to duplicate the nitrate film prints.

ALLEN: And then in 1960, I was all of ten, so I didn't really know that much about what was going on, you know, just what was kind of swirling around me at the time. You know, my father stopped working in New York and actually had enough film to start an archive. And he was supplying at the time television, like ABC and NBC were cranking up a lot of big documentary units like, you might even, *Project 20.* There was a show called *Project 20.*

And, you know, all the shows back then were done in 35 mm, even in this country. And there were also, he got involved with a producer named Robert Youngson. I'm jumping the gun a little here. That was the early '60s. But sometime between '55 and '60, I believe he stopped

working in New York and started actually supplying, you know, stock footage for production use to all these people who were making these big documentary productions. And it was all film based. There was no tape. You know, it was all 35 mm.

We also eventually started doing business with BBC in London, and all their shows were 35 mm. And your film, you know, that was it. I mean, they ordered film, either film work prints or actually negatives. You know, often, they would just order masters and negatives from our material, and virtually, all of it was nitrate film. And we would have to send the film into the city, into New York, to get it duplicated, I guess.

And then in the '50s, we started our own little lab to take care of the nitrate, because it was less and less being done in New York, and they often didn't do a very good job. You know, they would just tell you, well, you're lucky you got anything. It's old film. And so we, this was before my time, they started a little, tiny lab. It was about 12' x 12', at best, and it was one printing machine, and we would make duplicates from nitrate onto safety film, 35 mm.

(11:24 – 14:32) Account of arson in the Allens' film vault.

ALLEN: And in the meantime, 1960 rolls along. He had gotten the stock footage business rolling, and we got hit by an arson. Yeah, and the arson didn't know what he was burning when he hit my father's vault. It was the second fire he had started. The first one was a big, big barn. This was, I forget what town it was, but it wasn't too far from our town. And the barn was full of brand new farm equipment, and it was a real old, giant barn, and that just burned to the ground. Friday night at 8:00, this firebug set that on fire.

Well, the next Friday night at 8:00, he set my father's vault on fire, and I think he got a lot more than he was ever expecting, because it was almost all nitrate film, and it was a very large quantity. I don't know. I've seen pictures of the aftermath. I remember going to the building. We actually used to have a little garden in the back, so I remember the place. But it, you know, that would have been when I was less than ten. You know, I had been to this place. It was maybe five miles away or something, somewhere . . .

And actually, the first night we could see the barn burning from where we lived, you know, it was such a huge fire. And then, actually, the guy did another fire after that the next Friday at 8:00. And I think they finally caught him, in any event. But it really, it was devastating, because most of, you know, a great deal of my father's film was in there, and a lot of other people's stuff was in there. And so it was a huge hit, you know, for him.

And but the good news was at the time, our car had been stolen in New York City. We had a station wagon. That was mainly what we used for moving film around. And so he had, he would have to, you know, we weren't real wealthy or anything at the time. He would borrow people's vehicles and bring film in from this vault. This was before the fire.

But fortunately, since he didn't have this car, you know, anymore that had been stolen, things built up in the vault that he had locally that was close, so he had quite a bit of film there when the guy burned the big place down. It was a very small amount compared to what was burned, but he had something left, you know. But it was just absolutely devastating, you know.

(14:33 – 18:38) Joining and growing the family business in the 1970s and 1980s and getting into nitrate film preservation.

So we, you know, went from there. Eventually, when I got old enough, I was asked if I wanted to, my father never pushed me into the business. He, his father tried to push him into the business he was in, which was still photography, and my father didn't want anything to do with it. And so he knew better, because he resented the fact that his father had done that to him. And I just kind of fell into it, and we, you know, started doing, of course, we were doing our own lab work for production use. And it was a dry lab, what they call a dry lab. We would just expose the film and send it out for processing in the city.

And then Eastman House started to have deteriorating nitrates that they wanted to be preserved. It was very, very early on in the, you know, this sort of a thing. And they had very, very little money. So you'd make the absolute minimum elements. In other words, if you had an original negative, for instance, of whatever, you would just make a master, a fine-grained master, which is a printing element, and then that was it.

You know, and if you really had some extra money, you might make a print off the original negative too. But more often than not, they'd just make the fine grain, because at least they knew they had something. You know, they had the next generation right off of the negative, the original negative, typically, or a dup neg off of an original nitrate print.

And so that, you know, that became, I started getting into it shortly thereafter. The man who was doing it was getting up in age, and he just didn't want to do it anymore. He was getting sickly. And so they asked me if I wanted to take over for him, and I started to do it.

And meanwhile, the library kept growing, and it actually grew to quite a large degree. I mean, we eventually, by the time we placed the nitrate in Culpeper a few years ago, actually, it went to Ohio first, our, most of our nitrate, it was around 20 million feet, and it was, yeah, it was about, it was one of the largest, privately held nitrate collections in the country. And the Library of Congress described it as a national treasure, and so that's where it is now.

We continued with the lab and continued to develop it, you know, to make it bigger and better. You know, we went from one little room to two to three, and then eventually, it kind of outgrew the space we were in. We got very popular. In the '70s and '80s, we were it. I mean, everyone, you know, sent, we had more work than we could do, as far as doing preservation stuff. And it wasn't all nitrate, but, you know, nitrate we were extremely familiar with and very comfortable with it.

(18:39 – 24:17) The growth of regulations governing nitrate film in New Jersey, and installing sprinklers in Allen's nitrate vaults. Includes description of the vaults' construction.

ALLEN: And we got into optical printing, and the library kept expanding. We kept buying up other collections, because people just didn't want to deal with nitrate. And back then, you know, I, you would often just get a truck and put the stuff in and move it. You know, it wasn't, there was no big restrictions.

Eventually, for institutional purposes, you know, we started getting all the regulations due to airplanes crashing and due to other things, and it had nothing to do with nitrate film. I don't think there was ever a plane that crashed that was attributed to film, but I think one of the big things was the, I don't know if you remember, well, it's certainly in history, it wasn't that long ago. There was some plane that crashed into some swamps, and it was due to oxygen cylinders that were supposedly rolling around in the hold.

SLOPER: *Right, mm-hmm.*

ALLEN: And that was one of the big things that really, really put the pressure on these fire laws, you know, and these transport laws. And then in New Jersey, something happened when where they had a big fire. It was at an amusement park. That was another big event in the state of New Jersey that really kicked the laws in, and they totally changed everything. And they made this law that had to do with saving lives, you know, based on this amusement park where, in one of the buildings, a lot of children died because, you know, the codes were so lax, and so they made this lifesaving law.

And that, you know, we had the film in underwriter spec vaults, but actually, they weren't sprinklered, and they made us put in the required, according to NFPF [National Film Preservation Foundation] specs, sprinkler systems, which are, of course, are very heavy duty. And in fact, nobody knew except us what the spec was, curiously enough, only because we had been in many nitrate vaults, you know.

But the, when they did this to us, and I don't know exactly when that was. You could look up the year of that fire, it was in Great Adventure or somewhere like that where they had this big fire that a lot of kids died, and it was right around then or maybe a year or so later that they came in.

And so the sprinkler guys came in, and they said, oh, we're going to put one head in each vault. And I said, you know, no, I don't think so. That's not going to work, you know. And they absolutely did not believe me. And, of course, this would have probably quadrupled the cost, because you have to put in ten heads in a standard vault, the way ours were configured, you know, they were 10' x 10' vaults, and you had to have ten sprinkler heads.

And the guy was absolutely just, he had, didn't have a clue. And this went on for months, you know, a long time. And finally, I got a book and showed it to him, and he finally, sort of believed me. But I knew that, you know, we weren't going to go to all the trouble of having this system come in, and then have someone come in a year later and say, this isn't right. You know, I mean, the firemen didn't know any better either. You know, they didn't have a clue. Nobody knew, you know.

But they had the actual sprinkler company come in, and, of course, they had no experience doing these things. You know, they had never done a nitrate vault before. And so, you know, they just said, well, it's 10' x 10'. It gets one head. You know, and it was very funny, because they were actually telling me I was an idiot for suggesting this. It was so funny, and it was just hilarious.

But we got the sprinkler. We had a huge main put in. And this was in a semi-residential area that the vaults were located, and we had ten vaults there. And they had the blowout panels. And everything was, you know, it was according to spec. There were four-ply brick in between each building. They were attached all as one, it was one big building with a hall down the middle, and so the five vaults off of the hall all the way down for about 60' or so. And they had the blowout panels and the fusible links and the, eventually the full sprinkler systems put in with a huge water main.

(24:18 – 25:34) Allen's experiences growing up around nitrate film, continued.

ALLEN: And so that was that. And we continued, you know, we had actually a purpose. In 1960 we built a, we moved to a new location. That's where the vaults, the new vaults were built,

and they weren't all built at once. But I lived in the house right next to the vaults. I mean, virtually my whole life I've lived next to a nitrate vault. When I had children, we actually lived for a while right above the vaults. My oldest son, his window overlooked the whole nitrate vault, but the blowout panel was facing away from where we were. But it was right there, you know.

And so, you know, we, I just, I lived with it. It was in my hand, you know, all the time. You know, eventually, when I came, this was the . . . it was really, it was 24/7. And I used to work very long hours. I still do, like 12 hours a day, roughly.

(25:35 – 27:39) Expanding the film lab and using nitrate scraps for bonfires.

ALLEN: And so, you know, the lab was booming, and we put in optical printing and specialized gates that would handle shrinkage and frame line . . . position frame lines. And we just went all out to make the absolute best possible, you know, image, because that's what you have to do when you're doing preservation work. You're, it's the last shot, particularly if it's something that's going to deteriorate soon, or if it's in the stages of deterioration.

And we would often make master elements from deteriorating nitrate film. And in the early days, we ended up with a fair amount of waste. You know, you would have, you'd have a trim bin that was a fireproof can, which I think they still use today that you would throw the little pieces in, and it would get burned. And people would, we actually, before the fire, before that big fire law was put in, in New Jersey, the fire department, you know, knew who we were and knew what we had, and they would come by and ask for nitrate film for the bonfire.

Yeah, they, you know, they'd have those famous for the football games, I guess they were, and they'd build this huge pile of stuff. It was probably, I don't know, 20' high, and they always wanted some nitrate to start it, because they could kind of just, you know, roll it around the perimeter of, at the base of this humongous pile of stuff, which was usually wood, and that was kind of a tradition back then. I guess that's kind of disappeared these days. But so we were the source for the . . . a few . . .

(27:40 – 31:52) The impact of new fire laws, nitrate's behavior while burning, and the utility of sprinkler systems depending on vault design.

ALLEN: And so, you know, so everyone knew us, and that's why there was really never any problems until later years. It was a whole new crew in. It was all young guys, and I guess they had kind of heard the rumors. And one day, one of them came in and decided to, you know, since this new law has been passed, they had, we were in a classification climate that they had to do something about.

And, you know, the arson had burned this huge place down in 1960, and it just burned down, and that was the end of it. You know, nobody got hurt. I mean, it was in the middle of nowhere. It was in a, actually, it was right next to the barn, you know, probably 1,000' away. The guy did it in order. He did the building. He did the barn, then he did our place, and then he did the gas station, which was right next door to our place. And so, and it went up like crazy, you know, the '60 fire.

And in my opinion, that is the cleanest way to let it go, because this film produces all kinds of noxious gasses, and if you start dousing it with water, it does nothing but fester and get worse. You know, it just sits there and smokes. You know, if you let it burn, it just, it burns out like crazy. It just, it feeds itself, you know. And so you can blow out a vault real fast, you know,

and this was just one big building. It wasn't a vault, you know, and there was no sprinkler. You know, this was all pre that big fire code deal.

So we never had a fire after that. It was, and that was one reason we moved the film to the premises, you know, so that we had a little tighter control over it, and it was right under our watchful eye. And we had fire alarms and burglar alarms, and, you know, eventually did put the sprinkler in, which we really disapproved of. You know, I, and it wasn't just the expense. You know, we've always felt that it would, in certain circumstances, it would be better, and in this circumstance, it would have been better to just let it burn.

In this kind of a vault, you are not going to, you know, like you take a fancy vault like someone like the Museum of Modern Art has or the Library of Congress, those vaults are designed that if the sprinkler goes off, it stops the fire. You know, it's limited to a few slots, and that's a preservation vault. It, this was a regular, open-storage vault, you know, the ones that we had that were spec. They were regular vaults. The film was on racks. There was no dividers. There was no doors. You know, so if the thing went up, no sprinkler was going to be putting the fire out.

And so we really felt, you know, in, under the circumstances, but that's beside the point. You know, they had this law and code is code, and so that's the way it had to be. But I personally have moved many millions of film myself in trucks and not necessarily film that was in good condition. You know, we're talking about neglected collections that had all kinds of deterioration in them. They had, you know, you'd have a ten-reel, ten 1,000' reel box full of cans, and there was so much red dust in amongst these cans that it was just you could see it pouring out of the, out of all the little crevices of the box.

(31:53 – 34:56) The exaggerated stories about nitrate film's dangers, particularly the dangers of brown powder and deteriorated film.

ALLEN: And, you know, there's been so much false, sensational information about nitrate that people tended to believe all kinds of stories. And a lot of nitrate people like to tell them because, you know, they thought it was cool. But a lot of these stories were absolutely false.

I mean, one of them is red dust. You know, red dust, in my experience, is probably totally safe. We have actually taken, we've run burn tests, you know, because we wanted to know what we were dealing with. And most archives have, at one time or another, have run burn tests. And we've actually taken a can of red dust and put a blowtorch on it. And do you know what happened?

SLOPER: *Nothing.*

ALLEN: Nothing. Right, nothing, absolutely nothing. And deteriorating film, you know, there was those stories about, okay, so say you have the roll of deteriorating film. And believe me, I know. I've seen, I may be one of the few people alive that has seen more rolls of deteriorating nitrate film. Okay. But if you take, depending on, you know, the worse it is, the worse it's deteriorated, the worse, the more goo that's coming out of it, you know, all that jelly and stuff, the less flammable it is.

And, of course, the stories always were, you know, now it's unstable, and it's extra dangerous. And, well, maybe under, you know, really unusual conditions that might be true, but in standard, ambient temperature conditions, I think it's totally false. And I do know that we ran

numerous burn tests on deteriorating as well as fresh, you know, I'll call it fresh film, fresh film that would mean film that is not deteriorating at all, that's in nice shape. And do you know what the most dangerous film is the film that's still in good condition.

You know, the deteriorating film, you can actually put it out. Set a roll on fire. You can put it out. You put a fire and set an un-, a non-deteriorating roll on fire, and you virtually cannot put it out. We've taken whole fire extinguishers. We've set a roll on fire and emptied the whole fire extinguisher on it. And it would completely subdue it. The fire would disappear, and there would be no fire. And as soon as the fire extinguisher ran out, it would burst into flames.

(34:57 – 39:20) Fire risk and protection in projection booths and other film viewing situations.

ALLEN: So, you know, it's, it was never a scary thing for me. I've had fires. We've had fires. Getting back to the stock footage, I've experienced projector fires. I've experienced fires on rewinds, you know, because these things happen. You know, you will, if you're projecting nitrate, it's not unusual to for the film to, particularly old film, to potentially break or splice open, and it can then gather in the projection head and get ignited by the lamp. You know, that's, you have to have a really good ignition source. It has to be deliberate, you know, or an unsafe condition.

And that's why the projectors had all the traps, and we had all the traps in our, we had a whole projection room in Park Ridge that was full nitrate specs. It had all the shutters on the windows and the links on everything and sprinkler, and that's where we showed customers stock footage, right out of the vaults, which were right next door to the projection room. And so that room was totally legal.

And back then, people looked at film. You know, as I said earlier, a lot of these networks were cranking up shows, and so there were all kinds of researchers, and all they knew how to do was to come out and actually look at the film. They'd put it on a rewind. We had special viewing machines, and we would show them the film. There was nothing else. There was no videotapes. You know, there was nothing else to show, so they'd actually look at the original.

And back then, the researchers were experienced film people, most of them, and they could even read negatives. You know, they could look at a negative image on a rewind, and they were so used to it, or on a viewing machine. You know, it was a machine that went between rewinds. It was not motorized, and it would just reflect the image. It had a very low temperature light source in it, and it, you really couldn't start a fire on this viewer, it was cooled in such a way.

And so experienced researchers would come out. We would have sometimes up to three of them at a time. And we were really busy, you know, in the '80s particularly, and we'd get two or three researchers out in a day. And they would come in, and if they were experienced, you know, they had given us their wish list, and we'd drag 50 cans out of the vault, for example, and they would run through all of them. And they'd make two piles. One was the in pile, and one was the out pile. And then in pile was the things that they wanted within the vaults. And back then, we used something called a Mercer Clip. I don't know if you've ever heard of that.

SLOPER: *Hmm-mm.*

ALLEN: That's a, that was a way of showing a section of a roll, where you put this little clip that actually clipped in between the perfs of the film, and you could put a little arrow on, made out of, it was made out of plastic, and it occupied two perforations on each side of the film. And it was very obvious in the roll, so when the lab went to make their copy, they'd know exactly the portion they wanted in the roll.

And that's how it was done. You know, I mean, it was strictly, it was 100% film. And so we ended up making the copies.

(39:21 – 44:40) The impact of video on the work done in Allen's lab and moving to new facilities in Pennsylvania.

ALLEN: Eventually, it started, you know, video started creeping in, and we started having to send stuff into the city, because it was only these high-end machines at the time, which were known as Rank Cintel Mark III or Rank Cintel Telecines, they call them. And that was the standard of the industry. Actually, BBC had pretty much originated that machine. It was a UK machine.

And so we started sending it in, and we lost control of the quality, because it was in our vested interest to make a really good quality copy for the stock footage customer, because if it looked good, they were much more likely to use it than if it looked bad. And, you know, it's kind of one of those duh things.

But when you were at the mercy of facilities in New York that had a whole different attitude about, you know, old film, the labs just wanted to do pretty much do new film. You know, this old stuff, and again, they would just tell you. They'd say you're lucky you got anything off of it. You know, so they'd make you a crappy copy, often, in video I'm talking now. They'd just stick the roll on the machine, press the button, and walk away, and it would look like shit, you know.

And so this was very disturbing to us. You know, we had lost control. We had lost quality. So we ended up buying our own Rank Cintel machine and putting it in, which was a big deal, a whole new area that we knew absolutely nothing about. And so we got it, made it happen, and we transferred, a lot of our screeners that you can view our footage on today were made on that machine. But we ran, oh, I don't know, we made about 1,300 hours of screeners from a lot of our nitrate.

But, you know, then this, there was this huge shift at that time. Researchers got more expensive, stock footage budgets got cut back, and producers no longer wanted to, you know, they weren't sending researchers out as much. And as soon as video and tapes started coming in, they wanted screeners on tape, and they didn't want to send anybody, you know.

So by, and we didn't really know this was going to happen, but by, we moved. We had planned this move to Pennsylvania many, many years ago, and because we were out of space in New Jersey. And we did it very gradually, you know, because we had the two locations, so we didn't just have to just up and leave. But by the time, by 2001, I could even say by 9/11, nobody was coming at it.

So we really, a little concerned that we were going to lose business, because we were going to be further away from New York City. Now we were about 45 minutes by bus from Midtown in the New Jersey location. And when we moved out to Pennsylvania, we were many hours away, you know. You were talking a major excursion, you know. But by the time, you know, the library actually moved, nobody was coming out. And so that was good, in a way.

But what resulted, and this wasn't just our archive, many archives went down this path, you know, even archives in the cities, a lot of times, they wouldn't even bother. They didn't want to pay a research to go to. So the big push was to get every, get screeners. Well, you're completely eliminating a huge percentage of what the selection is by doing this, because if we have 1,300 hours of stuff available for viewing, you know, out of, say, 40 million feet of stuff, it wasn't just nitrate, you know, we did a lot of others, that's an extremely small percentage.

So today, most productions are very limited on what they are able to see from many archives, you know, particularly the older ones and the older film. It's just like, you know, the Internet and books. I mean, you know, you can access so much stuff on the Internet, but there's mountains more that you'll never see on there, or you're not seeing it now, that's for sure. And, you know, you know what I mean. It's the same idea.

(44:41 – 47:22) Anecdote on the benefits of old fashioned research using archival prints and the scope of Allen's film collection.

ALLEN: And very, very few people, we had a . . . we had one customer, it was a Scottish production, who actually, they wanted fresh stuff. They didn't want stuff that could be located on a screener, because everyone is using that. You know, they wanted things that nobody else was tapping. And we said, fine, you know, this is a World War I show by Scottish television. It was a ten-hour series. And World War I was a very neglected subject in recent years. I forget when this was. It was maybe, I don't know, five or ten years ago. But they sent a researcher out here, and they just camped out for a month. They lived here and with the nitrate film, you know, when we had it.

And it was a big hit. You know, they did it the old-fashioned way. And she was old enough to know, you know, to know how to look at negatives and to identify faces. And, yeah, this is stuff from, you know, which was 90 years old, roughly. And our collection goes all the way back to Edison's stuff. We have Edison original prints. It starts around 1893 and goes right up through.

But we're very, very heavy in the early days, you know, very heavy. And we're also very heavy in actuality footage. You know, my father was much more interested, unlike most archives, he was much more interested in real people doing real things than in dramatic films. So that's why he would horse-trade dramatic films, and he would sell them, buy them and sell them. But he, you know, what really excited him was real stuff, real news footage or just raw footage of real people doing real things.

And so a vast amount of the library is that. You know, we do have clips from comedies. You know, because back years ago, there are a lot of that sort of material was used in advertising. You know, they put funny, old clips up from the '20s, of telephone poles knocking people into the ground, weird shit like that.

(47:23 – 53:32) The challenges of working with stock footage and how this work shaped the quality and working methods of the lab as a whole.

ALLEN: And but so, you know, the lab continued. Very, very, you know, we went from being a lab that was originated from doing stock footage, I mean, that was where, that's why we had it. That's why we started the lab was for our own collection. And then we started gradually, you know, doing outside stuff. And this is on a very small scale, you know. And we, where was I

going to go with that? Well, you know, people started finding out that we could do really good work on old film, because we had perfected all these systems.

And, oh, the other point is that duplicating stock footage, pieces of film, you know, like I told you about say we put out 50 cans for someone, well, those 50 cans, they, within them, could have 20 different pieces of film in them, from which they select from. And let's say they select 40 pieces from out of those 50 cans. Well, we would actually pull the pieces out. We didn't usually section print unless it was something that would, it would harm it, you know, in other words, we'd lose frames. But typically, there were slugs in these roles, and you could lift out the sections that were of interest. And we'd put them back after making the film copy, you know.

The whole point here is that stock footage is the worst thing to work on, I mean, because it's all over the place. You know, you can do, you do a feature. You know, someone sends you an original negative, you know what you're dealing with. It's pretty consistent, you know, or a print, an existing, let's say a print of a feature, a nitrate feature print. It's, you know, it's good enough to put on a screen. It's consistent.

But stock footage is all over the place. You know, it wasn't necessarily highly professional to begin with. You had all different kinds of film, cameras, all different kinds of processing in black and white. There was no real standard. Everyone had their own idea about how to do it. So and, you know, and it was a rather crude system in the early days, so the results sometimes could be on the crude side. So our job was to make it all flow, make it up to, in a film copy for production use, we had to normalize it, let's put it that way, so it could be put in a production, and it could flow well, you know. And we got to be, you know, and that's very difficult.

We, so we cut our teeth on this sort of material. Our lab, when we started out doing this stuff, we were doing the most difficult thing too, what everyone else didn't want to do. All the other labs, they didn't want to hear about this stuff. You know, it was just too troublesome, too time consuming, a big pain in the ass, and you often would have to redo stuff for technical reasons, because the stains were different in the various phases of the film.

And there was just all these variables that you would look at a piece of film, and you'd expose it and say there's going to be no problem with this. But it's film. You know, the proof is at the end when you get the finished thing back. And you know instantly if it's no good. And remember, we had a vested interest in it being good, so we would go back, and we'd do it two times, or we'd do it three times. We'd do it until it was right, you know. And anyone else, they'd just do it and say, here it is. You want to do it over again? Okay. You can pay again, you know.

So that's how, that's why we got so good, because we learned on such difficult material. And we really, you know, it was the ultimate learning experience. And so anything that comes through the door to this day is not really a major challenge, because we have so much experience with so many different kinds of elements and images and problems, and, you know, just on and on and on.

And we'll take raw material, you know, raw film stock, and we'll do things with it that you're not, that is not recommended. You know, it's not Kodak standard. You know, because a lot of these projects, particularly a nitrate original print, there is no film made, technically, to duplicate a nitrate original print. You know, they, negative, dup negative is made to duplicate a master of an, a master positive of an original negative. That's a whole different thing, you know, so you have to play games, big games with all of these films. Kodak never made a film that was specifically designed for duplication of high-contrast originals.

And so we had to, you know, just keep messing around and experimenting and testing, and just it went on for years. And we've been doing this for, since 1955, you know, we've actually been printing film. I was five years old then, obviously. I wasn't doing it. But as soon as I, you know, when I hit my teens, I started doing it, and probably when I was around 17. And so that gives me a fair amount of experience.

(53:33 – 56:10) The decline in work on nitrate film and the problems with acetate film.

SLOPER: *Yeah, I'd say. I just want, you've already answered every question on the list, but I was just wondering if you would talk for a few minutes about like when you're working now on nitrate in the lab, do you think the current safety regulations and best practices are appropriate? Do you, are you doing things outside of what's recommended, or do you think that you're given pretty good guidelines on how to handle nitrate in your facility?*

ALLEN: Well, you know, since we don't have the mass bulk that we're sitting on, that's a non-issue. I mean, even when we had it, it was legal. It was in, you know, proper, when we had large, large quantities. When you're dealing now, you know, we're dealing with small quantities. Someone sends in a few reels, you know, and we do them, and they get sent out. So it's a whole different situation. So I would say, you know, it's a very different situation, I should say.

And there's a lot less nitrate work going on now for whatever. You know, I mean, it used to be that was the mandate, I mean, was to get the nitrate done. Well, but that's kind of, it's kind of, to some degree that, it's been getting sidestepped a little bit, you know, and people are saying, well, there's other things. And it's true. You know, in many respects, acetate is less stable than nitrate.

You know, and it's interesting to say that here we are. You know, we went through almost the whole phase. You know, we went from nitrate ended in what, '53. We were printing film in '55, so we were putting it all on acetate, and acetate was the savior. You know, we're doing nitrate conversions. And then we find out, you know, acetate is worse than nitrate.

And in my opinion, it very much is worse than nitrate, other than the flammability issue, you know. I mean, I don't mind working on a roll of nitrate, no matter how deteriorated it is. But you know what acetate is like. And, you know, everyone just kind of, everyone groans when, really nasty acetate comes in, because it's so foul.

(56:11 – 58:45) Anecdote about a nitrate film fire in the lab's New Jersey facility, and the potential danger of nitrate fires in projectors or printing machines.

ALLEN: But everything has changed. I, we have been through so much. I, one thing I didn't mention is, you know, talking about fires, I did have, back in New Jersey, in that fireproof room, I happened to be there when a researcher was rolling through a reel of film. And there was a lamp over the table, and they happened to have the lamp just a little too close to the film, and it was stretched across from rewind to rewind, and it burst into flames right in the middle of the film.

And the person is sitting there, you know, and I, fortunately, happened to be standing right in back of them, just by chance. And I grabbed the film and ripped a piece out of the middle and threw it on the floor and stamped on it. And that was the end of that. And the same thing happened in projectors. You know, we had projector files in that room, because we would

occasionally run nitrate film. And those projectors were capable, and, you know, more, less because I was concerned about the projector was set up correctly, but I was concerned about losing the film, I did the same thing with that. You know, I'd rip the film out of the projector and threw it on the floor, just the part that was burning.

You know, because you're, what we tell our people, what we've always told them who worked and do this work is if the roll catches on fire, you just leave. Don't be a hero, you know, because there's nothing you're going to be able to do about it. You know, once a roll starts cranking, there's nothing you can do. And we've never had that happen, ever.

Now printing machines don't really generate enough heat to, typically, to, under any circumstance, I mean, even if the film got jammed up, you know, it's not the kind of level you have in an arc projector, which is what we were using there. And so, you know, there's very, very little danger.

(58:46 – 59:36) Shipping policies for the lab and how shipping regulations have changed over time.

ALLEN: We are certified for shipping. You know, we take the courses. We have the certificates. We ship typically by FedEx, and we've been doing that since, you know, the beginning of all these regulations. And that really hasn't changed much, except they keep, you know, and now they're just making it tighter and tighter. You have to, you know, get certified more often, changing the laws. And, you know, and I can't say one way or another. I can't comment on those laws because they know more about what they're doing when it's in transport than I do. And I certainly wouldn't want to be in a plane with nitrate burning, you know. So, you know, it's a little different situation.

(59:37 – 1:03:01) Taking a common sense approach to the handling and storage of nitrate film, and the particular hazard of gases emitted during a nitrate fire.

ALLEN: Here, if something happened to, I mean, we haven't had something catch on fire in, since that one I told you about on the rewind tape, which is probably, gee, 40 years ago. But, you know, it's common sense. You know, you don't keep, you don't smoke near it. We don't, you know, there's no smoking in our building, period. The film is kept in a totally fireproof vault, completely isolated from the rest of the building, if there's any quantity at all.

And on a printing machine, there's no danger. You know, unless you're standing there with a cigarette, and you happen to, or you have a Tensor lamp on a table, but you just don't do that. And it's very straightforward. Nobody is frightened here of nitrate, in the least. I mean, it burns, you know, with the intensity of an oak log. I believe it's about 10,000 degrees, but that's just off the top of my head.

So it's really not all that hot. I mean, you know, but it, the problem is that once it starts, it just keeps going, and that's the big danger. So safety-wise, I don't want to see anyone get hurt. You know, let the building burn down, if necessary. But in actuality, you know, the building we're in is totally fireproof. It's all brick and concrete and steel, and so if anything did happen to ever happen, it would be very limited, you know. And the roll would burn, and it would burn out in minutes, you know.

And just make sure the gas, you know, it's the gas that is what gets you, yeah. And many projectionists, you know, had lost their lives due to sticking around in the vault, in the projection

room when the fire was going on. And, you know, if that roll is burning in a magazine, you can forget about it. You know, just get out. Get away from it.

And I've seen people do burn tests and stand in the clouds of smoke. I mean, I wouldn't do that. I'll tell you. You know, I don't know, it's, that's scary stuff. And if you don't die from it, you'd probably get some horrible cancer, you know. But I think, typically, it was very typical to die, many, many people lost their lives from those fires. And, you know, those booths were set up correctly, but the fatal mistake was the projectionist should have just been told to leave. But that was back in the day, and things, we did things differently back when than we do today, you know, so . . .

(1:03:02 – 1:08:38) Comments on contemporary nitrate vault construction, including facilities at George Eastman House; the Museum of Modern Art; and the National Audio-Visual Conservation Center in Culpepper, VA.

SLOPER: *I'm curious. You, I mean, you talked a little bit about the logic behind the regulations, like especially when you were talking about the sprinklers being put in your large facility. Are there other things like that, that you see happening, where there's like the standards aren't being interpreted in a real way, like in a useful way, like by people who are actually doing the work?*

ALLEN: Well, I'm out of the loop at this point. I mean, you know, I don't see much. I mean, there's not that much action. You know, other than seeing the Museum of Modern Art has their vaults within ten miles of where I am right now, and they were, they went around the world looking at different vaults to design theirs. But again, those were preservation vaults, you know, just like at LOC. They're designed in a very different way, and it's great, you know, and I'm sure it's outrageously expensive.

But so anything I've seen recently, or anything that still exists, is either no different than it was in 1940 or is current day, like LOC. I've seen, you know, some of their new vault systems, and we have all our stuff there and or MOMA or Eastman House. Actually, I haven't been to Eastman House's nitrate vaults. They've certainly invited me, but I don't think I ever made it out there.

But I, you know, their thinking, I know when they made theirs, I was a little privy to what they were thinking, and it made a lot of sense to me. You know, they took a big building, an existing building, and they built the vaults within with airspace all the way around within the building. And so there was a buffer between. Within from the outside wall there was airspace all the way around the entire, you know, inner core, which was the building that was that the spec building.

And that makes a really lot of sense to me, I mean, particularly, not so much in regard to fire, but for the comfort of the film and the stability of the environment, you know. That, I thought, was a really cool idea. It's, I mean, you know, a lot of these systems, they're a combination of different ideas. You know, I think MOMA, really, it was a custom thing. Their design was totally custom, you know.

And their, I don't know that, you know, I don't know if they went to NFPF and sought approval or how they exactly ended up doing it. And, you know, I just, it's kind of a non-interest of mine at this point. I don't have, you know, mine is sitting, my stuff is sitting down there.

SLOPER: *Yeah, it's not your problem anymore. It must be kind of a relief.*

ALLEN: It's Culpeper.

SLOPER: *Uh-huh.*

ALLEN: Yeah, well, you know, I mean, it was problematic. And in some ways, it's a relief. I mean, I wish it was here, actually, to be honest with you, but it also probably should be someplace like that. I mean, their facility is phenomenal down there. I mean, it's wonderful. And it's almost full, from what I understand, what I'm told. I don't think they have hardly any room left in the nitrate film space. They do have room for further expansion, I think, and I think so does MOMA, for that matter.

But I saw, you know, I saw a lot of vaults in New York City. Again, this would be, you know, '30s, '40s style, and, you know, it's pretty straightforward. You know, ours were square, the ones we built. Most of them in the city are narrow and long. You know, they're not wide. You have a rack on each side. These are not preservation nitrate vaults, they're just standard storage vaults. And so you just walk through the fire door, and there's racks on each side, all the way down. And it's quite long, you know, and it's only a rack on each side of you, and that's it.

You know, ours were racks all around the walls and then racks it the middle, but it was, they were designed, theoretically, to hold about 1,000 cans each, the ones we had. I think that's typical for a regular vault, you know. And beyond that, and to be perfectly honest, as far as all the latest action, you know, and I haven't participated, because I haven't had the time.

(1:08:39 – 1:10:14) The air pollution risks of nitrate film fires.

ALLEN: And I really probably couldn't add all that much, you know, other than what I'm doing right now. You know, this is my personal experience, and I still believe that under the right conditions that it should not be sprinklered. But certainly, in a building like New York City, you know, in a skyscraper or whatever, you have to do things like that. But if you're in the middle of nowhere, I personally believe that you're better off, from an air quality standard, to just let it burn out, you know.

And theoretically, our vaults, one would burn, and the rest wouldn't. I mean, all vaults are supposed to be set up that way. So theoretically, we would have lost, if we had a fire in our vaults, we would have lost one vault out of 10 or 11. We theoretically, we had about 11. So that's, and that's really, that's just a pollution issue more than anything else, air pollution. You know, it's really not a fire issue so much, I don't think.

SLOPER: *Yeah, that part doesn't get talked about quite as much.*

(1:10:15 – 1:12:48) The importance of common sense when handling nitrate film.

ALLEN: Yeah, well, you know, because the law, the rules are the way they wrote them, and mostly, it was based on the horrible things that happened like the x-ray film fire in . . . and, I mean, those were major events that really woke people up. And it was just, you know, it was, it's common sense. You know, if you have common sense, unfortunately, some people don't, that's the only catch. Everyone doesn't have common sense.

We have had fires where, we've had nitrate fires where, you know, it should have been limited to one vault. Not me. I didn't have it. But I'm not going to talk about who did, but the whole place went down, because, you know, all the doors were open. And, you know, that's not common sense. So that's pretty much it.

SLOPER: *I feel like that common sense line is a nice spot to wrap up, actually, because that's, actually, every person I've talked to, that has been kind of a leading, like it's not that complicated.*

ALLEN: Right.

SLOPER: *Yeah.*

ALLEN: And it's not dangerous. I, you know, the one thing, and I don't know if you've ever seen this, but in the '80s, I think this was, and we had this, we had a copy of it, someone did this wonderful cartoon about preservation lab, or a nitrate preservation lab. And it was absolutely hilarious. And, you know, it put forth every fallacy ever invented about nitrate film and expounded upon it. And it was like a poster, you know, and it was all these little cartoons about the lab exploding and everything. And so we though it was absolutely hilarious. But I lost track of it. I don't know whatever happened to that. I wish, you know, I don't know if . . . but if you ever see that, I would like a copy.

SLOPER: *Yeah, I'll send you a copy. It's got to be in an archive somewhere. This was great, Janice. Thank you so much.*