

William S. (Bill) O'Farrell Jr., 1954–2008



Image courtesy of the Cable Public Affairs Channel (CP AC). From "National Archives of Canada, Gatineau Preservation Centre Tour," broadcast 12 September 1997.

William S. (Bill) O'Farrell Jr., former head of Moving Image and Audio Conservation at the then National Archives of Canada passed away in Ottawa, Ontario at age 54 on Saturday, 30 August 2008. Bill worked at the National Archives from 1975, until his illness forced him to leave his position in 2002.

Over the years, Bill served as a mentor to many in the film archive profession in Canada and elsewhere. He will be remembered for his enthusiasm, imagination, knowledge, and sense of humour.

He began his career in moving images with Crawley Films and the federal Department of Urban Affairs. In 1975 he joined the then Public Archives of Canada as a film-vault technician. He quickly became responsible for the management of all film preservation projects at the archives. During Bill's tenure he oversaw numerous film restoration projects, including 550 reels of silent-era films excavated from Dawson City, Yukon Territory; the Flaherty collection of vintage 1896 Edison nitrate; the complete set of 106 Canadian Army newsreels; and the oldest surviving copy of the Canadian feature film "Back to God's Country." Sam Kula, the former director of the National Film, Television, and Sound Archives of the then Public Archives of Canada, acknowledged in his posting to the Association of Moving Image Archivists (AMIA) listserv on Sunday, 31 August that "what-

ever success we had in building a national collection of moving images for all Canadians was due greatly to his efforts.”

Bill also lectured at conferences and seminars, gave numerous workshops, and wrote on the subject of audio-visual preservation. He was an active member of AMIA, where he served as a member of the Executive Board, and also chaired its preservation and awards committees. He served as an advisor to various film archives in Canada and the United States, including Northeast Historic Film and the Chicago Film Archives. He was one of the recipients of the 1997 Film Preservation Honors from the Anthology Film Archives of New York, in recognition of his dedication and efforts in the field of film and video preservation.

Aside from all the valuable and important work he did at the National Archives of Canada throughout his long career, and his important contributions to the work of AMIA, Bill was a constant source of assistance, information, and general encouragement to the Canadian and international archival community on audio-visual matters. He encouraged, assisted, and mentored many across the globe – as witnessed by the many tributes that have been posted to the AMIA listserv. He was especially helpful to archivists in small institutions where there was little technical expertise, and even fewer physical and financial resources. He gave practical and helpful advice and encouragement to take care of the audio-visual heritage about which he was so passionate. He had a deep understanding and knowledge of the technical complexities of AV preservation, but he knew how to make it simple and practical to an archivist lacking that technical expertise. He made a difference.

As Nancy Marrelli’s posting to the AMIA listserv noted, “He cared about things: about film, about people, and so many other things. He moved us forward in the preservation of our moving image heritage through his dedication, hard work, long, long hours, and his powers of persuasion – all the while maintaining that playful and wicked sense of humour that all of us who knew him will never forget.”

He was a colleague, a mentor, a friend. His loss will be felt in audio-visual archives around the world.

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