

Sam Kula, 1932–2010



Image courtesy of Caroline Forcier-Holloway

If the audiovisual heritage community had a hall of fame, Sam Kula would be a top choice for the builders' category.

Although best known as an expert in film and video archiving, Sam's history degree from Concordia University gave him a shared background with his colleagues at the then Public Archives of Canada (PAC), where he first worked from 1954 to 1957. Some of his experiences in the Manuscript Division were summarized in a paper he delivered to the Canadian Historical Association in 1957.¹ It already displayed his interest in film-based archival material, and the special requirements for its cataloguing and preservation.

Sam left the federal public service in 1958 and moved to England, where he pursued post-graduate studies in library science at the University of London. He then began his specialization in film archiving as Deputy Curator of the National Film Archive of the British Film Institute from 1960 to 1962. At this time his first published articles began to appear, addressing film librarianship, film storage, and filmic literacy. He moved to the University of Southern California in 1962 to work as a librarian and to pursue further studies related to moving images. In 1968, this led to a position as archivist and the first Assistant Director of the newly founded American Film Institute in Washington, DC.

Sam returned to the PAC in 1973, to become first Chief, and then Director of the National Film Archives Division (NFA). While PAC had made some modest forays into acquiring film in earlier years, it was in 1973 that these activities were removed from Picture Division and formalized in their own separate division. The Historical Sound Recordings Unit moved into the NFA at the same time (though formal Cabinet approval did not occur until 1976). The long-standing responsibility for Canadian television production was acknowledged in 1980 when the Division was renamed the National Film, Television and Sound Archives (NFTSA). During Sam's thirteen-year tenure, he set the priorities, defended the division within a conventional, text-centric

1 Sam Kula, "The Preparation of Finding Aids for Manuscript Material on Microfilm," *The Canadian Archivist* 2 (1964), pp. 3–10.

organization, and launched a major acquisition program that formed the foundation of Canada's national collection of film, video, and audio heritage. Among the most significant acquisitions were the Canadian Film Institute collection, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation/Société Radio-Canada Fonds, the Dawson City Museum and Historical Society collection, the National Film Board of Canada Fonds, and the Crawley Film Fonds.

The rapid growth in holdings encouraged the staff to display a high degree of innovation and imagination, qualities inherent in Sam's approach to life. This, in turn, led to the development of internationally recognized expertise in archival automation, description, appraisal, and preservation. Under Sam's leadership, the Division automated archival description in the Moving Image and Sound Archives Control System (MISACS), which celebrates its 26th anniversary this year. In collaboration with the National Film Board and others, he ensured the continued publication of *Film/Video Canadiana*, an annual catalogue of Canadian film and video production, from 1980 to 1995.² Challenging acquisitions such as the Dawson City collection required the development of pioneering preservation techniques to stabilize the film emulsion damaged by burial in the Arctic permafrost. The restoration of *Back to God's Country*, a rare Canadian silent feature film, pushed the conservators' printing and tinting skills to the limit. The design and construction of a cold storage vault helped preserve the vibrancy of colour films; equipment was adapted to restore flexibility to brittle film stock, to remove scratches, and to rescue a wide range of near-obsolete video formats. Sam also shepherded Canada's first major exhibition on film, television, and radio history, *Beyond the Printed Word: Newsreel and Broadcast Reporting in Canada*, which opened in 1988.³ Before the department was reorganized in 1986, the division had forty-two employees and an operating budget of \$3 million. Years later, Sam delighted in teasing us when we admitted that he had overseen the Golden Age of audiovisual archiving in Ottawa. We would never have admitted it at the time, being so focused on asking Sam to get us more staff, more

- 2 Initially titled *Film Canadiana*, this annual inventory of Canadian film production was published by the Canadian Film Institute for the first decade (from the 1969–1970 to 1979–1980 edition). Beginning in 1980–1981, research and publication were taken over by the National Film, Television and Sound Archives Division (later the Moving Image and Sound Archives Division) of the then National Archives of Canada, in collaboration with the National Film Board of Canada, the National Library of Canada, and the Cinémathèque québécoise. The 1984–1985 edition was re-named *Film/Video Canadiana*, a title which remained in use until its final edition in 1995.
- 3 The exhibit produced two books: *Beyond the Printed Word: Newsreel and Broadcast Reporting in Canada = Au-delà de l'écrit : actualités filmées et reportages radio et télé diffusés au Canada*. (Ottawa, 1988), and Richard Lochead, ed., *Beyond the Printed Word: the Evolution of Canada's Broadcast news heritage = Au-delà de l'écrit : le patrimoine de la radio-télédiffusion des nouvelles du Canada* (Kingston, 1991), based on the proceedings of a symposium held at the National Archives of Canada from 20–22 October 1988.

funding, more profile, and more projects to meet all the needs of the audiovisual collection.

Sam's stewardship was all the more important because this was an era in which the archival profession in Canada was just beginning to standardize, and professional associations specializing in moving image and sound were forming to support the work. He was often present at the founding of organizations such as the Canadian Film Studies Association and the Association for the Study of Canadian Radio and Television. He served on the board of the Association of Canadian Archivists as a Director Without Portfolio from 1993 to 1995. He encouraged the development of audiovisual expertise in provincial and regional archives by offering advice, training, and financial support. The Open Vault series at the Toronto International Film Festival, which Sam organized and presented from 1984 to 1990, gave prominence to Canada's archival film heritage by highlighting recent film restoration projects and introducing many early Canadian productions to new audiences.

Outside Canada, Sam was a founding member of the Film Archives/Television Archives Advisory Committee (FAAC/TAAC). He also held executive positions in the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAP) and the International Federation of Television Archives (FIAT). He served as the first chair of the Working Group on Audiovisual Documentation of the International Council on Archives (ICA). From 1973 to 1987, he was a frequent contributor to ICA and UNESCO seminars and workshops. In 1983 UNESCO published his seminal study, *The Archival Appraisal of Moving Images: A RAMP Study With Guidelines*.⁴

In the later years of his career, Sam continued to search out new challenges. In 1987, he became the first Director of the Canadian Centre for Advanced Film Studies, founded by Norman Jewison. He returned to the National Archives of Canada to serve as Director of the West Memorial Building Project (Archives Headquarters Accommodation Project), and as Assistant Director General of Archives and Government Records Branch. He contributed to the June 1995 report, *Fading Away: Strategic Options to Ensure the Protection of and Access to Our Audio-Visual Memory*.⁵ Sam completed his federal government career at the Department of Canadian Heritage where he was Director of the Canadian Image Project, a millennial project designed to examine image and reality in the Canadian experience in the twentieth century

4 Sam Kula, *The Archival Appraisal of Moving Images : A RAMP Study with Guidelines*, prepared for the General Information Programme and UNISIST (Paris, 1983).

5 Task Force on the Preservation and Enhanced Use of Canada's Audio-Visual Heritage/ Groupe de travail sur la sauvegarde et la mise en valeur du patrimoine audio-visuel canadien, *Fading Away: Strategic Options to Ensure the Protection and Access to our Audio-Visual Memory = Patrimoine en peril : options stratégiques pour assurer la protection et l'accès à notre mémoire audio-visuelle* (Ottawa, 1995).

using archival resources.

In 1997, Sam “retired,” but only from the public service. He remained active in the world of archives after his formal retirement. In 1990, FAAC/TAAC had evolved into the Association of Moving Image Archivists (AMIA), the professional association representing the moving image heritage community in North America. In his first post-retirement job, Sam increased his participation to serve two terms as its President, from 1999 to 2003. AMIA honoured Sam in 2006 with its Silver Light Award, recognizing his major contributions and leadership in the field.

In addition to his role in AMIA, his many activities included membership on the Board of Directors of the AV Preservation Trust (1997–2009) and special advisor to the Canadian Cultural Property Export Review Board (2001–2003). He also conducted a major review of film footage of Canadian troops in the First World War held at the Imperial War Museum (London, England), the National Film Board of Canada, and Library and Archives Canada, in order to create an authoritative inventory.

Sam published widely throughout his career and he continued to do so during his retirement. His writing style was fluid and articulate. His personality frequently came through in his writing, reflecting his sense of humour and wide-ranging knowledge of, and love for, all things film. Sam could always coin a good title, such as “There’s Film In Them Thar Hills,” about the major find of nitrate film in Dawson City,⁶ and “Mea Culpa, How I Abused the Nitrate in My Life.”⁷ In the latter, Sam showed that he was not afraid to poke fun at himself while challenging the conventional wisdom about the storage of highly flammable nitrate film.

Retirement finally provided Sam with the time to tackle the particularly difficult issue of assigning monetary value to archival moving images. His book on the subject, *Appraising Moving Images: Assessing the Archival and Monetary Value of Film and Video Records*, was published in 2003.⁸ His involvement with the television series *Growing Up Canadian*⁹ (for which he is credited for the original concept), spurred him to write about the relationship between film and memory. His book on this subject remained unfinished at

- 6 Sam Kula, “There’s Film in Them Thar Hills,” *American Film* 4 (July–August 1979), pp. 14–18.
- 7 Sam Kula, “Mea Culpa, How I Abused the Nitrate in My Life,” *The Moving Image* 1 (Spring 2001), pp. 198–202. Also in Roger Smither, ed., *This Film is Dangerous: A Celebration of Nitrate Film* (Brussels, 2002), pp. 163–70.
- 8 Sam Kula, *Appraising Moving Images: Assessing the Archival and Monetary Value of Film and Video Records* (Lanham, MA, 2003).
- 9 *Growing Up Canadian* is a 6-part documentary series produced between 2001 and 2003. It explores the myths and realities of Canadian childhood through family life, schooling, work, play, health, and the media, extensively using home movies to illustrate the discussion. The series is currently available from the National Film Board of Canada.

the time of his death in Ottawa on 8 September 2010.

Several years ago, Sam told friends that he was going to wind down his active participation in archival associations, his work as a consultant, and as an appraiser of archival film collections, a phase he dubbed his “second retirement.” In his work, in his retirement, and in his second retirement, Sam kept in touch with colleagues around the world, and many colleagues became friends. He was a mentor to several generations of archivists, and his foundational work continues to guide the profession both in Canada and internationally.

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