New home for historic films and broadcasts

The original negative of “Casablanca” is in a former Federal Reserve facility that holds the world's biggest audiovisual collection. (Everett Collection)

By Susan Decker, Bloomberg News  |  August 31, 2007

“Casablanca” and “Gone With the Wind” are finding refuge in a Cold War-era bunker near Virginia's Shenandoah Valley.

The original negatives of those classic films are part of the world's biggest audiovisual collection, held by the Library of Congress. Their new home is a radiation-hardened building once used by the Federal Reserve to store cash and emergency supplies in the event of a nuclear attack.

Archivists are filling the facility with more than 6 million items - films, audio recordings, television shows, posters, screenplays, and musical scores - gathered from storage sites across the United States. They're on the lookout for treasures such as the recently unearthed 1957 Carnegie Hall concert by Thelonius Monk.
and John Coltrane and the uncensored version of the 1933 Barbara Stanwyck film “Baby Face.”

“That’s what’s so amazing. That’s why I started this mission,” says Gregory Lukow, chief of the library’s motion picture, broadcasting, and recorded sound division.

By January, the National Audio-Visual Conservation Center will open to scholars for research. Its 45-acre campus sits aside Pony Mountain near Culpeper, an hour away from Washington, D.C.

The audiovisual collection holds copies of the first films ever made, including “The Great Train Robbery” (1903). It has kinescopes of the earliest black-and-white television shows of comedians such as Milton Berle and Ernie Kovacs; copies of every US movie produced since 1940 and many before that, and radio broadcasts of historic events such as troops landing on Guam in World War II.

“This facility will allow us to preserve them and make them accessible to the public at a faster rate than ever before,” Lukow says.

Only a portion of the 420,000-square-foot facility will be open to everyone: an entry hall with exhibition area and a 208-seat Art Deco movie theater, which has a replica of a Wurlitzer organ to play the soundtracks for silent films.

Nonprofessionals may gain access to the collection at the library’s 21 reading rooms on Capitol Hill and via the Internet. New technology is being used to convert artifacts to digital form.

“We have a lot of things here that really help us to preserve this material for future generations,” says Mike Mashon, head of the library’s moving-image unit.

For sound recordings, the facility has a turntable developed at Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory that uses optical images to read deep into the grooves of LPs and 78s, even ones that are warped or broken.

Some items, such as Thomas Edison’s first film, a 7-second short from 1894 known as “Fred Ott's Sneeze,” will remain in Washington at the Library of Congress.

Culpeper is a 248-year-old town of 13,000 where both Confederate and Union troops encamped. The Federal Reserve built its underground shelter there in 1969 to house $3 billion in coin and currency, to pump into the economy in case of nuclear attack.

The bunker was decommissioned in 1993, after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The building was sold to the nonprofit Packard Humanities Institute. The institute spent $155 million to convert it into a storage area for the National Audio-Visual Conservation Center. The transformation included removing a gun turret, steel plates 6 inches thick over windows, and a vault door that took months to cut through. The group then returned the building to the government - the biggest gift to the legislative branch in US history, Lukow said. The library took possession last month.

The former Fed building is now a climate-controlled environment for master copies of films, including the negatives of “Casablanca,” “Gone With the Wind” and Warner Bros. cartoons from the 1930s.

A newly built area contains vaults for nitrate films, the highly flammable material that has brought the loss of many great films over the years. The facility includes a 1,500-square-foot vault for this material, and the library will work with Congress to build a “national vault” in Washington and another in Culpeper.

For more information, visit http://www.loc.gov/avo/
flammable type used in most movies before 1950. Each has shelving
to hold just one or two reels and sprinklers overhead.

Eventually, the glass-and-concrete facility will almost fade into Pony
Mountain, covered by native plants and trees to help integrate the
building with its setting.

Culpeper will benefit from jobs the library is bringing, according to the
local Chamber of Commerce. The town’s oldest movie theater is
being renovated and plans to stage film festivals with old movies from
the archives, says Diane Logan, director of Culpeper Renaissance
Inc., a group fostering downtown revitalization.

The archives building was designed with capacity for works produced
during the next 25 years. By then, most recordings on magnetic tape
will be transferred to digital files, making room for new submissions.

``We're in the forever business,'' Lukow said. ``We don't want to
decide what people 10 years, let alone 100 years from now, will
consider important.

``People sometimes live to regret what was not kept 50 years ago.''

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