

A POTENTIALLY “EXPLOSIVE” FIND IN SOHS’S COLLECTION

By Ron Kramer

Speaking of early motion pictures, President Woodrow Wilson said, “It’s like writing history with lightning.” The author of a documentary on early film observed, “Film was born of an explosive.” And both were essentially true.

From the time of the invention of motion pictures, the stock on which movies were made and exhibited was made of cellulose nitrate, a highly flammable substance used as a replacement for gun powder explosives. It was dangerous, but it produced highly desirable photographic results—which accounts for it not being replaced entirely by the movie studios with a safety film alternative until 1952.

A story is told about noted early filmmaker Robert Flaherty, whose *Nanook of the North* 1922 documentary remains “one of the most significant American documentaries.” During an early stage when Flaherty was working on the film, a flickering cigarette flame fell onto the nitrate stock and the whole film and laboratory went up in flames. Flaherty’s “clothes were on fire, so he ran out onto the street, where the local chemist knocked him down and put him out.” As seems self-evident, early nitrate films present special storage issues.

You never quite know what you might find in SOHS’s remarkable collection. In February, I learned that SOHS has a collection of 35mm nitrate film which has been in refrigerated storage for as long as anyone at SOHS can remember. One title particularly intrigued me: *An Equal Chance*.

The 1920 film was produced by the National Association for Public Health Nursing and is a dramatized documentary

on the 1918-1919 Spanish Flu pandemic and the issues it presented for medical professionals. Clearly, this was an extremely timely and important film.



Nitrate film can disintegrate even when in properly refrigerated storage.

This image is not from our collection!

Photo Source:

<https://ansp.org/exhibits/online-exhibits/stories/saving-archival-treasure>

It’s important to note that cinema 100 years ago didn’t commonly produce documentaries of the type that we now associate with that term. Accordingly, both *Nanook of the North* and *An Equal Chance* rely upon dramatization based on the filmmaker’s real-life exploration of a topic to tell their story.

In March 2022 SOHS reached out to the San Francisco-based National Film Preservation Foundation to explore what we might do to obtain a safety-film copy of *An Equal Chance* and were encouraged to try to determine whether any other copies of this film existed. Given contact information to pose that question to various film archives and archivists, we found that it appears that

SOHS possesses the only extant copy.

We were quickly encouraged to apply to the NFPF for a grant to cover the cost of making a safety film copy as well as a digitized version for easy use online – and we have filed such an application for grant funding the project.

Once we have a safe way of sharing this film with you and public, we’ll do so. In the meantime, you can be enticed with the knowledge that this is but one of many 35mm nitrate films in our collection.

We’ve just begun exploring!