

Research Incentive Grant Report

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In November 2009, I traveled to Western Australia for research activities in support of projects described in my sabbatical leave application. For this leave I had two major projects that I wanted to begin: 1-Weather Permitting: The Outdoor Picture Gardens of Early Twentieth Century Western Australia, and 2-Guide to Early Film Studies: Research and Resources.

For several years I have planned to be able to undertake a research project on the inter-war outdoor cinemas of Western Australia, and the sabbatical represented my first opportunity to devote the time necessary to uncovering the history of this venue of film exhibition while also developing a parallel practical resource for film history researchers. Largely a result of my recent interactions with the film studies program at IUB, I recognized a need for and I wanted to write a guide to research in early cinema studies.

As I stated in my application:

“The purpose of this nascent project is to research the early twentieth century phenomenon of outdoor picture gardens in Western Australia. Frequently connected to an indoor cinema, these outdoor movie theatres were purpose built for film exhibition.

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My proposed research on the outdoor picture garden would fill a gap in the literature of film exhibition. While there has been much written on the experience of film watching, the theories of audience reception and reaction, and the practice of early film exhibition particularly in the United States, the outdoor picture garden in Australia has been relegated to a virtual footnote. In spite of the numerous monographs that cover the history of movie houses, nickelodeons, and drive-in theatres, little time has been given to the study of these open air cinemas. The outdoor picture garden is mentioned in film literature rather off-handedly when it was an appendage that happened to be connected to an indoor theatre or an historic cinema building that is undergoing conservation repair or is in the process of becoming a part of the national historic register of buildings. Sun Pictures, a still functioning picture garden in Broome, Western Australia, advertises itself with anecdotal reference to its history. There is not, however, a methodical study of these venues of exhibition. In fact, the most extensive treatment of the outdoor picture garden is found in a short essay sponsored by the National Trust of Australia. These structures are part of a vanishing history of early film. Like many early films that have disappeared due to unstable media on which they were created, these theatres have also fallen in to disrepair, no longer used and often demolished.”

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Grant funding from InULA helped me to be able to start this new endeavor in my professional development activities. This is a new type of research for me, and in an area that is largely under-examined. A short summary of my research trip follows.

I conducted much background research without travelling by using the Indiana University Libraries' wealth of film and other historical resources. Before leaving for Australia I was able to develop a preliminary reading list for a literature review that reflected predominantly a contemporary interest in outdoor film showing.

My research in Australia was limited by available funding, so I had to take advantage of libraries for discovery of potential resources that I was then able to obtain from home. Using local discovery tools to determine what resources existed made it possible for me to access them at a later date.

My priority for the research trip was to use municipal historical societies, local libraries, museums, and importantly locally run township visitors' centers often run in part by historical societies throughout the state of Western Australia. Many conversations with storekeepers, campground attendants, visitors' center volunteers, librarians, and museum staff pointed me in new directions and added entertaining anecdotal tales to my research. Local newspapers and ephemera were a major source of information about outdoor picture gardens, what they screened, and community reaction to and reception of these businesses and their entertainment offerings. Through a small note on a museum exhibit I learned that these venues were often the only public space in which white and Aboriginal Australians were allowed to assemble, a feature that was a new discovery for me.

I was able to locate the sites of scores of former outdoor picture gardens and returned with hundreds of photographs of theatres or what they have become. Similarly, I returned with a large bibliography of primary and secondary resources that I have been moving through since my return.

My sabbatical application included a second project that I wanted to pursue:

“I also plan to use my research experience to create a different type of product... Based on the predicted wide and interdisciplinary variety of resources I expect to have to use for the first part of my research project, I want to develop a monograph, or a bibliographic essay, that will take film studies researchers through the logical steps from developing a research project to successfully accomplishing that research.”

I have completed the edited manuscript of my second book on literary research for Scarecrow Press, *Literary Research in the Literatures of Australia and New Zealand*, which is now in the galley stage. My experience with this series places me in a recognized position of authority and ability to develop quality publications for all levels of researchers. Early film studies is an area in need of a solid and thorough research guide, one that crosses international boundaries to touch all national film industries in the first several decades of the twentieth century. Scarecrow is interested in this type of guide.

I will continue to grow this project in a range of outlets, from conferences to monographic publications. Currently I am looking for conference outlets to present my ideas and am excited to continue the promising start to what is certain to be an enduring research interest.

