



BELONG ING

»»» GREATARTSSTORIES
FROM REGIONAL AUSTRALIA «««





The Farmer's Cinemathèque

A luminous community archive



Rupanyup, VIC

One of the things I'm always looking for when I'm making films with regional communities is good vision to illustrate complex themes. Photographs can be useful but if you can find good movie footage it's even better.

Ten years ago I had an exhibition of work at Horsham Regional Gallery. A local farmer from Rupanyup, John Teasdale, came in to have a look. He told me he was a keen amateur cinematographer and asked if I'd be interested in having a look at his films. He'd made these films over a long period of time at his farm and around his community. His father, Relvy, had also been a cinematographer and the earliest films in the Teasdale archive go back to the 1930s. There's footage of an Indian hawker with his horse and cart at the Teasdale farm and there's film of sowing crops with really early tractors - material that's historically very important.

When I saw his archive I was just gobsmacked. It was like coming across a gold mine: this archive is far and away the best collection of amateur cinematography I've found anywhere.

John was incredibly generous. When I met him he'd been recently diagnosed with cancer and didn't have that long to live. He died within a year but during that time we developed a rapport. Since his death, I've maintained a good working relationship with his widow, his son and grandsons and his sister. They're a really lovely family.

There's about twelve hours of film in the archive - that's a lot of material to work with. John had very good cinematic technique and did a lot of editing in the camera.

Some of the films I like best are where John is filming a local event. He spends a little bit of time filming the spectacle but most of his time he's filming the people who are there - beautiful portraits of people being together as a community. In the latter months of John's life, he set up a digitising facility and he also recorded narration for some of the films. The narration is incredibly moving to me. He talks with the particular manner of a farmer and he does these terrific recitations of names of people and places. Many of those people are gone now of course, so in a sense these films are a litany of ghosts, even though family names often live on in the district. John's intimate knowledge of people and how they relate together is one of the things that strikes me most.

My work with the film archive has evolved over a long period of time. Sometimes you've got to be patient and allow work to marinate slowly. I've used material from the Teasdale films within quite a few projects over the past few years. And I've had various collaborators who've brought their own perspective and skills to the project - that's enabled it to develop a real depth and richness. The National Film and Sound Archive have agreed to acquire the celluloid films so ultimately they will be housed there, but the Teasdale family will still own the rights. Museum Victoria supported me to catalogue the archive. I'm currently developing a one-hour documentary film that tells the story of the collection and explores its underlying meanings.

Our working title is *The Farmer's Cinemathèque*. A cinemathèque in this context is a film archive or library. We use the films as a kind of trigger and look for storytellers who can add layers of meaning. Some of the characters in the films are still around: one of these is John Teasdale's younger sister, Acey, now in her 70s. She's worked as an anthropologist and a clinical psychologist and lived in various parts of the world but she still considers herself to be very much a farmer's daughter, defined more than anything by her Rupanyup origins. She's a great storyteller.

One of the things that the films reveal is an intimate knowledge of country held by multi-generational farming families. I reckon there are some interesting synergies here with the sense of country held by many Aboriginal people.

"These films document a level of social wealth that has been severely diminished. Yet the town and district have survived."

We did a presentation of work-in-progress last year at the Wimmera Machinery Field Day. Rupanyup people could see their ancestors, people they might just know from a photo on a mantelpiece, suddenly walking and talking.

But this project isn't just an exercise in nostalgia. The farming economy has rationalised so enormously in recent times: there's half the number of people in Rupanyup now than there was in the 1950s. These films document a level of social wealth that has been severely diminished. Yet the town and district have survived. We want to highlight the resilience of this community while remembering what has been lost.

It's quite unusual now to have a multi-generational connection to the place you live: the place where your parents and your grandparents lived and where your children might live too. This is a big issue for all of us. How do we care about and look after places if we're just passing through? We can only do it properly if we've got a real connection. It's all just scenery and airport lounges otherwise, isn't it?

Dog tricks at neighbour's farmyard, 1961

Dawn and Peter, 1965

Maypole at Rupanyup show, 1954

ALL STILLS | JOHN TEASDALE

