

# WASHINGTON COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY



## News Release

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WCHS Historic Sites Supervisor  
Kirsta Benson is shown with the  
extensive Runk motion film  
collection donated to the WCHS.

## WCHS Acquires Historic John Runk Motion Film Collection

### Collection Offers a Moving, Visual Window into Mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century Washington County Life

The Washington County Historical Society has received an extensive collection of 8mm and 16mm motion film from the collection of John Runk, the prolific Stillwater photographer who extensively documented Washington County life during much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The 48 reels of film were donated by Runk's grand nephew, Jim Runk, who lives in Lindstrom, Minn. Runk donated the material to WCHS after he grew concerned about the preservation of the films. He knew WCHS was the best steward to preserve and share this rare media collection.

“This is a remarkable addition to our collection, said WCHS Executive Director Brent Peterson. “We know of Runk’s passion for still photography, but this rare motion film collection offers the community actual moving pictures of life in Washington County and elsewhere in Minnesota during the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century,” Peterson added. “These are amazing films that will be researched and enjoyed for generations.”

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### **Historic Footage**

While the films must be transferred to DVD for safe-keeping and viewing, Runk's meticulous labeling on the film cans provides insight into the subject matter captured. One reel includes footage of the last operational streetcar in Minnesota, an historic event that occurred in Minneapolis June 18, 1954.

Other reels include rare film footage of the Minnesota State Fair from the 1940s and 1950s, film of Andersen Windows and the Marine Ferry from 1948, 1940s film of log rolling and other views of Stillwater and St. Croix river activities, general "neighborhood fun" from the same era, and what appears to be significant footage of national events captured on movie newsreels such as programs entitled *Arctic Thrills* and *America's Wonderlands*. Another film reel is labeled "1947 World Series" which pitted the New York Yankees against the Brooklyn Dodgers (Yankees won in seven games).

"Once we have these films transferred to a digital format, we'll know more about the scope of the content and the context in which it was captured. Runk's photography business was upstairs of a local movie theatre for a time so it's possible he filmed the newsreels as they played on the movie screen," Peterson said.

Also included in the donated items are Runk's Kodascope film projector, many rolls of still film, old 45 records, and examples of the device Runk invented to clean the grooves in phonograph records. The *Kleantone* device was first patented in the U.S. in November 1921, and later in Canada. The *Kleantone* product reflected Runk's lifelong parallel interest in music and phonographs.

WCHS is seeking contributions to defray the estimated \$2,500 cost for transferring the film reels to digital format. A public viewing of the Runk film collection is planned for a later date.

### **Detailed, Meticulous, Committed to Purpose**

Runk, a bachelor who devoted countless hours to his historic and meticulous photography work, was perhaps Washington County's premiere early adopter. His studio had a telephone in 1908. He owned one of the first phonographs in Stillwater and later bought the first black and white television in the community from Simonet Furniture and Carpeting Company. Runk was the first to use electric lights in the taking of portraits. When 8mm and 16mm film became available to capture moving pictures, Runk began to experiment with the new technology. He filmed many of the same events also captured in still photographs.

Runk died in 1964. “My only wish,” he said prior to his death, “is to leave something in Stillwater when I pass away which will live and perpetuate for all time the history of this region.”

“Because of John Runk’s dedication to recording county history, citizens today and the generations that follow can see actual moving pictures of what life was like here more than half a century ago,” Peterson said. “This film is a wonderful addition to an epic still photo collection which is preserved and shared at the Washington County Historical Society and the Stillwater Public Library.”

A new biographical article on John Runk, researched and written by WCHS intern Allison Drtina of Woodbury, is available at [www.wchsmn.org](http://www.wchsmn.org).

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Founded in 1934, the Washington County Historical Society is a private, donor-supported, nonprofit organization with more than 700 individual, family, and business members. WCHS is supported by individual gifts, memberships, earned income, and foundation grants. For more information, please visit [www.wchsmn.org](http://www.wchsmn.org).

**Media Advisory:**

To schedule an interview to discuss this historic addition to the WCHS collection, please contact WCHS Executive Director Brent Peterson at 651-439-5956.