

Andy Uhrich, New York University. “The Role of Wrestling in Early Broadcast Television: Preserving the Syndicated TV Films of Russ Davis”

Wrestling was first televised in Chicago on July 10, 1946 on the only station in the area, WBKB. The sport quickly became one of the most popular programs in the market and it played an integral role in the growth of television spectatorship. While most if not all of those early broadcasts were never recorded, the syndicated wrestling television show distributed by Chicago area announcer Russ Davis and his production company IWF during the early 1950s offers a look into this under examined aspect of TV history. This paper will examine the collection of IWF films held under the auspices of the Chicago Film Archives from both a historical and archival perspective and will investigate the ways the two reinforce each other. As historical objects the films allow for a study of a popular television from the 40s and 50s very different from the idea of the time as the medium’s Golden Age. Additionally, they express a raw view into the era’s opinions on ethnicity, race, and gender. As archival objects they present a very particular set of problems. Since they are from a syndicated TV program shot on film they fall outside of most funding opportunities for film preservation. Further, even naming the program is complicated by the fact that the local stations that rented the films added the title sequences at the time of broadcast. Unfortunately, these elements are not known to exist.

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