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Intro to MIAP
Final Paper

**Small Town Archive, Big Time Problems: The WBHS-34 Video Archive
PART I- Assessment of the Collection**

Introduction

When I first decided to enter the archival field I knew that one of my major concerns was going to be addressing the problems of small archives. During my undergraduate program I had an internship at the Rowan University Archives, a relatively small and most definitely underfunded archive. I saw how difficult it could be for small archives to survive and properly maintain their collections and knew I wanted to do something to help.

When the final project for Intro to MIAP was explained I knew that the project gave me an opportunity to help one of these small forgotten collections that I care so much about. I also immediately knew which collection I had in mind, one that I was already quite familiar with. I attended Belleville High School in Belleville, New Jersey. Belleville is a relatively small, lower-middle class, town with a fairly normal high school. However, Belleville High School has something special that not every other high school has: a fully functioning television station.

WBHS History

WBHS-34 dates back over thirty years to 1980, when English teacher, Marilyn McCabe, had a dream to start a school television station. With much fighting and hard work she was able to convince the Board of Education to help fund the program. McCabe's husband, Jack McCabe built the original studio, a small room on the first floor of the high school and WBHS-34 was born. The station is a completely student-run, and because it is funded by the Board of Education, it was revolutionary for being the first New Jersey state funded project of its kind.

Since 1980 WBHS-34 has come a long way. According to the WBHS website throughout the years former WBHS students have worked at ABC, CBS, WWOR, MTV, Atlantic Records, ESPN, Warner Brothers, and more.¹ One alumna, Ines Rosales (2000), is now a weekday traffic reporter for Fox TV's morning show. She recently came back to talk to the students about her experiences in the field.² In the course of the stations history students have been back stage at Billy Joel and Iron Maiden concerts and in the Yankee locker room.³ Soon the program expanded beyond one class. The Mass Communication program is now comprised of three individual classes: The first focusing on radio and interpersonal communication, the second on television history, and the final television production.

Today the WBHS is in a larger studio upstairs with newer equipment. In the last few years they have acquired new editing equipment, laptops, teleprompters, news desk, interview couch, and they even painted a green screen on one wall. Their next goal is digital cameras. However, as New Jersey educational budget cuts grow, little of the money for this equipment comes from the Board of Education. The students hold regular fundraisers to keep the station growing. So far the fundraising campaign has been successful, but with students having to pay for new equipment and even field trips there is little wiggle room to spend on preservation concerns.

¹ "WBHS Homepage," <http://www.belleville.k12.nj.us/Bhs/WBHS34/WBHSHome.htm>.

² Maria Karidis, "Fox Anchor's Career Dream Started at BHS," Belleville Times, September 30, 2010, http://www.northjersey.com/news/104104709_Fox_anchor_s_career_dream_started_at_BHS.html.

³ Aliza Appelbaum, "After 30 Years Belleville TV Station Still Inspiring Young Broadcasters," Star Ledger, October 1, 2010, http://www.nj.com/news/local/index.ssf/2010/10/after_30_years_belleville_tv_s.html.

The Collection

Despite the final classes focus on television production, any Belleville High School student, especially those in the Mass Communications Program, who is taught to use a WBHS camera, can shoot a local event for use on the station. With a thirty-year history and three classes a year worth of audiovisual materials collected, it is needless to say that WBHS-34 has amassed a sizable collection of videotape. When I visited the station for this project I was already somewhat familiar with the collection. I had worked with the collection once before, as a senior in high school. I had volunteered to stay after class and organize the piles of loose tapes on shelves in the two editing rooms of the new studio. I remember there was little left from the early 1980s only a few tapes. We had some cases to place the tapes in, but we soon ran out. I was also disheartened, because my brother said he had also volunteered to organize the tapes again a full two years after I had graduated, and all of my original work had been undone.

As I had feared when I first saw the collection it was in obvious disarray. The collection is still separated into two editing rooms on narrow wooden shelves. Tapes are not only on these shelves, but also on the editing tables, and haphazardly around the studio control room. The first editing room holds the newer archival tapes from the late 1990s onward. These tapes are in plastic cases with labels. The labels do not describe what footage is on the tape, but instead have only the year on the label in large print. They are loops of all of the footage from each year so that they can easily be playing on the station all day during classes. The videos along the wall are all standing upright, vertically in plastic archival video cases.

The second room, which houses all of the videos made before 1998, has no organization. This room houses far more tapes than the first. None of these have plastic cases. Some have cardboard covers, while others are completely unprotected. Some of these are looped tapes for a

specific year, some are individual events, and yet others are a mystery. The tapes along one wall of the second room are on deeper shelves than the first room. There are two rows of tapes. In back there are tapes standing upright and vertical, and in front of these there is another row lying vertically, but on their sides. There is an area where the view of the tapes is obstructed by various station ephemera. Along the other wall there is shelves with taped stacked horizontally, one on top of the other. There is as many as ten tapes in a stack.

The more consistently used tapes are not in either editing room. They are in various places around the control room. Some are stacked in a metal cabinet next to the VCRs and DVD players. Others are lying on a desk, and finally the newest DVDs are in a separate cabinet next to the control room door.

Access Problems

Before the preservation problems of this collection are discussed at length, I feel the need to make a few comments about the access concerns relating to the WBHS-34 collection, because access and preservation go hand in hand when caring for a collection. Belleville High School allows almost completely open access to the WBHS video collection. Any former student or parent can view a video, request an event played on the station, or even borrow a tape if they contact the station. However, a major concern is that few people know the collection exists. Belleville High School is not an official archival institution, and it is not advertised as holding an archival collection. The closest the station gets to allowing anyone know about the collection is a notice on the station in between shows stating that any requests can be called into the station.

When on the rare occasion someone does call in a request there are serious problems finding the footage being requested. There is no inventory list, database, or finding aid for the collection. What is even more troublesome is that many tapes are mislabeled or labeled not on

the outside case, but on the front of the tape. In order to find a specific event one would have to track down the right year on the outside label, in the case of the newer videos with plastic cases, and then read the inside label for every tape from that year. Finding a specific event from earlier than 1998 proves almost impossible. According to Ryan Sheridan, the current station director and Mass Communication III teacher, the time it takes to track down footage is simply not worth it when there are other more important issues to handle and there is little demand for access.

The apparent lack of demand may stem from the fact that outside of former Belleville High School students and their relatives few know the collection exists. There are plenty of community events that would be of interest to local organizations unrelated to the school, but if they do not know the footage is at their disposal than it will never be used.

Preservation Problems

One troubling thing I noticed immediately as I entered the first editing room was the how warm the room was. I was informed that these rooms, when not in use, were kept closed and locked. Computers are frequently running in the rooms as well creating heat. There is no temperature-controlled environment. When the tapes leave the overheated editing room they enter into an air conditioned control room, and are subsequently placed into a VCR, which will heat the tape again. Another environmental issue is the messy nature of the editing rooms. In the room with the older tapes there is equipment and WBHS ephemera strewn about. In some cases this was on top of the tapes. There was even an empty lunch tray sitting on top of some tapes.

Many of the tapes are not in the ideal position on the shelves. Tapes should be standing on their sides, label side up. Most of the tapes are standing upright or worse stacked horizontally one on top of the other. In the room with the newer tapes the shelves are far too thin to

accommodate placing the tapes in the proper position. In fact, both rooms are far too small to house the constantly growing collection. The tapes should have multiple rows in front of others.

The worst news I received during my assessment of the collection came from Sal Mauriello, Mass Communication II teacher, television historian, and avid collector of archival television footage. Mauriello has the second largest private television collection in the country and knows something about audiovisual preservation and types of damage. When asked about the collection he shook his head. He then went on to say that at this point much of the earlier tapes are trash. They have severe drop-off, clogged heads, and some simply have lost all magnetism and no longer play. Mr. Sheridan added to the bad news by explaining that some of the tapes may have been exposed to magnets in order to erase certain sections of material in order to reuse the tapes. Unfortunately, time constraints did not allow me to see this damage for myself, because finding the damaged tapes would have proved difficult in the unorganized state the collection is currently in.

Possible Venues for Relocation of the Collection

After seeing the state of the WBHS collection the first priority was to see if I could find a home better suited to take care of an archival videotape collection. Mr. Sheridan had mentioned that there had been some talks with the Belleville Public Library about housing the collection, but nothing had ever come to fruition. Initially this sounded like it might be the best thing for the collection. The public library would certainly have more room for the collection and it would solve many of the access concerns the collection currently faces. However, a visit to the library proved that it might not be the best place for the collection after all.

I talked with the Reference Librarian, who informed me that they have very little in the way of audiovisual materials. She showed me their DVD collection and where their tape

collection used to be. Recently they have sent the videos to an outside company to have the videos transferred to DVD and then the original copies were destroyed. Their special collections and local history collections were of interest to me as well. I asked if they had an archivist I could speak with and if any special care was taken with this collection. I was disheartened to be told that the archivist had recently retired and had not been replaced. The collection is seldom used and they do not have money to give it any special attention. The reference librarian said that they basically protect the materials as is, because they do not have the funding to do any more than that.

The library may be able to provide more access and possibly a bit more space, but the library conditions seemed fairly similar to that at the High School. The library was heated and relatively warm. There is no one with expertise in taking care of audiovisual material, and there was not even much more space in the library for new materials than there was at the High School.

One other option to be considered would be to move the collection into the High School Library. There is some shelf space that could be used to house the tapes. It tends to be cooler in the library than in the overheated editing rooms and there would be more visible access to the public and students. While this location would not be ideal it might be the best option at the current time unless a sizable donation is made to help fund the project elsewhere.

Conclusion

Even with the physical damage and disorganization of the WBHS collection there exists one more pressing problem that without a solution will make anything else I suggest futile. The attitude toward the collection is one of disinterest bordering on hostility. The current director

seemed to see the collection as more of a headache than anything else. He much preferred to talk about future plans for the studio than focus on the past. He even suggested that they considered throwing out the archival footage. Even Mr. Mauriello, who has a vested interest in both audiovisual materials and the past, viewed much of the collection as “trash.” Disinterest leads to neglect, and it is obvious that is what has occurred in this situation. Those in charge need to be reeducated before anything else can happen to preserve the collection. The WBHS is important to local history and the history of Belleville High School. If interest can be fostered in the collection then it still stands a chance of surviving.

Part II- Preservation Plan for WBHS-34

Introduction

After closely examining the video archive for WBHS-34 some serious preservation concerns have come to light. Without serious modifications the WBHS collection will be damaged beyond the point of salvage. The following report outlines some ways in which WBHS can better manage their video collection and ensure its future safety. The report takes into account some of the unique challenges WBHS faces as being a small collection in a public school setting. Specifically the limited funds and resources available to WBHS will be addressed.

The report is organized into three main sections; each explains what can be done to help the collection with differing levels of effort. The first section will contain the most pressing issues facing the collection. These are steps that must be taken as soon as possible in order to slow the currently rapid deterioration of the collection. Also in this section will be simple steps that can be taken without the need of outside resources or much monetary support. The second section will highlight important long-term steps that should be taken to improve the condition of the collection. These steps can be delayed for some time, but should eventually be considered. The suggestions in the second section may require more effort and monetary support. The final section outlines the ideal goals for a video collection. These suggestions will be a reach for a small institution to accomplish, but must be included so that WBHS knows what the archival standards are for a video collection. It is my sincere hope that this report can be used as a motivational tool and a catalyst to improve the current state of the WBHS-34 video collection.

Why Save the WBHS-34 Video Collection?

An important and valid question to consider before undertaking any preservation project is whether the collection is worth preserving. In the case of the WBHS collection a strong case can be made in favor of preservation. The reasons to save the collection are threefold. WBHS-34 footage is valuable as reference for students, as local history, and as institutional history.

As reference material students can gather inspiration from those who came before them. For instance, if the collection were properly catalogued a student working on a cooking program might get started by looking at a previously recorded cooking program. A class might also look at the types of television shows shot in the past to gather ideas. In this way, the collection could ultimately serve as an active learning tool.

The collection has historical value to both Belleville High School and Belleville as a whole. The High School is clearly proud of its communication program. Having a collection dating back to 1981 gives BHS bragging rights that might not be felt as strongly without visual proof. Belleville as a whole has an important record of local events thanks to WBHS. Potentially local organizations could utilize the collection for research or for commemorative events. However, for the collection to serve any kind of relevant purpose it must first be better managed.

Simplest Preservation Plan

At the very basest level there are some actions that can be taken to improve the life and quality of the collection. Although it would be better to go beyond this simplest level of care, the resources available to Belleville High School and the Mass Communication Program are limited in time, money, and manpower. The following suggestions take these concerns into account and provide the most cost efficient methods of care.

The first and most important step to improving the condition of the collection is figuring out what exactly it is you have. Taking an inventory of what is in the collection and assessing the condition of the material is crucial to any preservation plan. If the program cannot process the entire collection at first then the oldest tapes should be assessed first. Those tapes are the most in danger of being ruined or permanently damaged. The newer tapes are already labeled and stored in plastic cases and are of secondary concern, but should not be forgotten.

Ask for volunteers among the Mass Communication students, or even students outside of the program to work on this project. If there are time constraints and it is impossible to watch individual videotapes at least make sure to note any labels and any visible damage to the tapes. Be conscious though that if any real cataloguing attempt is desired videos may need viewing to get proper information. Create a spreadsheet to compile your information. The amount and type of information you want to include is up to the program. This may also be a good time to figure out some organizational system for referencing videotapes, such as a numbering system.

When examining the videos look first for damage on the cases. Then be conscious of any strange smells. Mould and fungus should not be problems for this particular collection, but there are always exceptions. Then tilting the tape away from whatever light source you are using and check for any visible irregularities to the tape. Look also for any brown flakes, white residue, or sticky substances on or in the tape. This most likely means that the tape is deteriorating.⁴ Make sure to write down if you see any of these problems. Place any tapes that seem particularly damaged separate. These tapes will be your priorities.

The next issue facing the collection is storage. The conditions in which these tapes are currently being stored are detrimental to their survival. Firstly, the storage rooms need to be

⁴ AMIA, "Fact Sheet 9: Tape Inspection"
http://www.amianet.org/resources/guides/fact_sheets.pdf

cleaned. Tapes need a dust free environment. When the room is cluttered dust collects and causes issues. This can be done quickly and easily with the help of students. The videos should really have their own space, but seeing how space is limited their environment should at the very least be better organized. Nothing should be on top of the tapes. Secondly, all tapes should be stored upright on their side, label facing up. Tapes should especially never be placed stacked horizontally. This can cause shifts in the tape that cause damage.

Those tapes that are severely damaged, but can still be played should be reformatted onto DVD. The question was raised about what to do with loop videos and compilation videos that hold up to 6 hours of material, versus the two hours that fit on DVD. Dual layer DVDs can hold up to 6 hours of material. These DVDs are slightly more expensive than a standard rewritable disk, but will solve the issue. WBHS does have the equipments to convert VHS to DVD. I would take the most valuable tapes in the collection, and make reformatting a priority.

There are several preemptive measures students can take when they use tapes to help prolong their shelf life. Never leave tapes lying around the studio. Once done being used it should be returned to its rightful place. Magnetic forces, such as those in monitors and computer equipment, can ruin tapes; so do not place tapes on the control panel desk when not in use. Also, after use if the tape is not winded to the end please do so before rewinding. Stopping a tape in the middle can lead to damage. It is better to let it run completely in one way or another. Finally, under no circumstances should a magnet be used to erase material. This can ruin the tape, and any chance of reusing it. It may be useful to have a talk with the students about proper tape care at the begging of the year.

Quite possibly the most important step the program can take is to start thinking about preservation at the time of creation. This will save time, money, and much frustration later on.

Now that WBHS has begun saving their footage on DVD new concerns and procedures should be followed. Also, as each new work is created it should be entered into that inventory list. This will save time later on, and allow for easy access to the material. Take care to always place DVDs back in their cases and not leave them in the machines after they are done being used. DVDs are a far more stable format than VHS, but they still need care and maintenance.

Middle Level Preservation Plan

Once immediate concerns have been met it may be wise to consider taking some more advanced steps to care for the collection. These steps may require some monetary support I highly suggest dedicating some of your fundraising to preservation. Currently the older tapes are housed in cardboard covers, which are acidic, this is detrimental to the life expectancy of the tape. Instead tapes should be housed in plastic cases.⁵ These cases in bulk can be costly, but not out of reach. This is obvious by the fact the tapes from 1998 on have plastic cases. However, it is the older tapes that need these cases more. The tapes in the plastic cases should be housed on metal shelving. The current shelves are wood, which leave the tapes more susceptible to fire damage. The heavy weight of the tapes over time might also cause wooden shelves to collapse.

A finding aid should also be made for the collection. This goes beyond a standard inventory. There would be some information about the collection history and more descriptive information about the videos. This information is called metadata. Creating a finding aid would allow the outside community to know what was in the collection. This would increase interest in the collection and in WBHS as a whole.

As a long-term goal WBHS should think about reaching out to the outside community for help. An archive is something that can bring a community together. A video collection

⁵IMAP, preservation 101, http://www.imappreserve.org/pres_101/index.html.

containing local history especially can spark the interest of the public. Alumni might be willing to help with preservation projects. It is their history and their creations you would be striving to protect. They also might be willing to donate more to the program as a whole if they know they still have some tangible tie to the station.

To best preserve these tangible ties it is wise to consider a more widespread reformatting project. This can be done gradually, but should be a priority. It will surely take time and money, but considering the level of use the collection receives it might be the only way to protect frequently used materials. Reformatting will also help with space concerns and the obsolete nature of VHS tapes. Although WBHS has the in house capability to reformat, it may be better to fundraise and send the tapes elsewhere. The copies will be of a higher quality and it will save time and manpower that could better be used elsewhere.

Ideal Preservation Plan

If Belleville High School were to receive some significant funding for the care of their video collection the program might be able to preserve the collection according to best practice standards for video archive collections. If this were to happen the approach to the collection would be dramatically different to the plans previously outlined. While it would still be important to follow the rules of handling and storage mentioned in the other plans, more extreme measures would be taken to ensure the life of the collection.

Most importantly the collection would be kept in a temperature-controlled environment. Where the collection currently is has temperatures far above what an archival video collection should have as a safe environment. According to AMIA the best conditions for long term tape storage is approximately 46 degrees Fahrenheit with a room humidity of 25 %. This ideally

should not fluctuate more than 4 degrees in any given 24-hour period.⁶ It is obvious that Belleville High School does not currently have the resources for this type of temperature control, and would not without significant outside funding.

Tapes that are damaged would be able to undergo the costly processes of conservation. At the moment WBHS does not have the funding to send tapes out to a private conservator, and certainly does not have the resources to do conservation work in-house. The ideal would allow the tapes that are now considered “trash” to be revived and once again enjoyed.

Another ideal would be to have an online database of everything in your collection. This would make items searchable to outside researchers. This is not an impossible goal, but it would take a significant amount of time and server space, as well as someone familiar with the technology surrounding the creating of a database. If a student or former student has this capability this ideal is not out of WBHS’ reach.

The final ideal for WBHS would be a completely digitized collection. If this were to happen the tape collection would no longer be necessary. It would save space and be searchable online. WBHS would be internationally accessible. Years from now this may be the norm and not so unattainable. However, right now digitization projects are extremely costly and time consuming. Mostly large intuitions have the resources to both fund and sustain such a project. I feel it is necessary to outline the ideals, so that the program has something to which they can strive.

Conclusion

With proper care and maintenance there is no reason why the WBHS archives can’t have a long useful life. However, if preservation is ignored than Belleville will lose an important

⁶ AMIA, “Factsheet 8: Environmental Conditions.”
http://www.amianet.org/resources/guides/fact_sheets.pdf.

source of local history. If the program feels that it cannot or will not properly care for the collection, it may be worth it to consider relocating the collection elsewhere. I have looked at both the Belleville Public Library and the Belleville High School Library as possible candidates to house the collection. It had been previously mentioned that there had been talks of moving the collection to the Belleville Public Library. However, after visiting I would like to advise against this course of action. They are no longer equipped to handle analog media. They have recently transferred their video collection to DVD format and disposed of the tapes. Also the archivist who once took care of their local history special collection has recently retired and will not be replaced.

The Belleville High School Library may be a better option. Despite the fact that the room has quite a bit of natural light, a problem for videotapes, it also has more room, metal shelves, and would be a better choice in terms of both access to the collection by students, and the public. It may even be possible to have an exhibit of WBHS history made in the library making use of some of the archival footage. This is only an idea, but it might be best for the collection at this time. I sincerely hope that some of the suggestions made in this plan may be implemented. The WBHS archive is an important part of Belleville history and should be guarded and protected as such.

Resources

AMIA Preservation Fact Sheets http://www.amianet.org/resources/guides/fact_sheets.pdf

IMAP- <http://www.imappreserve.org/index.html>

Experimental Television Center ,Video History Project-
<http://www.experimentaltvcenter.org/history/index.html>

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