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Introduction to MIAP

8 December 2016

The Bobrow Family **Homie** Film and Video Collection: History and Case Study

The preservation of home movies has garnered a lot of attention lately. These movies, as a whole, are generally forgotten or are not believed to contain valuable content, only capturing mundane moments of family life. In reality, these mundane moments are the history of families in certain places and times. This content is not only personally important to a family, but if made accessible, also to scholarly researchers who are concerned with tiny moments in history that could help explain or further exhibit particular specific groups, at a specific place, at a specific time. Also, members of the moving image preservation community are more recently making it a point to reach out to families who wish to preserve their families' memories but do not possess the resources or the know-how to do so. The Bobrow family, specifically Walter and Edythe Bobrow (the patriarch and matriarch) are one example.

The Bobrows reached out to me, a moving image archiving and preservation student, to help advise them and give assistance with their home film and video collection. The following will act as a case study on how to interact with a family and their objects of memory, culture, and history. I provide a narrative of my process of managing the collection and also of my understanding of the family's history. This study will hopefully serve as an example for anyone who encounters a similar situation, contributing to the home movie preservation field generally. In the interest of full disclosure, I should admit that I am not a professional. I am a student learning as I go. I had my successes, and my challenges and failures working on this project.

Ultimately though, I do believe my involvement was a step in the right direction for the family's collection.

How This Project Came to Be

I moved to New York City this past summer, and like many who move to this city, I knew almost no one. My best friend was moving up for a summer internship and he needed a place to stay for three months. After much searching, he found a roommate through a friend. Before my friend moved in with his new roommate, he asked me to go check out the place for quality assurance. I met his roommate. His name is Morgan Bobrow-Williams. He quickly became my first friend in the city.

It was quickly apparent that Morgan was an interesting person. We got to know each other quickly. He told me about his past and about his family. I explained to him that this semester I would start my studies as a Moving Image Archiving and Preservation graduate student at NYU. **Once I was able to clearly explain to him what that long program title meant,** he told me about his grandparents' film collection located at their home in New Rochelle, NY. Morgan mentioned that it was recently rediscovered by the family and I was hooked. I knew I needed a project for my Introduction to MIAP class soon. I mentioned the idea to him and he was very open to it and interested.

Commented [HB1]: !!!!

So, I agreed to a project without seeing the collection or meeting the grandparents. I accepted it as a personal and scholarly challenge. But at the time, I did not know what the project really was. **I was going in with certain ideas, but once I met the family and got my hands on the collection, the project mission evolved.**

Commented [HB2]: Actually, this kind evolution/change in project often happens even when you're an experienced archivist.

My First Visit: The Family

I first visited Walter and Edythe Bobrow's home in New Rochelle, NY on October 2, 2016. I was invited over for the Jewish holiday Rosh Hashanah to have dinner and meet with the family, with the idea of them becoming more comfortable with me and me becoming more comfortable with them and their collection. I traveled with Morgan on the Metro North Train from Grand Central Station to New Rochelle, where we were picked up in a car by another member of the family Lea, a cousin of Morgan's who also lives in New Rochelle.

When I arrived I was greeted warmly by Judith Bobrow (daughter of Walter and Edythe, mother of Lea). Mrs. Judith introduced me to Walter and Edythe, who seemed very glad to see me. Any worries that I may have had about the family were quickly wiped away. The walls and tabletops of the home are filled with art and pictures. The family seemed to have a story for each and every piece. I quickly realized that this family cared very much about keeping a record of their history and it was important that stories of their past were passed along to others.

Commented [HB3]: This is pretty universal, at least among families that aren't constantly worried about paying the rent or getting enough to eat.

Morgan had previously told me that the film and video collection were kept in a box in the attic. With only a few months of study under my belt, I already knew that the attic or basement are usually the worst places to hold a collection, for obvious and less obvious reasons.

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According to my research prior to the visit, Bill Brand and Toni Treadway's *A Self Preservation Guide for Film/Video Makers* and filmforever.org's *The Home Film Preservation Guide* proved to be the best resources for my purposes. These served as a guiding light for treatment of the collection and my suggestions to the family.

My First Visit: The Collection

Upon encountering the collection, I used the four sections of *A Self Preservation Guide for Film/Video Makers* as my approach:

- Locate, List, and Remove from Harm
- Inspect, Label, and Improve Containers
- Annotate and Place
- Distribute and Imagine

The film collection was located in a silk-covered wooden box inside of a larger cardboard box in the attic. Attics are known for their extreme temperature shifts and inconsistent humidity levels, both of which are harmful to film and video. We immediately took the collection out of the attic and moved it into a home office that is no longer used with enough space to be able to get an assessment of the size and condition of the collection. This being my first viewing of the collection and knowing I would not be able to visit New Rochelle often, I had to make sure to photo-document the collection the best I could.

I opened the silk-covered box and was pleasantly surprised. The film was housed in metal cans that appeared to be in great condition. There were no visible dents or signs of rusting. The VHS video collection was stored in a shoe box. Both of these boxes are not ideal for storage. The materials of the boxes can release acids which can contribute to the degradation of the film and videos.

The film cans were already well labeled, but admittedly inconsistent. The labels on the outside of the cans displayed anything from just a date to a very precise description of the content of the films. Each can also had a dot sticker with numbers. I realized that these numbers not only counted the amount of reels of film, but they also corresponded to the VHS tapes. The VHS were the product of film transfers, so copies of the film were already made. Film-to-video

Commented [HB4]: Again, very very common

Commented [HB5]: Extremely important discovery!

transfers are an effort of preservation and it was really great to see that the Bobrows made this effort in the past.

I began to inspect each reel of film, taking pictures of each reel, checking for any degradation including warping, cupping, flaking, or “vinegar syndrome”. All of these degradation issues are usually a result of poor storage and housing conditions. But again to my surprise, the 8mm films were all in great condition and most of the cans included notes about the content of the films. It was apparent that Walter took great care of the movies he shot and he was aware enough to preserve these memos for the sake of provenance. Again, storing paper materials near film materials is not perfect preservation practice. As the paper ages, it can release acid and create dust that will impact the film negatively. But as far as home movie collections I have heard about in the past, **this collection was in relatively good shape.**

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I was not able to inspect the entirety of each reel. I did pull each reel of 8mm film out a few feet, and, using the light in the room to illuminate the film, inspect some frames. The edge code showed that the film was Kodak film. The color was still vibrant. I did not notice any color fading. Each reel already had leader attached. Since I did not have access to the correct tools, I could not check for shrinkage. But theoretically, this collection was ready to project all these years later.

Commented [HB6]: All good practices

The VHS tapes are labeled on the edge of the cassette housing. They included the reel numbers and runtime of the video. The cassettes appeared to be in good shape. The magnetic tape seemed to be wound tightly around the reels with no visible damage. But one can not really determine the quality of the video without playing them on a compatible VCR. Morgan and I tried to play the VHS tapes on the VCR in Walter and Edythe’s room, but alas, the VCR was not in operational order. I would have to save the VHS for another day.

Included in the larger cardboard box from the attic were associated moving image objects. There was a film splicer, film cement, a camera with lens filters, and an 8mm film projector. The film splicer and its box were in good condition. The film cement jar still had cement inside. The camera appeared to be in great shape because it was housed in its original case along with the lens filters. The 8mm film projector still turned on when I plugged it in. The belt on the inside melted off presumably from being stored in a hot attic so it was not technically in working order. I kept these items in the large cardboard box because they each had their own respective containers and would not affect each other by being stored next to one another.

Commented [HB7]: These are indications that someone did some editing, or at least splicing. Did you ask about that?

By the time I finished my inspection, it was time to eat and celebrate Rosh Hashanah. I had informal conversations about the collection and its condition over dinner and the family was very excited to hear about the great shape it was in. Through this conversation, the Bobrow family and I grew closer together. I believe we gained respect and trust for each other that night, which allowed me to have another visit to their home and open access to their moving image collection.

My Second Visit: The Family

I was able to visit the Bobrows with Morgan in New Rochelle for a second time on December 3, 2016. More time had passed since my last visit than I had liked, but both Morgan's schedule and mine would not allow a more recent visit. Morgan and I walked in on Walter and Edythe having dinner, which I took as another fortunate opportunity to speak with them about their past with respect to the films and videos. This time, it was the right setting and I had the presence-of-mind to record the conversation on my phone. I used the recording of the conversation as a reference for this report.

Commented [HB8]: Very good

Both Walter and Edythe are 91 years old so ~~there~~their memory of past events comes and goes, but Edythe, especially, had a fond memory of Walter always taking photos and movies of their vacations and their children. She mentioned that Walter bought the movie camera before their honeymoon trip to Europe. Walter often had the camera in his hand. She admired being the subject of his films, but she loved when he took movies of the children. My end-goal for the conversation was to ask her about her wants/plans for the collection. When I asked, she responded, "I would love to watch the movies like we used to on the projector. It would be great to have them on DVD." I suggested services in the city do film-to-digital transfer which the family seemed excited about but do not currently have the budget for. I asked her if she wanted to share the home movies with the public on the Internet Archive or an archive like The Center for Home Movies, to which she said, "I don't really have that desire." The important thing for me to remember at that point was the wants and needs of the family. As someone who studies preservation and archiving, I want works to be accessible whenever possible. In this case, it simply was not possible. I must respect the wishes of the family.

Commented [HB9]: Though this butts up against our principles of access, this is actually good archival practice.

After our conversation, Morgan and I went upstairs to check on the collection which we stored in a closet in the home office. All of things were just where we left them. I was able to take the collection out again and take pictures. I inspected the films again and there were no visible changes from our last visit two months ago on October 2. I knew that the storage and housing conditions of the film could certainly be improved with archive quality, inert, vented plastic cans and reels but the budget of this project was zero dollars so that wasn't a realistic option. I did suggest that if the family did create a budget for it, I could point them in the right direction.

Commented [HB10]: When balanced against value and budget, this probably wouldn't be necessary. They certainly aren't quickly deteriorating, and you got them into a reasonable storage atmosphere. I'd say that changing reels and cans is of very minimal concern.

The end-goal of my second, and last visit for the time being, was to take the VHS tapes back with me to New York City so that I could test them at the NYU Cinema Study Archive where I am employed as an archival assistant. At the archive, there are functioning video racks and VCRs that I work with on a regular basis. The family gave me permission to take the VHS tapes in the shoebox back to New York City with me, further displaying their trust in me. I was able to tell the family that their VHS tapes worked and that the quality was definitely good enough for viewing! All they need now is a working VCR. Although the last VCRs were produced this year, finding an inexpensive working VCR is not out the question.

Commented [HB11]: Putting the word out to friends of the kids. EBay. Etc.

Exhibition

Morgan and Lea both expressed a strong desire to eventually exhibit the films and/or videos. They wish to create a museum-like exhibit of Walter and Edythe's entire collection including still images, scrapbooks, documents, special clothing, and movies in the New Rochelle home. They envision it as something special to organize for the extended family to see and enjoy and learn about their own family's history and memory. I think that is a beautiful idea and something that is completely possible given the condition of the whole collection. I hope I can be involved in some capacity when it happens.

In Conclusion

I believe I created a higher awareness of the collection amongst the family, placing emphasis on the importance of preservation for generations to come. The Bobrows were extremely receptive and understanding of my efforts. I could not have asked for a better family

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for my first home film and video preservation experience. I took the collection out of harm's way. I shared film/video care and handling knowledge with the family that they can now use to more consistently care for the objects. For me, it was a terrific practical learning experience. It was so rewarding to able to work with and for a family that treated me so well and cared so much about their family history. This project is in no way completely finished. There is lots more to do, but my contributions were certainly the first few steps in the right direction.

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Commented [HB12]: I think that these are all one citation, not 2.

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