

Film Collections Require Proper Handling and Storing

Repairing damaged film can be difficult and costly, so knowing how to handle and maintain film collections is of prime importance for archivists.

Film stock consists of a thin plastic base made of polyester or acetate. This base is coated with a photosensitive chemical emulsion set in gelatin that is imprinted with images when exposed to light. The gauges—or film widths—most often encountered are 35mm, 16mm and 8mm, and smaller film collections are more likely to contain the latter two.

When storing film, remember the 50/50 rule: try to keep the temperature at a stable 50°F and the relative humidity—or RH—at 50%. The ideal environmental conditions for long-term storage are cool temperatures between 45°F and 55°F and an RH between 30% and 50%.

Wider ranges, however, are still acceptable. For instance, don't worry if the temperature in your storage facility goes no lower than 70°F, fluctuates a few degrees during the course of the month (which is completely normal and acceptable), or has a 55% RH. The goal is to maintain a *stable environment* for your collection. Stability is your best protection in the long term.

Film in your archive should be stored and handled in the following ways:

- Always handle with clean, white cotton gloves.
- Store in a clean, dust-free environment away from sources of heat (including light) and humidity.
- Always store horizontally to evenly distribute the weight of the film stock.
- Always hold by the outside edges or plastic container to prevent damaging the images/data imprinted or recorded onto the surface.
- When shipping film stock, be sure to carefully pack it well with bubble wrap, crumpled newspaper, packing peanuts, etc. to keep it from getting jostled and damaged.

Misuse and mishandling of film stock can easily damage its physical structure: dirt and dust can scratch the delicate emulsion layer; the plastic base can be bent and the sprocket

holes lining the sides of film stock can be torn if improperly threaded into a projector. Damage such as ripped sprockets and torn film stock can be repaired by a professional film conservator, but scratches in the emulsion layer are permanent.

In high humidity conditions, mold, fungus, and mildew feed off the gelatin base and work their way into the film from the outside edge. Water-damaged containers can promote growth that may spread to film. Infected film should be treated by a conservator or trained professional.

In 2005, the General Service Office Archives began a two-year project to preserve and catalog some of the 122 oldest items in its film collection. Sixty of these, the films in the poorest condition, were professionally cleaned, repaired and migrated to DVDs. The goals of this project were to better understand the depth and range of our moving image collection; to eventually make available to A.A. members an important part of the Fellowship's heritage; and to preserve the deteriorating films in our holdings and save them from decades of neglect.

Only a few water-damaged containers were encountered during the Archives' Film Preservation Project, but their contents were all affected by the humidity through an accelerated decomposition process called "vinegar syndrome."

Acetate degrades naturally over time but the process can be hastened by high temperature, humidity, water, and even other acetate films nearby through the presence of acetic acid vapor. This degradation is most easily identified by its tell-tale vinegar-like odor. Vinegar syndrome causes acetate films to shrink and curl, warp, become severely misshapen, and, in its later stages, causes the emulsion layer to separate from the plastic base. It cannot be reversed, but can be slowed by placing the ailing film in a temperature- and humidity-controlled environment. Of the Archives' 60 films selected for in-depth preservation, 16 suffered from vinegar syndrome damage.



Film at the Archives, such as this 16mm reel, is stored according to the recommended 50/50 rule: temperature at 50 degrees Fahrenheit and relative humidity at 50 percent.

Other problems that can affect film stock include color fading (the natural decay of dyes used to make color film, which can be hastened by high temperature and humidity) and shrinkage caused by low humidity.

For more information, consult the preservation calculator available online from the Image Permanence Institute (http://www.imagepermanenceinstitute.org/shtml_sub/dl_presalc.asp). This is an excellent tool for determining the natural aging

rate—including such precise information as how many days before mold sets in—based on a sliding temperature and RH scale. Another good resource is a guide to frugal preservation measures published by the University of Washington Libraries, *Washington State*

Film Preservation Manual: Low-cost & No-cost Suggestions to Care for Your Film, available online at <http://www.lib.washington.edu/specialcoll/film/preservationmanual.pdf>.

Group Histories Feature Prominently at G.S.O. Archives



Microfiche cards on individual A.A. groups number in the thousands and contain material sent to G.S.O. by the groups over the decades.

Some of New York City’s oldest and best known A.A. groups—such as Carlyle, Gramercy, and Lenox Hill—trace their names to the telephone exchanges associated with the Manhattan neighborhoods in which these groups met. (Telephone numbers up until the early 1970s started with two letters—such as **GR**amercy5-5555.) This bit of A.A. history is included in a group history sent to the G.S.O. Archives by the Carlyle Group, which celebrated its 50th anniversary this past November.

Many group histories, including one on a beginner’s meeting in Philadelphia, are short – one type-written page—and contain such information as when the meeting first met, who the officers were, what prompted the founding of the meeting, and where and when the group met over the years.

Some group histories can be as long as 50 pages, such as a history of A.A. in Richmond, Indiana, that arrived at the Archives recently. That history contains old photos of the town and of meeting places, along with reproductions of press clippings and images of decades-old group treasury reports and membership rosters.

The G.S.O. Archives welcomes group histories from A.A. members and over the years has received hundreds of them. The histories are organized according to area and city within the Archives’ area collection.

Group histories are welcomed because the information

they contain can be shared with A.A. historians or any A.A. member with questions pertaining to that group.

“Every day we receive phone calls regarding information about specific A.A. groups—every day,” says Michelle Mirza, senior archivist at G.S.O. Archives.

“A.A. members look to us to compile a history of their group. Often, though, all they want to know is when the group had its first meeting, usually in relation to celebrating a group anniversary.”

“We have thousands of correspondence from groups informing us of their existence,” says Michelle, adding, “the Archives has always depended on groups to tell us about themselves.”

Beginning in 1984, letters from A.A. groups to the G.S.O. were scanned onto microfiche cards, of which there are now thousands on file. Each of these cards may contain any number of documents, depending on how often the group corresponded with G.S.O.

“Sometimes when we have no records for a particular group we provide the year the group first appeared in the A.A. Directory.”

If a group dates back to the 1940s or 1950s, Archives staff reviews early correspondence to compile a history.

Archives staff generally tries to accommodate all requests for group histories, but also welcomes group members who want to conduct their own research at the Archives. “If someone is seeking information on a number of groups, we invite them to submit an application to the trustees’ Archives Committee,” says Michelle.

The Archives Research and Access policies are available online at the Archives portal of the G.S.O. Web site (www.aa.org).

2009 National Archives Workshop To Meet this September in California

The 13th National AA Archives Workshop will take place this year at Warner Center Marriott Hotel in Woodland Hills, California, on September 24 to 27. The event will offer a wide array of sessions on preservation and conservation. For more information, visit the Workshop’s website at www.aanationalarchivesworkshop.com, or telephone George R., chairperson, at 818-378-4186.

From Early Stirrings, G.S.O. Archives Grew to Full-Scale Operation

At the G.S.O. Archives, the corporate records of the Alcoholic Foundation, Works Publishing, and Alcoholics Anonymous World Services are arranged, described, preserved, and maintained in an organized, hierarchical fashion in accordance with standards established by the archival profession.

The department's activities are overseen by the trustees' Archives Committee, which is advised by the archives director. Work at the Archives is guided by this Committee's policies and by the code of ethics established by the Society of American Archivists.

The idea for organizing a historic collection of the Fellowship's records came from co-founder Bill W. in the early 1950s. Knowing that the office correspondence and other material were loosely maintained in the drawers at the General Headquarters, Bill asked his secretary, Nell Wing, to start collecting files. Both Bill and Nell recognized the importance of saving the written record of the Fellowship for posterity. They started right in the office, asking early staff members to save their letters.

Archives Opened in 1975

After many years of organizing, and a growing recognition that A.A.'s history merited retention, the G.S.O. Archives room was opened with a formal ribbon-cutting ceremony in November 1975. Managing and maintaining the collection now requires a professional staff who understand the processes of information management. The department has four full-time and three part-time employees.

The primary duties of the **senior archivist** include research for trustees, directors, staff, and external researchers, as well as establishing records management procedures for department files and assigning projects to Archives staff. The position of archives director being vacant, the senior archivist has assumed some of those duties, including: setting and maintaining budgets; pursuing vendor bids for special projects; and writing and presenting reports to the General Manager, trustees' Archives Committee, A.A.W.S. Board of Directors, and the Conference Archives Committee.

Like the senior archivist, the **associate archivist** is a trained archives professional. Her responsibilities include the processing of incoming materials, cataloging all media types, developing informational tools (like pathfinders, finding aids, and subject guides to the Archives' collection), and preservation. Other duties include planning and installing exhibits in the Archives display area. These exhibits, which highlight various aspects of A.A. history, change quarterly, and there are four display spaces that need to be filled.

A recent project was the cataloging of Bill W. recordings in our audio collection, which required listening to every recording to identify speakers, discussion themes, and highlighting important passages.

Another position in the Archives is that of the **associate research archivist**, whose focus is researching group and A.A. history in response to requests from members of the

Fellowship and from G.S.O. staff members and trustees. The associate research archivist scours files to find requested information, which can range from a detailed description of the growth of A.A. in a particular town to simply finding the start date of a group.

The research process also involves searching through Archives' computer databases and contacting the Records department to copy and print decades-old microfiched records.

The fourth full-time position is that of the **assistant archivist**, who also spends a major portion of her time providing group histories for the Fellowship. She has the additional task of taking the majority of incoming calls to the department, preparing shipments of *Archives Workbooks* and other materials to newly elected area archivists and archives chairperson, and arranging for the shipment of traveling Archives displays.

The assistant archivist greets all visitors, gives a brief overview of the display areas, and encourages them to take a self-guided tour of the permanent exhibits. She takes care of requests for photo sets and Big Book manuscripts (offered by the Archives for a suggested donation) while answering questions on A.A. history and preparing her own research for group histories.

There are two part-time **scanning assistants**, whose duties are confined to digitizing records. One scanning assistant is responsible for determining the preservation value of decades-old microfilmed group records that, in some cases, have decayed to the point where the informational content is



This display case is one of four at the Archives and is used for exhibits highlighting various aspects of A.A. history. The material enclosed in the cases is changed quarterly.

no longer legible to even the strongest scanning programs. She recently digitized more than 850 group microfiche records in a six-month period.

The other scanning assistant spends her days in the Archives at the combination scanner-photocopier to make high-quality scans of decades-old corporate records. In addition to digitizing records, the scanning assistant must also label the newly created digital files, save them in the appropriate filing scheme, and attach metadata to enhance access.

The seventh position at the Archives is that of the part-time **archives assistant**, who is assigned a myriad of tasks that help ensure the smooth running of the department, from filing hundreds of pages of correspondence to moving 50-pound boxes of records between storage spaces. She is aware of every form of information available in the collection (foreign language materials, General Service Conference Advisory Action reports, Board meeting minutes, etc.) so that she can assist the archivists with their research.

Bill's efforts in the 1950s to organize the Fellowship's records were prompted by his growing concern that "the history of Alcoholics Anonymous is ... veiled in deep fog." Today the staff of the G.S.O. Archives works daily to keep that history in focus.

Setting the Story Straight On the 'Kips Bay Group' Audio Recording

Tapes of a supposed talk by Bill W. on the day Dr. Bob died have circulated for years and prompted numerous queries to the G.S.O. Archives from A.A. members wanting to know if the recording was genuine. As the story goes, Bill W. was attending an A.A. meeting of the Kips Bay Group when he received notice of Dr. Bob's death. The G.S.O. Archives knew that the voice on the tape was not that of Bill W.'s, but otherwise did not know the origin of the recording.

Recently, though, Archives was able to contact the person responsible for the tape-recorded script and can now set the record straight.

The script for the recording, "Moments, An Evening with Bill W.," was written in 1989 by Bill M., a member of Alcoholics Anonymous who wanted to present the story of A.A.'s origins in a way that would be interesting and accessible, even to those unable to read. According to the author, his experience in bringing A.A. meetings into prisons and

hospitals indicated that many A.A. members in these institutions remained ignorant of A.A.'s history, despite his efforts to interest them in the literature. He then hit upon the idea of dramatizing the events of A.A.'s early years.

Bill M. sets his story in an A.A. meeting at a group he call Kips Bay on the day of Dr. Bob's death. Bill W., played by Bill M., tells the story of Dr. Bob and himself and the beginning of A.A. The one-man play has changed over the years, as Bill added anecdotes and dramatic devices. Though Bill W. never actually delivered this account of his friend Dr. Bob at a Kips Bay group (no such group existed at the time), the details about A.A.'s history are accurate. Bill M. has presented the play for 20 years, once to an audience of 7,000 in Cleveland, he says.

According to him, a recording made by someone in the audience at a performance in Scranton, Pa., in 1994 is the one that has been in circulation, making it onto the Internet and around the world. "It was never my intention to have this happen," says Bill M. "I honestly believe that 'Moments' serves our beloved A.A. well and has helped a great number of people over the years."

Some of the performances have been filmed, and video of these performances have circulated since 1995.

Markings Going Online-Only.

The General Service Office Archives is taking steps to reduce costs by delivering our newsletter, *Markings*, electronically only. This means that very soon paper copies will no longer be mailed to subscribers.

We encourage readers, though, to continue receiving every new issue of *Markings* by signing up to have the newsletter delivered to them via e-mail. Subscribers will then be able to print their own copy of *Markings* or read it online. To register for free e-mail delivery, go to www.aa.org and click on "A.A. Periodicals Digital Subscriptions." Registration is quick and easy and is available now.

Readers can also read *Markings* on the Archives section of the G.S.O. website. Back issues of the newsletter are available there too.

We want to assure our readers that *Markings* itself will have the same look and continue to cover topics of interest to archivists and others in the A.A. Fellowship.