

Introduction, or, Learning to Make Peace with the Enemy

For the past seven years, the American Jewish Historical Society-New England Archives has embarked on a mass digitization project that has resulted in close to 2 million scanned images. Although we are comfortable working with digitization of paper and photographs, born digital media is something that we have hidden in boxes or ignored while adopting a “hear no/see no/speak no evil” mantra. Now that our staff has grown slightly and we’re moving forward with our digital archives, it’s time to face the challenge like grown-up archivists.

However, it is important to start small! So I decided to tackle this project quietly on my own and survey two collections (The Papers of Dr. Robert Sperber and the Papers of Elizabeth Wyner Mark) that encompassed a small group of born digital content on obsolete media. Both of these collections are the personal papers of professors and published authors who used the now obsolete media to store their research, drafts and business dealings. At least, I *think* that is what is included on these disks. I chose these collections to survey because one was currently being processed and the other was being pre-processed, so they were easily accessible. As a bonus, I included an external hard drive formatted for a Mac that includes re-formatted home videos from the Wyner Family Papers. Since I have a PC at work, the material on the external hard drive is rendered useless until I can obtain access to a Mac.

Sperber Papers

The discovery of 8 inch floppy diskettes in the Sperber Papers caused a great deal of amusement and astonishment around the workplace as I tried to decide what to do with them. Creating a decoupage wall art installation was clearly out of the question, as was one colleague’s suggestion to turn them into fascinators for the next Derby. There is an inventory with the diskettes that does provide some information on what files might be saved on the disks, so that was somewhat helpful, even though it’s difficult to ascertain what some of the acronyms and abbreviations mean on the inventory. It’s possible that with some further research, we can piece together some clues that will help us identify what those acronyms stand for. There are three pieces of optical media (one CD-R and two DVDs) in the collection. The CD is labeled as “speech- long version” and “speech- short version”. The DVDs are both recorded Town Meetings and the property of Brookline Access Television. It is unknown at this time what event the speeches were for.

Inventory for the Sperber Papers includes:

(11) 8” Floppy Diskettes, each capable of holding 1.2 MB of storage (dated 1985-1986)

Most diskettes are labeled and there is an inventory that came with them. However, there are quite a few acronyms and codes so it will take some time to identify all the content.

(1) CD-R, capable of holding 700 GB of storage (dated 2005)

The CD-R is labeled with a post it note enclosed in the case.

(2) DVDs, each capable of holding 2.42 GB of storage (both dated 2009)

The DVDs are labeled with permanent marker on the disks.

Wyner Mark Papers

The Elizabeth Wyner Mark collection contains a large majority of 3.5 inch floppy disks and a DVD that is essentially a home video of a Passover Seder. This is still readable on my current machine. The 3.5 inch floppy drives are less frightening as we have a reader that can be attached to our machines via USB port. However, not knowing what condition the disks are in as well as not wanting to inadvertently change the provenance of the materials on the disk, I have not attempted to read any of them. Most of the disks were labeled, but not very legibly or in a way that makes sense to someone else. What is evident is that most of the disks have something to do with a book the creator of the papers was editing, and that some of the material on her disks was not necessarily created by her, but by other authors, highlighting an intellectual property issue.

Inventory for the Wyner Mark Papers includes:

(24) 3.5" floppy disks, each capable of holding 1.44 MB of storage (most undated, 1995, 1998, 2002)

Most of the disks were labeled, but the information was very particular to the creator.

(1) DVD; capable of holding 8.5 GB of storage (undated)

The DVD was labeled Passover_DVD as a file name; "Passover" written on the disk itself in permanent marker.

Wyner Addendum

As a bonus round, I included the external hard drive of home videos for the Wyner Family Papers addendum. As stated previously, the hard drive is formatted for use with a Mac so the drive is the equivalent of a paperweight at the moment (albeit a well preserved one.)

Inventory for the Wyner Addendum includes:

(1) External hard drive, Mac formatted, capable of holding 2 TB of storage (undated, content migrated 2014)

The external hard drive is labeled with a post-it note taped to the device with the donor's name written on it (I know, classy!)

Survey Process

The survey itself did not take very long- gathering the materials in each collection took less than 15 minutes and media inventory took about two hours. Although there was a fair amount of media, the media itself could be grouped into two main categories- 3.5 inch floppy disks and 8 inch floppy diskettes. I started with the Sperber papers, counting the disks and taking note of how items were organized on the inventory that came with the collection. I then moved on to the Mark papers, where I took more time inventorying and counting the disks as some were double-sided, some were not; and not all of them were labeled. I did not do anything else other than take notes on what I think we have, and inventory the items.

Next Steps

AJHS-NEA is fortunate to work alongside the archivists of its partner organization, the New England Historic Genealogical Society. In the next few months, we plan to create a digital curation workstation that both archives will use to preserve the born digital media in our collections. AJHS-NEA will further investigate ingestion of born digital content in our digital archives and whether that is feasible on a large-scale or if it is something that should be examined on a case by case basis. For now, we will evaluate various open source software (Karen's Directory Printer, as an example) and look for the tools needed to read the various media. Both archives have external 3.5" inch floppy drive readers, so the focus will be on purchasing a 5 ¼" floppy drive reader and the various accoutrements that is needed, as well as a write blocker. Unfortunately, we'll have to wait a little longer before we can read the 8 inch floppy diskettes (unless we visit this nuclear [silo](#))ⁱ. With any luck, we'll be able begin tackling our backlogs of media by the end of the year.

ⁱ The obsolete media used at nuclear silos in the United States was the subject of a 60 minutes episode. You can view the video and read more about it here: <http://www.theverge.com/2014/4/28/5660614/nuclear-control-center-behind-the-scenes-video>