

THE UNEASY EPHEMERALITY OF NEWSPRINT

preserving
the history of
the everyday

STORY BY
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On September 14, 1923, the *Romsey Examiner* reported on London's peppermint harvest. The plants were gathered within a few miles of the major metropolis for distillation into crème de menthe. On July 23rd of that same year, the paper published an article titled "Wireless' Cinemas: Moving Pictures in Your Own Home." Romsey is a small town between Melbourne and Bendigo, Australia, established in the 1850s as a stop en route to the gold fields. During the 1920s, both London's peppermint harvest and broadcast television were as far from local Romsey residents' experiences as a rocket trip to the moon. And yet, their small town newspaper printed this information, unattributed, alongside reports of local 21st birthday celebrations, minor car accidents and the annual Potato Festival. I know this because, in 2011, in my role as a library preservation technician, I disbound the *Romsey Examiner* and many other volumes of regional newspapers in preparation for microfilming.

Disbinding is exactly as it sounds: the dismantling of the binding and sewing structures that hold newspapers together in bound volumes. With a knife, I cut into the cords or tapes that attach the pages to the boards. I peel back the leather or buckram spine to reveal the sewing pattern and guess at the type of glue. The easiest volumes to disbind are held together with animal glue that can be reactivated with a poultice of wheat starch paste. Slowly, in layers, I peel away spine-lining paper and

The Reliant Microfilmer
manufactured by Recordak,
historical image provided
by Janessa Pyles from her
collection of ephemera.



“THE PRESENT TIME WILL BE REGARDED IN THE FUTURE AS AN AGE OF BOOK DESTRUCTION.”

THOMAS TANSALLE

mulled, then work my way along the spine with a septum elevator, gently scraping away softened glue. With a scalpel, I cut into the tensioned linen threads that bind one issue of the newspaper to the next. I work backwards, undoing the work of the binder before me, freeing one paper from the next, releasing it from the text block, hoping the paper doesn't tear or crumble in my hands.

These papers will not be rebound. My colleagues and I package them between boards and ship them to be microfilmed. They return to our climate-controlled off-site store in shrink-wrapped packages. Protected by the Australian government's 1988 Libraries Act, these pages will be kept in perpetuity. Ideally, from a preservation perspective, they'll never be handled again.

It is this process of disbinding, microfilming and then destroying or discarding the original newspaper that drove Nicholson Baker to write *Double Fold: Libraries and the Assault on Paper*. Describing the act of browsing a broadsheet newspaper, Baker says that “reading a paper like this is not the only way to understand the lost past life of a city, but no other way will enclose you so completely within one time-stratum's universe of miscellaneous possibility.” Alerted in 1999 to the sale of American and foreign newspaper titles being deaccessioned by the British Library, Baker embarked on a campaign to save as many of the American newspapers as he could, many of which were the last known paper copies in the world. To do so, Baker, in desperation, formed the American Newspaper Repository, a nonprofit organization, and acquired approximately 11,100 volumes of irreplaceable newspapers. The Repository's collection was stored in a rented warehouse in New Hampshire near Baker's home until 2004, when the collection was donated to Duke University under ironclad stipulations that it never be dispersed or destroyed.

This act of advocacy—the preservation of historical documents in their original form—exposed modern-day library practices that shocked the book-loving public and rattled library administrators. With it, Nicholson Baker asked a fundamental question: Is a newspaper simply an accretion of information, perfectly replicable and replaceable in an alternate format, or is the form of the newspaper itself as intrinsic to its newspaper-ness as the intellectual content within? What Baker's book exposed was the enormous, irreplaceable loss to a culture when an original document is lost forever due to the belief that a replica is an adequate replacement.

Microphotography was a wartime technology. During the 1870 siege of Paris, carrier pigeons flew to Paris from Tours with military communiqués miniaturized onto film emulsions. Prior to this, the birds had dropped dead from the sky under the weight of paper documents. During WWII, microfilm was considered to “rank in importance with any secret military weapon thus far dis-

closed” by a leading OSS operative. Baker's research reveals how many high-ranking library administrators of the Cold War era came directly from military and intelligence agencies, and how they brought with them a technological fervor to fight a double-pronged battle: firstly, against paper, believed to be rapidly disintegrating, its information fugitive and imperilled, and, secondly, for space. Why allocate shelf upon shelf of precious storage to volumes of newspapers when the entire run of a title could be housed neatly in a single filing cabinet? Verner Clapp, deputy head librarian at the U.S. Library of Congress, wrote in 1959 that he hoped for a day in which microfilm machines “[could] be made a personal accoutrement, as homely and as natural and as essential as the toothbrush, the ball-point pen or as eyeglasses.”

What these early microfilming zealots failed to understand was how durable paper can be—even the worst sorts of alum sized (acidic) papers that are used in newspaper printing can survive over the years—and how problematic microfilming can be. The films themselves degrade and the quality of the imaging varies widely. What were large format images in full-colour are reduced to poorly contrasted black-and-white. Tiny newspaper print in the original is lost completely in miniaturization. Ergonomists recognize a form of motion sickness caused by the difficulty of visually tracking text as it skids by on a murky green-grey microfilm projection screen. Even the staunchest proponents of microfilming today agree that people hate it.

Thomas Tansalle, a scholar and bibliophile, wrote in 1993 that the “present time will be regarded in the future as an age of book destruction.” Reflecting on government-funded digital and microfilm preservation projects, Baker writes, “as a very lowball guess, 39 million dollars' worth of originals left our nation's libraries, thanks to federal largesse. It's as if the National Park Service felled vast wild tracts of pointed firs and replaced them with plastic Christmas trees.” When I took my scalpel to the *Romsey Examiner*, what was lost? In his 1998 essay “Libraries, Museums, and Reading,” Thomas Tansalle reflects that it is “only by approaching books as museum objects do we most fully and productively read them.” When they return, the pages of the *Romsey Examiner* will be cared for to the best of our institutional ability. It's possible, likely even, that they will be re-imaged in the future using a technology we cannot even dream of today, a possibility that does not exist for all the newspapers destroyed and deaccessioned by British and U.S. libraries in their quest for space and their unwavering belief in the imaging technology of the day. But I was the last person to turn those barely yellowed pages of the *Romsey Examiner*, to scan my eyes across the columns of neat type, to hold that day's edition in my hands just as Romsey residents did in 1923. That experience is gone now, and I cannot help but be wistful for my part in its loss. **U**