

CBS Television City

NARRATIVE SUMMARY-2/21/96

The testimony I would like to offer centers around preserving video images on videotape and I would first like to tell you a little bit about CBS Television City's facilities and the CBS Entertainment Division's Archives. Then I have a couple of specific points I would like to make about video images on videotape and the preservation thereof.

CBS Television City facility designed for the production of television programs. We have eight television studios and a large Videotape Department that has twelve on-line edit rooms, audio sweetening facilities suitable not only for television, but also motion picture sweetening, videotape duplication and various other facilities.

One of those various other facilities is a department that is set up specifically to transfer two-inch and one-inch videotape to digital formats for preservation, syndication or any other purpose. The two-inch videotape transfer facility will be the focus of my remarks here today. Approximately two years ago, CBS entered into a contract with Mark Goodson Productions to transfer approximately 34,000 of their shows from their current formats, which consisted of 16mm kinescopes, two-inch and on one-inch videotape to the serial digital betacam format. Over the next fifteen months, 34,637 shows were transferred (approximately 2700 of those transfers were from film originals, the rest of the transfers were all from videotape originals).

None of the tapes in the Goodson collection had been stored in what anyone would call "proper" videotape storage environments. They were basically stored in "furniture" warehouses where temperature and humidity changed, along with the weather. There was even a rumor that about 8000 of the tapes had been stored for several years on pallets covered with black plastic located on the back lot of one of the other studios here in Los Angeles.

How to store videotape "properly" has been an interesting subject since about the time videotape was invented. The conventional wisdom had always been that if you did not store videotape in very carefully controlled environments, after about ten years, when you opened the container, you'd have nothing left but clear plastic and a little brown dust. Our experience with the transfer of these 34,000 shows, however, showed the conventional wisdom to be not so wise after all. Our experience with this large transfer project showed that out of approximately 32,000 videotape shows, some dating back to 1956, there were only two that we were not able to transfer and the difficulty with those two was not due to chemical deteriorations of the tape.

Our conclusion is that tape is a lot tougher that anybody thought it was. This brings me to the first point that I would really like to make and that is videotape is still the most economical and safest long-range storage medium that is available to us today for the storage of television pictures and sound. Even when stored in less than ideal conditions, videotape is still a robust storage medium and can store more information at less cost than any other system we know of. The weak link in storing images on videotape is the machinery, not the tape.

CBS Television City currently has ten working two-inch videotape recorders and six additional two-inch machines that are used for parts to keep the ten on-line machines running. Two years ago, when we started the transfer of the Mark Goodson Productions material, we only had one operating two-inch machine on the premises. At first it was believed that by calling a few chief engineers from stations, we would be able to acquire the additional two-inch machines we needed because the conventional wisdom was that everybody had two or three old two-inch machines in their back room that they were just waiting to get rid of.

Once again, the conventional wisdom proved to be incorrect. In calling around the country, trying to acquire these machines, most of the time the answer from those we contacted was something like this, "Gee I wish you had called us a couple of years ago, we just sent those things to the dump, because they were in the way". Eventually, we were able to acquire machines here and there all over the country (two from Alaska, one from New York, one from Rhode Island, and so on). We gathered machines from everywhere, refurbished them and rebuilt them, and eventually, we assembled the group we are currently using which consists of two Ampex AVR 1's, six Ampex AVR 2's, and two Ampex AVR 3's. We currently have, as I said before, six additional machines that are cannibalized for parts, in order to keep the others running. Parts acquisition for these older machines is an ever increasing problem.

Several years ago, when Ampex stopped supporting the two-inch format with parts, a man by the name of Roger Clemmens, who at that time was an Ampex employee, retired and made a deal with Ampex to buy up all of the remaining parts for the two-inch machines. He moved them to Gunnerson, Colorado and for several years, was supplying owners of two-inch machines with hard to find parts. Late in 1995, Roger Clemmens contacted me and said he wanted to go out of the business and was I interested in buying his entire remaining stock. I said of course I was and arranged to buy them. This, however, is like to good news/bad news story. The good news is I was able to buy all of the remaining new parts for the Ampex two-inch machines, the bad news is, they all arrived in one small truck.

Mr. Clemmens' remaining stock, though valuable, was not very extensive. The problem here is that as these machines get older, the cost of keeping them running and the scarce availability of parts will eventually make it impossible for even CBS to keep the machines running. I'm afraid that "eventually" is only about three to five years away. All of the above is mentioned, only to underscore the second point I would like to make, which is there is a great urgency in getting two-inch tape transferred to a more modern medium; not because the tape won't last, but because the machines to play them are dying.

CBS Television City is the only facility with the resources to do large collection transfers in any kind of workable time frame. To transfer the 32,000 shows for Mark Goodson Productions, we worked around the clock, seven days a week for fifteen months, to complete the project. Eventually, it will not be financially possible to keep these machines running, and when that point is reached, large-scale transfer projects will no longer be possible, simply because there will be no machines to do them. Yes, you will be able to find "a" person with "a" machine or two, who can transfer a few tapes for you, but if you have a large collection of several thousand two-inch tapes to transfer, you will have a real problem finding the capacity to do them.

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Some people with large collections "just don't get it". One company with a very large collection of two-inch tapes, was very proud of the fact that they had two, two-inch videotape machines. They went on to tell me that they weren't worried about transferring their whole collection, because anytime anybody wanted a copy of one of the two-inch tapes, they just brought it up from the basement, put it on the two-inch machine and transferred it at that time to a more modern format. Then they went on to tell me that actually only one of the machines was working because their repair engineer had to take parts out of one machine to keep the other one running. Then I was told that they used to have seven machines, but now they only have these two left but they weren't worried because they had a good maintenance staff who could keep the remaining machines running.

This is unfortunately a true story and a prime example of those who "just don't get it". They should be getting a wake up call that they used to have seven machines, now they only have two, one of which doesn't work, because it's been cannibalized for parts to keep the one remaining machine working. That one machine may support their needs for the near future, but in five years they may not be able to get parts for the one remaining machine and then what are they going to do?

This is really my final point. Time is of the essence. The clock is ticking on these old machines and when they are no longer functional, people with large collections of two-inch tape, who are not getting them transferred to a modern, digital tape medium, will wind up with warehouses full of two-inch tape and no machines to play them on.

Attention must be turned to encouraging those with large two-inch tape collections to have them transferred to a serial digital component tape medium as soon as possible while there are still machines to play them.