



DOUBLE FOLD

LIBRARIES AND THE ASSAULT ON PAPER

NICHOLSON BAKER

A KNOPF  BOOK

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Libraries and the Assault on Paper

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To my son, Elias

Preface

In 1993, I decided to write some essays on trifling topics—movie projectors, fingernail clippers, punctuation, and the history of the word “lumber.” Deborah Garrison, then an editor at *The New Yorker*, called to ask if I wanted to review a soon-to-be published history of the world. Perhaps I should have written the review; instead, I suggested a brief, cheerful piece about the appeal of card catalogs. I began talking to librarians around the country, and I found out that card catalogs were being thrown out everywhere. I grew less cheerful, and the essay grew longer.

When it was published in 1994, I became known in the library world as a critic (and, to some, as a crank and a Luddite), and as a result, librarians at the San Francisco Public Library thought of me two years later when they wanted to tell someone what had happened in their institution: administrators had sent a few hundred thousand books to a landfill after they discovered that a new library building was too small to hold them. I gave a speech on this subject in the auditorium of the new building, and I published an article about it in *The New Yorker*. There was a local fuss, the head of the library eventually lost his job (over deficits, not book dumping), and I found myself described as a “library activist.”

In the midst of the controversy, a man named Blackbeard told a reporter that he had a story for me. He wouldn't reveal any details to the reporter (who was Nina Siegal, of the San Francisco *Bay Guardian*); I was supposed to call him. I didn't make the call right away, though, because the squabble over the San Francisco Public Library was sufficiently distracting, and because my family and I were packing to spend a year in England. Some weeks later, going through some papers, I found the name, Bill Blackbeard, and his number, which I dialed. Blackbeard had a formal, slightly breathless way of talking; he was obviously intelligent, perhaps a little Ancient Marinerian in the way that lifelong collectors can be. He had edited collections of comic strips (early *Popeye*, *Terry and the Pirates*, *Krazy Kat*), and he ran something called the San Francisco Academy of Comic Art—a one-man curatorship, apparently—which owned, he said, a very large number of ex-library newspaper volumes, including one-of-a-kind runs of the great early Hearst papers. Some of what Blackbeard told me I couldn't quite comprehend: that the Library of Congress, the purported library of last resort, had replaced most of its enormous collection of late-nineteenth- and twentieth-century newspapers with microfilm, and that research libraries were relying on what he called “fraudulent” scientific studies when they justified the discarding of books and newspapers on the basis of diagnosed states of acidity and embrittlement. I said that it all sounded extremely interesting and that maybe he should write about it himself; I thanked him and hung up. I was tired of finding fault with libraries; in theory, I loved libraries.

Almost two years later, I thought of Blackbeard again, and I decided to pay him a visit. He had by this time sold his newspaper collection, which filled six tractor trailers, to Ohio State University, and he had moved to Santa Cruz, where his wife liked to surf. He was in his early seventies, fit, clean shaven, wearing a nubbly gold sweater and a baseball hat turned backward. One room of his very small house was filled with dime novels and old science-fiction magazines in white boxes. In his youth, he'd written for *Weird Tales*; he'd driven armored vehicles in the Eighty-ninth Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron in the Second World War; and in 1967, filled with an ambition to write a history of the American comic strip, he'd discovered that libraries were getting rid of their newspaper collections. The San Francisco Public Library had, Blackbeard said, an "incredible treasure trove." Staff members told him that they would love to have him take it away, but unfortunately he was a private citizen—the library's charter permitted the transfer of material only to a non-profit organization. "I became a non-profit organization so fast you couldn't believe it," Blackbeard told me. Soon he had acquired a bound run of William Randolph Hearst's New York *American*, which the Hearst Corporation had donated to the Los Angeles Public Library (the library kept the custom-made burnished mahogany shelves), and another *American* run from the Stanford University Libraries. He went around the country picking up newspaper volumes, which he called "files," a usage that confused me at first. Sometimes he cut the comic strips or Sunday sections out and sold the remains to dealers; sometimes he kept the volumes whole. "When I suddenly discovered that I could have any of them that I wanted, I just went off my rocker. It was the most wonderful thing in the world." Blackbeard also told me about a test that librarians were using on paper, in which they folded the corner of a page back and forth until it broke.

Not long after I visited Blackbeard, I moved with my family from California to southern Maine. I sat in my new office, surrounded by boxes of books, staring out the window at a valley filled with young trees. There were several off-white nests of webworms clinging like the ends of Q-tips to some of the trees' upper branches. I looked at the webworm nests, and I thought, Why not find out what's happened to the newspapers? Why not learn more about the fold test? I called *The New Yorker* and asked Deborah Garrison if she could stand another article about libraries. She said yes, and I went to work. I learned about pyrophoric compounds, mummy wrappings, oversewing, artificial-aging ovens, redox blemishes, and a group called the Council on Library Resources, founded by Verner Clapp. I became familiar with the efforts of a woman named Patricia Battin, and I watched a movie, *Slow Fires*. I began moaning and typing things like "Oh, my friends, it's worse than you think." I realized that I had something that was longer than a magazine article.

Then, four fifths of the way through writing this book, I found out that one of the last remaining collections of American wood-pulp newspapers would be cut to pieces unless I started a non-profit corporation—just as Blackbeard had—and raised the money to save it. I sent out letters and grant applications; then I resumed work on the manuscript. And that's how *Double Fold*—so named in honor of the brittleness test that Bill Blackbeard first told me about—came to be written.

This isn't an impartial piece of reporting. I've tried not to misrepresent those whose views differ from my own, but I make no secret of my disagreement; at times, a dormant prosecutorial urge awoke in me, for we have lost things that we can never get back. I must also say, though, that the Library of Congress, the British Library, and the other illustrious institutions herein held up for criticism, employ a great many book-respecting people who may not know of, or approve of, what their superiors or their forebears have done.

The following people read the manuscript, or parts of it, and made useful suggestions: Nicolas Barker, Viscountess Eccles, David McKitterick, Paul Needham, Randy Silverman, Thomas Tanselle, and Peter Waters—which is not to imply that they agree with everything I say. Many others were helpful in various ways, including Marty Asher, Ann Godoff, Melanie Jackson, Cressida Leyshon, Timothy Mennel, Charline Parsons, Susanna Porter, David Remnick, and Sasha Smith. I'm grateful to my parents and my parents-in-law, and, most of all, to my beloved wife, Margaret.

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CHAPTER 1

Overseas Disposal

The British Library's newspaper collection occupies several buildings in Colindale, north of London, near a former Royal Air Force base that is now a museum of aviation. On October 20, 1940, a German airplane—possibly mistaking the library complex for an aircraft-manufacturing plant—dropped a bomb on it. Ten thousand volumes¹ of Irish and English papers were destroyed; fifteen thousand more were damaged. Unscathed, however, was a very large foreign-newspaper collection, including many American titles: thousands of fifteen-pound brick-thick folios bound in marbled boards, their pages stamped in red with the British Museum's crown-and-lion symbol of curatorial responsibility.

Bombs spared the American papers, but recent managerial policy has not—most were sold off in a blind auction in the fall of 1999. One of the library's treasures was a seventy-year run, in about eight hundred volumes, of Joseph Pulitzer's exuberantly polychromatic newspaper, the *New York World*. Pulitzer discovered that illustrations² sold the news; in the 1890s, he began printing four-color Sunday supplements and splash-panel cartoons. The more maps, murder-scene diagrams, ultra-wide front-page political cartoons, fashion sketches, needlepoint patterns, children's puzzles, and comics that Pulitzer published, the higher the *World's* sales climbed; by the mid-nineties, its circulation was the largest of any paper in the country. William Randolph Hearst moved to New York in 1895 and copied Pulitzer's innovations and poached his staff, and the war between the two men created modern privacy-probing, muckraking, glamour-smitten journalism. A million people a day once read Pulitzer's *World*; now an original set is a good deal rarer than a Shakespeare First Folio or the Gutenberg Bible.

Besides the *World*, the British Library also possessed one of the last sweeping runs of the sumptuous *Chicago Tribune*—about 1,300 volumes, reaching from 1888 to 1958, complete with bonus four-color art supplements on heavy stock from the 1890s (“This Paper is Not Complete Without the Color Illustration” says the box on the masthead); extravagant layouts of illustrated fiction; elaborately hand-lettered ornamental headlines; and decades of page-one political cartoons by John T. McCutcheon. The British Library owned, as well, an enormous set of the *San Francisco Chronicle* (one of perhaps two that are left, the second owned by the Chronicle Publishing Company itself and inaccessible to scholars), which in its heyday was filled with gorgeously drippy art-nouveau graphics. And the library owned a monster accumulation of what one could argue is the best newspaper in U.S. history, the *New York Herald Tribune*, along with its two tributaries, Horace Greeley's anti-slavery *Tribune* and James Gordon Bennett's initially pro-slavery *Herald*. The *Herald Tribune* set carries all the

way through to 1966, when the paper itself died—it, too, may be the last surviving long run anywhere. And there was a goodly stretch of *The New York Times* on the British Library’s shelves (1915 through 1958), with Al Hirschfeld drawings and hundreds of luminously fine-grained, sepia-tinted “Rotogravure Picture Sections” bound in place.

All these newspapers have been very well cared for over the years—the volumes I was allowed to examine in September 1999 were in lovely shape. The pictorial sections, but for their unfamiliar turn-of-the-century artwork, looked and felt as if they had peeled off a Hoe cylinder press day before yesterday.

But then, wood-pulp newspapers of fifty and a hundred years ago are, contrary to incessant library propaganda, often surprisingly well preserved. Everyone knows that newsprint, if left in the sun, quickly turns yellow and brittle (a connective wood ingredient called lignin, which newsprint contains in abundance, reacts with sunlight), but rolls of microfilm—and floppies and DVDs—don’t do well in the sun, either; so far, many of the old volumes seem to be doing a better job of holding their original images than the miniature plastic reproductions of them that libraries have seen fit to put in their places over the years. Binding is very important. The stitching together of fifteen (or thirty or sixty) single issues of a paper into one large, heavy book does much to keep the sheets sound; the margins often become brown and flaky, since moist, warm air reacts with the acidic compounds in the paper and weakens it, and the binding glues can stop working; but a little deeper inside the flatland of the tightly closed folio, the sheer weight of the text-block squeezes out most of the air. The effect is roughly equivalent to vacuum-sealing the inner expanses of the pages: the paper suffers much less impairment as a result.

Many librarians, however, have managed to convince themselves, and us, that if a newspaper was printed after 1870 or so, it will inevitably self-destruct or “turn to dust” any minute, soon, in a matter of a few years—1870 being the all-important date after which, in American newsprint mills, papermaking pulps consisting of cooked rags gradually began to give way to pulps made of stone-ground wood. But “soon” is a meaningless word in the context of a substance with a life as long as that of the printed page—indeed, it is a word that allows for all sorts of abuses. Early on, fledgling microfilm companies fed the fear of impermanence with confident mispredictions. Charles Z. Case, an executive at Recordak, Kodak’s microfilm subsidiary, wrote in 1936: “Since the adoption³ of wood-sulphite paper for newspaper printing, a newspaper file has had a life of from 5 to 40 years depending on the quality of the paper, the conditions of storage, and the degree of use.” Had Case’s forecast held true, the volume of the *Chicago Tribune* for July 1911 that lies open before me as I type (to an influenza-inspired illustrated section on “A New Theory of Baby Rearing”) would have expired at least half a century ago. Thomas Martin, chief of the manuscript division of the Library of Congress in the thirties, agreed with the Recordak salesman: “Old wood-pulp files⁴ which have only a few years’ duration remaining in them should be photographed on film as soon as satisfactory results can be obtained. In such cases we really have no choice but to make or take film copies, the original will soon

crumble into dust.”

But the originals didn't crumble into dust. Keyes Metcalf, a microfilm pioneer and the director of the libraries at Harvard, in 1941 predicted that the “total space requirements”⁵ of research libraries “will be reduced by paper disintegration.” Then five, ten, twenty years went by, and the paper—even the supposedly ephemeral newsprint—was still there. So librarians began getting rid of it anyway. If you destroy the physical evidence, nobody will know how skewed your predictions were.

Vilified though it may be, ground-wood pulp is one of the great inventions of the late nineteenth century: it gave us cheap paper, and cheap paper transformed the news. “All that it is necessary⁶ for a man to do on going into a paper-mill is to take off his shirt, hand it to the devil who officiates at one extremity, and have it come out ‘Robinson Crusoe’ at the other,” wrote the founder of the *New York Sun* in 1837. But there were never enough shirts, and in 1854 rag shortages lifted the price of newsprint to alarming heights. The arrival of the brothers Pagenstecher, who in the eighties imported a German machine that shredded logs to pulp by jamming their ends against a circular, water-cooled grinding stone, brought prices way down⁷—from twelve cents a pound in 1870, to seven cents a pound in 1880, to less than two cents a pound in 1900. The drop gave Pulitzer and Hearst the plentiful page space to sell big ads, and allowed their creations to flower into the gaudy painted ladies they had become by the first decade of the twentieth century.

There's no question that wood pulps are in general weaker than rag pulps; and old newsprint, especially, tears easily, and it can become exceedingly fragile if it is stored, say, on the cement floor of a library basement, near heating pipes, for a few decades. But the degree of fragility varies from title to title and run to run, and many fragile things (old quilts, old clocks, astrolabes, dried botanical specimens, Egyptian glass, daguerreotypes, early computers) are deemed worth preserving despite, or even because of, their fragility. The most delicate volume I've come across (a month of the *Detroit Evening News* from 1892), though the pages were mostly detached, and though it shed flurries of marginal flakes when I moved it around, could nonetheless be page-turned and read with a modicum of care—there was an interesting article,⁸ with two accompanying etchings, about a city shelter for “homeless wanderers.” (Sinners slept on wooden bunks without bedding, while the newly converted got cots with mattresses, and a reading room.)

Old newsprint is very acidic—and so? Our agitation over the acid in paper is not rational. Just because a given page has a low pH (a pH of 7 is neutral, below that is acidic) doesn't mean that it can't be read. There are five-hundred-year-old book papers that remain strong and flexible despite pH levels under five, a fact which has led one conservation scientist to conclude that “the acidity of the paper alone⁹ is not necessarily indicative of the state of permanence of paper.” It is difficult, in fact, to get a meaningful measure of how alkaline or acidic a paper actually is, since chemicals on the surface behave differently than those held within; the standard scientific tests (which often rely on a blender) don't discriminate. It's true that, all things being equal,

pH-neutral paper seems to keep its properties longer than paper that is made with acid-containing or acid-forming additives; scientists have been making this observation,¹⁰ on and off, for more than eighty years. But saying that one substance is stronger than another is not the same as saying that the weaker substance is on the verge of self-destruction. A stainless-steel chair may be more durable than a wooden one, but the wooden one isn't necessarily going to collapse the next time you take a seat.

Can't scientists foretell with a fair degree of certainty how long a newspaper collection of a given age will last? No, they can't; there has never been a long-term study that attempted to plot an actual loss-of-strength curve for samples of naturally aging newsprint, or indeed for samples of any paper. Years ago, William K. Wilson,¹¹ a paper scientist, began such a study at the National Bureau of Standards. For three decades he recorded the degradative changes undergone by a set of commercial book papers; then somebody decided to clean out the green filing cabinet in which the papers were stored—end of experiment. “That raised my blood pressure a little,” Wilson told me.

In the absence of real long-term data, predictions have relied on methodologically shaky “artificial aging” (or “accelerated aging”) experiments, in which you bake a paper sample in a laboratory oven for a week or two and then belabor it with standardized tests. With your test results in hand, you can, by applying a bit of chemist's legerdemain called the Arrhenius equation, come up with what appears to be a reasonable estimate of the number of years the sample will last at shirtsleeve temperatures. But the results of these sorts of divinatory calculations, invoked with head-shaking gravity by library administrators, have been uniformly wrong, and they are now viewed with skepticism¹² by many paper scientists. The authors of the *ASTM Standards*, for example, write that the use of the Arrhenius equation to predict the life expectancy of paper is “an interesting academic exercise,¹³ but the uncertainty of extrapolation is too great for this approach to be taken very seriously”; William Wilson points out that you can't predict how long an egg will last in the carton by putting it in boiling water for five minutes. Paper has a complex and as yet ill-charted chemistry, with many different molecular and mechanical processes under way concurrently; one Swedish researcher wrote that it is a “naive hope”¹⁴ to think that we can estimate “the life length of books by means of accelerated aging tests and [the] Arrhenius approach.”

In a way, however, all surviving newspaper collections, in and out of libraries, are taking part in an immense self-guided experiment in natural aging—an experiment that confutes the doctrine of newsprint's imminent disintegration. Peter Waters, former head of the conservation lab at the Library of Congress, told me that he sees no reason why old ground-wood pulp paper can't hold its textual freight for “a hell of a long time” if it is properly stored. He notes that most of the cellulose-sundering chemical reactions that can happen to a book or newspaper volume seem to take place in the first decade or so of its life; fifty years of handling paper (Waters is a master bookbinder) have taught him that the rate at which paper loses strength decreases

significantly over time—the curve of observed decay levels out. There is a very good chance, then, that a volume of the *New York World* that is doing okay at age ninety will be in pretty much the same shape when it is a hundred and eighty, assuming someone is willing to take decent care of it.

The British Library's papers had escaped the Blitz and the agenbite of their own acidity, but their keepers craved the space they occupied. English law requires that the library preserve British newspapers in the original but makes no such stipulation for foreign papers, and in 1996 the library quietly announced its intent to rid itself of about sixty thousand volumes—almost all the non-Commonwealth papers printed after 1850 for which they had bought microfilm copies. (The microfilm, much of it shot in the United States decades ago, is of varying quality—some good, some not good, all on high-contrast black-and-white stock, which wasn't designed to reproduce the intermediate shades of photographs.) The announcement appeared as an inside article in the newspaper library's newsletter;¹⁵ it was written up not long after as a short wire-service story¹⁶—“British Library Giving Away Historic Newspapers.”

In 1997 the library selected for discard¹⁷ more than seventy-five runs of Western European papers and periodicals, from France, Belgium, Germany, Austria, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain, the Netherlands, and Switzerland. They were able to place a number of these titles with national and university libraries; others they planned to sell or throw away. (I first found out about these developments in 1999; library officials still have not provided an accounting of where everything went.) Baylor University in Texas asked for, and got, eight runs of important French and Italian papers from the 1850s on, some of which will become part of their renowned Armstrong Browning collection, since Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning likely would have read those papers in their expatriate years.

Very few people knew any of this was going on. Although I interviewed a number of American newspaper librarians and dealers, I heard nothing of it; and even well-connected heads of libraries within England—such as David McKitterick, librarian of Trinity College, Cambridge, who serves on an advisory board of the British Library—were not informed of the “overseas disposals project,”¹⁸ and learned of it only late in 1999, when word began to get out. McKitterick objects to the “very quiet way” in which the deaccessioning was handled (at the very least, other British libraries should have had a better-advertised chance at the papers, he says), and he is troubled by what is on the lists; he mentions, for instance, the newspapers of pre-Revolutionary Russia, Nazi Germany, and occupied France. “I’ve now talked to a number of scholars about this,” McKitterick told me, “and they’re absolutely furious. When you replace a broadsheet newspaper with microfilm, you effectively kill stone dead much of what it meant at its time. Film can’t deal adequately with illustrations—and yet they were discarding the great French illustrated papers of the early twentieth century.”

But library administrators had other things to think about than illustration and scholarship. “Increasing pressure¹⁹ on the storage facilities at the Colindale site” was the justification for their desperate act. One of the finest libraries in the world was

unable or unwilling to buy, build, retrofit, or lease a ten-thousand-square-foot warehouse anywhere in England that could hold their unique international collection.

With Western Europe taken care of, having freed up thousands of linear meters of shelf space without any political trouble, the British Library then moved on to papers from Eastern Europe, South America, and the U.S.A. They sent out notices of availability to the Library of Congress and the American Antiquarian Society, of Worcester, Massachusetts. The Library of Congress rejected everything, but the American Antiquarian Society, which owns a famous collection of early papers (bound in black with gold trim), took several titles, mainly covering the era of the Civil War and immediately afterward. “The redcoats are coming!” librarians there said, shelving the red-spined British volumes next to their black ones. Richard Bland College in Petersburg, Virginia, claimed several nineteenth-century runs. John Blair, head of the history department, says he would have taken more of the British Library’s collection if his college had had more space; Blair remembers working as a stock boy in a large Massachusetts library in the fifties and hauling home dozens of unwanted newspaper volumes. “They just junked them,” he said; he has used them for years in his classes. Blair likened the clearing out of newspaper collections to the overeager tearing up of track as the railroads went into decline. “Now maybe they regret losing some of those rights-of-way,” he said.

No other libraries expressed interest in the huge remaining mass of U.S. material. The plan, blessed by the British Library’s board, was to offer to dealers whatever libraries left unclaimed; anything dealers didn’t want was to be thrown away: “Material for which we cannot²⁰ find a home will be offered to dealers for sale, or as a last resort sent for pulping.” Brian Lang, the director of the British Library, reiterated this plan in a letter to me: “The intention is that runs of newspapers for which no bids have been received will be pulped.”

CHAPTER 2

Original Keepsakes

I didn't want the newspapers to be dispersed by dealers or "pulped" (awful word), so I hastily formed a non-profit corporation called the American Newspaper Repository, and, when it was clear that the auction was going to go forward whether I liked it or not, I submitted bids. A dealer from Williamsport, Pennsylvania, Timothy Hughes Rare and Early Newspapers, also bid on the papers, as it turned out. Hughes owns a medium-sized, pale blue warehouse, tidily kept, filled with rows of industrial shelving; on the shelves rest about eighteen thousand newspaper volumes. He is an undemonstrative man with a small mustache, honest in his business dealings, who was formerly on the board of the Little League Museum in South Williamsport. His usual practice is to "disbind" the newspapers—that is, cut them out of their chronological context with a utility knife (you can hear the binding strings pop softly as the blade travels down the inner gutter of the volume)—and sell the eye-catching headline issues (Al Capone, the *Lusitania*, Bonnie and Clyde, Amelia Earhart) or issues containing primordial Coke ads or Thomas Nast illustrations, shrink-wrapped against white cardboard, at paper shows (where buyers gather to look over vintage postcards, baseball cards, posters, and other ephemera) or through his printed catalog or website. His father, jolly and self-effacing, is a retired sharpener of band-saw blades, as was his grandfather; now his father and his brother, along with an amiable ex-schoolteacher named Marc, are employees of the company, filling orders, moving pallets of incoming volumes around with a forklift, writing catalog copy, and gradually working down the inventory, almost all of which came from libraries.

If American libraries had been doing the job we paid them to do, and innocently trusted that they were doing, over the past five decades—if they had been taking reasonable care of our communal newspaper collections rather than stacking them in all the wrong places, and finally selling them to book-breakers or dumping them in the trash outright (an employee of one Southern library recently rescued from a Dumpster, and successfully resold to a dealer, a run of *Harper's Weekly* worth ten thousand dollars)—then the British Library's decision to auction off millions of pages of urban life, although it would mark a low point of cultural husbandry, would not have been such a potentially disastrous loss to future historians. Fifty years ago, after all, there were bound sets, even double sets, of all the major metropolitan dailies safely stored in libraries around the United States.

But that is no longer true. The Library of Congress and the New York Public Library once owned Pulitzer's New York *World* complete, for instance, and Harvard University, the University of Chicago, the Chicago Public Library, and the Chicago Tribune Company once owned sets of the *Chicago Tribune*. They don't now. ("I'm

sorry to say and appalled to say that they were tossed,” an employee of the reference department of the *Chicago Tribune* said to me. “It was before my time.”) At Columbia University (whose school of journalism Pulitzer founded), at the New York Public Library, and at the Library of Congress, you can flip through memoirs, biographies, scholarly studies, and original holograph letters of Joseph Pulitzer, works that describe his innovations in graphic design and recount his public squabble with Hearst over *The Yellow Kid*, a popular color cartoon that first appeared in the *World* in the 1890s—a squabble that begat the term “yellow journalism.” But the *World* itself, the half-million-page masterpiece in the service of which Pulitzer stormed and swore and finally went blind, was slapdashedly microfilmed in monochrome and thrown out by the New York Public Library, probably in the early fifties. Columbia said good-bye to its *World* at some point thereafter; the New-York Historical Society did so around 1990. The University of Chicago library, under the direction of micro-madman¹ Herman Fussler (former lead librarian and information specialist for the Manhattan Project), produced a bad copy of the *Chicago Tribune* in the fifties as well. The Library of Congress was quick to clear its shelves of the *World* and most of the *Chicago Tribune* and replace them with copies of the NYPL’s and the University of Chicago’s microfilm; and copies of that very same mid-century microfilm—edge-blurred, dark, gappy, with text cut off of some pages, faded to the point of illegibility on others—will now have to serve for patrons of the British Library, too.

All the major newspaper repositories—the Center for Research Libraries in Chicago, for instance, and the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, both of which once had collections of national importance—have long since bet the farm on film and given away, sold, or thrown out most of their original volumes published after 1880 or so. Nearly all major university libraries, state libraries, and large public libraries have done the same. Even the great American Antiquarian Society, having decided some years ago to narrow its focus to publications before 1876, is arranging with Timothy Hughes to swap long runs of some small-town papers—the Fitchburg (Massachusetts) *Sentinel* from 1888 on, for example—for older titles that they want.

The Kansas State Historical Society, founded by a group of newspaper editors in 1875, had, until a few years ago, an unusually fine out-of-state newspaper assemblage, including a pre-Civil War file of the New York *Tribune*, a long run of the Boston *Investigator*, and a large number of otherwise impossible-to-find Western and territorial papers. Then the society put up a new building that was smaller than it should have been and, in 1997, had an auction. One observer told me that the lots that Kansas ended up selling were so unusual, so valuable, that a group of buyers got together ahead of time to divvy things up, so that the bidding wouldn’t go completely insane. It was “once-in-a-lifetime stuff,” this observer said. The next step, according to Patricia Michaelis, the director of the library and archives division, was to dispose of most of the society’s comprehensive collection of original Kansas papers printed after 1875, offering them first to institutions and then throwing out the leavings. Michaelis believes that the original papers are doomed anyway: “They’re just inherently going to crumble apart, no matter what you do to them, because of the acid content.” About half of the people who use the library come for the newspaper collection. Do they like

the microfilm? Michaelis laughed. “Well, it’s the only option we give them.”

At another midwestern historical society, out in a pole barn, a collection was stacked twelve feet high and twenty feet wide near rows of shaft-drive bicycles and the disassembled pieces of a nineteenth-century machine shop. There were thousands of volumes of local papers and a run of *The New York Times*. Shawn Godwin,² an employee of the society at the time, wrote me that this “cube of history” was made to disappear by order of the head archivist: the volumes were chainsawed in half and fed into the steam engine that powered a vintage sawmill exhibit. “I asked one of the more sympathetic assistant directors if it would be possible to sneak a few of the volumes away,” Godwin writes. “He indicated if I was discreet and did not make a big deal about it it might be okay.” Godwin saved a small stack and tried to avoid looking at the column of smoke rising from the sawmill.

The cleanout continues. Since the mid-eighties, the vast U.S. Newspaper Program,³ a government project whose aims are to catalog as many newspapers in the country as possible (a worthy goal) and to microfilm those local papers that were passed over in earlier decades, has given libraries about forty-five million dollars in so-called preservation money—and zero dollars for storage space. The National Endowment for the Humanities, which pays for the U.S. Newspaper Program (and funds a related enterprise, the Brittle Books Program), makes no requirement that libraries actually preserve, in the physical sense of “reshelve,” their originals after they have been sent out for federally funded filming. The effect of all this NEH microfilm money has been to trigger a last huge surge of discarding, as libraries use federal preservation grants to solve their local space problems. Not since the monk-harassments of sixteenth-century England has a government tolerated, indeed stimulated, the methodical eradication of so much primary-source material.

Surely this material is all available on the Web by now, or will be soon? In time, eighty or a hundred years of a great urban paper could well become the source for a historical database of richness and utility. But at the moment, the scanning and storing and indexing of hundreds of thousands of pages of tiny type, along with halftone photos and color illustrations, would be a fearsomely expensive job; and even if money were limitless, there would remain the formidable technical challenge of achieving acceptable levels of resolution using digital cameras for formats as large as those of a newspaper spread. Nor will high-quality digital facsimiles of our major papers ever exist unless we decide right now to do a much better job of holding on to the originals—even the mangy ones with crumbly edges. You can’t digitize something that has been sold off piecemeal or thrown away, after all; and attempts to scan the page-images of newspapers from old microfilm have not worked well—and will never work well—because the microfilm itself is often at the squint-to-make-it-out level. HarpWeek, a venture that offers a digital copy of *Harper’s Weekly* on the Web, spent tens of thousands of dollars trying to scan the available microfilm, but they found that thirty percent of the resultant images were bad. Now they’re working from two original sets of the journal, both of which they’ve cut out of their bindings in order to set the loose pages flat on the scanner.

Amid the general devastation, there are some librarians of courage and foresight whose accomplishments are as yet unsung. The Boston Public Library, owing to the belief of Charles Longley—the recently retired curator of microtexts and newspapers—that his institution’s accumulated newspaper files are “part of the City’s own heritage⁴ and the Library would be remiss in not retaining them,” not only has held on to all its existing collections but has continued to lay away all the recent output of Boston and selected Massachusetts papers, wrapped in brown paper, right up through the present; and the library has taken ownership of important sets of bound Boston newspapers once owned by Harvard and other libraries in the region as well. Longley was lucky: his views were shared by the city’s longtime librarian, the late Philip McNiff; often a change of administration proves fatal to a great collection.

At Ohio State, a librarian named Lucy Caswell, who wears quiet silk scarves and directs the Cartoon Research Library, is almost single-handedly attempting to rebuild a bound-volume collection of national scope—buying back for scholarly use material offered by dealers and collectors, most notably the lifetime harvest of Bill Blackbeard and his San Francisco Academy of Comic Art.

Several years ago, Caswell bought some volumes of the *Chicago Tribune* (from a dealer, who bought them from another dealer); two of them, one from 1899 and one from 1914, were out on a trolley at the Cartoon Research Library when I visited—four-inch-thick buckram-backed bulwarks, with heavy pull-straps triple-riveted to the binding in order to assist the frowning researcher in hauling their massiveness from the shelf. Their exteriors are scuffed and battered, but they are things of beauty nonetheless; they made me think of Mickey’s book of broom-awakening spells in *Fantasia*. I opened the volume from 1914. The inside boards displayed the seal of Harvard University, and below it I read:

FROM THE BEQUEST OF
ICHABOD TUCKER
[Class of 1791]
OF SALEM, MASS.

The paper wasn’t crumbling—it was easily turned and read. I called Harvard’s microform department and asked if they had the *Chicago Tribune* on paper from 1899 and 1914, just to be sure that the Ohio volumes weren’t from a duplicate set that they had sold. A sincere-sounding reference woman in the microforms department said, “Oh, we would never have hard copies going back that far—they just don’t keep.” They don’t keep, kiddo, if you don’t keep them.

Aside from what Lucy Caswell and Charles Longley have been able to save, the annihilation of once accessible collections of major daily papers of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries is pretty close to total. Some state libraries—Pennsylvania’s, for instance, in Harrisburg—reached back further than the 1870s or 1880s as they designed their disposal programs, and used 1850 as a draconian dump-after date.

“Pennsylvania was the first state to undertake statewide microfilming and destruction of its newspaper files,” Bill Blackbeard told me. “They did an extraordinarily, brutally thorough job of it. Unfortunately, some of the earliest color Sunday comic strips were printed in Philadelphia newspapers. So I never have gotten to see very many of those.” The State Library of Pennsylvania did not keep its original bound set of *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, and neither did the Free Library of Philadelphia—a librarian there wrote me that wood-pulp newsprint “falls apart.” Bell and Howell Information and Learning (formerly University Microfilms) will, however, sell the whole *Inquirer* to you on spools of archival polyester, encased in little white cardboard boxes, for \$621,515.

Bell and Howell/UMI now owns microfilm negatives for most of the big papers in the country; and, to the extent that there are no originals left to scan when scanning resolution improves, its “master” microfilm (some of it inherited from now defunct filming labs and of poor quality) will perforce become the basis for any future digital versions of old newspapers, access to which the company will also control. Bell and Howell has successfully privatized our past: whether we like it or not, they possess a near monopoly on the reproduction rights for the chief primary sources of twentieth-century history.

Where did all the spurned papers go? Many were thrown out—and continue to be thrown out as statewide filming projects progress—but a colossal residue rests at a company called Historic Newspaper Archives, Inc., the biggest name in the birth-date business. If you call Hammacher Schlemmer, say, or Potpourri, or the Miles Kimball catalog, to order an “original keepsake newspaper”⁵ from the day a loved one was born, Historic Newspaper Archives will fill your order. In the company’s twenty-five thousand square feet of warehouse space in Rahway, New Jersey, innumerable partially gutted volumes wait in lugubrious disorder on tall industrial shelves and stacked in four-foot piles and on pallets. I paid a visit one winter afternoon. The Christmas rush was over, and the place was very quiet. Torn sheets, sticking out from damaged volumes overhead, slapped and fluttered in a warm breeze that came from refrigerator-sized heaters mounted on the ceiling. When an order came in for a particular date, a worker would pull out a volume of the Lewiston *Evening Journal*, say (once of Bowdoin College), slice out the issue, neaten the rough edges using a large electric machine called a guillotine (adorned on one side with photos of swimsuit models), and slip it in a clear vinyl sleeve for shipping. Every order comes with a “certificate of authenticity” printed in florid script.

Not everything was on shelves—some were piled three pallets high against the wall; and the University of Maryland’s large collection, a recent arrival, occupied about a thousand square feet of floor near the loading dock. The *Herald Tribune* set that the Historic Newspaper Archive is gradually dismembering is bound in pale-blue cloth and is in very good condition (where it hasn’t gone under the knife, that is); its bookplates announce⁶ that it was the gift of Mrs. Ogden Reid, who owned and ran the *Tribune*, more or less, in the forties and fifties. It is a multi-edition file: five editions for each day are separately bound. I would guess that this was at one time the *Herald*

Tribune's own corporate-historical set; Mrs. Reid no doubt believed that she was ensuring its careful continuance by donating it to a library. Hy Gordon, the no-nonsense general manager of the archives, told me that he believes he got his *Herald Tribunes* from the New York Public Library. Gordon sold me one volume from the set, for February 1–15, 1934 (including rotogravure sections and color cartoons by Rea Irwin) at a discounted price of three hundred dollars plus shipping.

(The NYPL divested themselves of their *Tribune* run, but it must be commended for keeping a huge cobbled-together set of *The New York Times*, from 1851 right up through 1985, several decades of which exist in a special rag-paper library edition. They will let you read from it in room 315, where they serve “semi-rare” material under supervision. The run has some gaping holes—for instance, there are no volumes at all for the years from 1915 through 1925. And no research library, I believe, has saved the *Times* in paper over the past decade: the paper now prints thousands of color photographs a year, but you wouldn't know that from the film.)

I told Hy Gordon that I thought some librarians had exaggerated the severity of newsprint's deterioration. “Oh yeah, yeah, it doesn't fall apart,” he agreed. “The ends might crack, but that's all. The newspaper's still fine.”

I said I was distressed that so many libraries were getting rid of their bound newspapers.

“Don't be distressed,” he said. “There are a lot of things more important in life.”

Are there really? More important than the fact that this country has strip-mined a hundred and twenty years of its history? I'm not so sure. The Historic Newspaper Archives owns what is now probably the largest “collection” of post-1880 U.S. papers anywhere in the country, or the world, for that matter—a ghastly anti-library. They own it in order to destroy it. “Here are rare and original newspapers with assured value many from the Library of Congress,” says the Archives' sales brochure—all for sale for \$39.50 an issue.⁷ I saw identifying bookplates or spine-markings from the New York State Library, the New York Public Library, Brown University, the San Francisco Public Library, Yale, the Wisconsin Historical Society Library, the American Antiquarian Society, and many others. A now mutilated run of the *New York World* has this bookplate:

Presented to

THE NEW-YORK HISTORICAL SOCIETY

by

THOMAS W. DEWART

former President of The Sun

and by

ROY W. HOWARD