A REPORTER AT LARGE

DEADLINE

The author's desperate bid to save America's past.

BY NICHOLSON BAKER

A few years ago, while I was in the middle of a squabble over book-dumping with the San Francisco Public Library, a man named Blackbeard told a reporter that he wanted to talk to me. I called him up one evening. Bill 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 operated something called the San Francisco Academy of Comic Art—a one-man curatorship, apparently—which owned, he said, a 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. He said that the Library of Congress, the nation's library of last resort, had replaced most of its enormous collection of late-nineteenth- and twentieth-century newspapers with microfilm, and he also said that research libraries were "telling fibs" when they justified the discarding of newspapers (and books) 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 to Ohio State University, and 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 cap 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 89th 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, Blackbeard said, had 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 nonprofit organization. "I became a nonprofit organization so fast you couldn't believe it," Blackbeard told me. Soon he had acquired a bound run of William Randolph Hearst's opulently lurid 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. Sometimes he cut the comic strips out and sold the remains to dealers; sometimes he kept

It's election day in animal land;
The office seekers all give the glad hand;
They've all got their pockets stuffed full of notes—
How wicked it is to pay money for votes.

No animal need vote against his will;
They simply feed him a knockout pill.
And then they know he'll not be gay,
But just vote any way they say.

The Octopus has the boarding house vote
"If I haven't," said he, "I hope I'm a goat.
With eight hands I can grab eight boarders at once,
And make 'em vote right, or else I'm a dunce."

The Hippo guards the ballot box—
He's as watchful and wary as any old fox;
"That old Octopus needn't try to buy me,
Because I'm already bought," said he.

KEEP OFF THE GRASS.

LOST.

Opposite: a printout from microfilm of the November 2 and 3, 1902, Chicago Tribune. After the University of Chicago shot the film, it got rid of the originals. Above: a photograph of one of the pages, made from a volume the British Library disposed of.

the volumes whole. "When I suddenly discovered that I could have any of them I wanted, I just went off my rocker. It was the most wonderful thing in the world."

Not long after I visited Blackbeard, my family and I moved 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 upper branches of the trees. I looked at the webworm nests, and I thought, Why not find out what's happened to the newspapers?

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 volumes of Irish and English papers were destroyed; fifteen thousand more were damaged. Unscathed, however, was a superb inventory of foreign newspapers, 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.

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 had discovered that illustrations sold the news, and in the eighteen-nineties he began printing four-color Sunday supplements and splash-panel cartoons. The more maps, murder-scene diagrams, ultra-wide front-page political cartoons, fashion illustrations, needlepoint patterns, children's puzzles, and comics that Pulitzer published, the higher the *World's* sales climbed; by the mid-nineties, it had the largest circulation 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, in a sense, 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 possessed one of the last sweeping runs of the sumptuous Chicago *Tribune:* about thirteen hundred volumes, reaching from 1888 to 1958, complete with bonus four-color art supplements on heavy stock from the eighteen-nineties ("This Paper Is Not Complete Without the Color Illustration," says a 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, a huge set of the San Francisco *Chronicle* (one of perhaps two that are left, the second owned by the Chronicle 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 United States 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—this set, 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 well cared for over the years: the volumes that I was allowed to examine this past fall 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 the day before yesterday.

Bombs spared the American papers, but recent managerial policy has not—

most were sold off in a blind auction last September. There were evidently only two bidders. I was one of them; a dealer from Williamsport, Pennsylvania, Timothy Hughes Rare Newspapers, was the other. Timothy 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 directors of the Little League Museum. 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 from his catalogue or his Web site. His father, jolly and self-effacing, was a sharpener of bandsaw 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 catalogue copy, and gradually working down the inventory.

Hughes and I were bidding on the papers because their keepers craved the space they occupied. English law requires that the British Library preserve British newspapers in the original, but makes no such stipulation for foreign material, and in 1996, in an article in a newsletter, 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 it had bought microfilm copies. (Included in the "overseas disposals project" were newspapers from Nazi Germany, pre-revolutionary Russia, and Occupied France.) "Increasing pressure on the storage facilities at the Colindale site" was the justification for this desperate act.

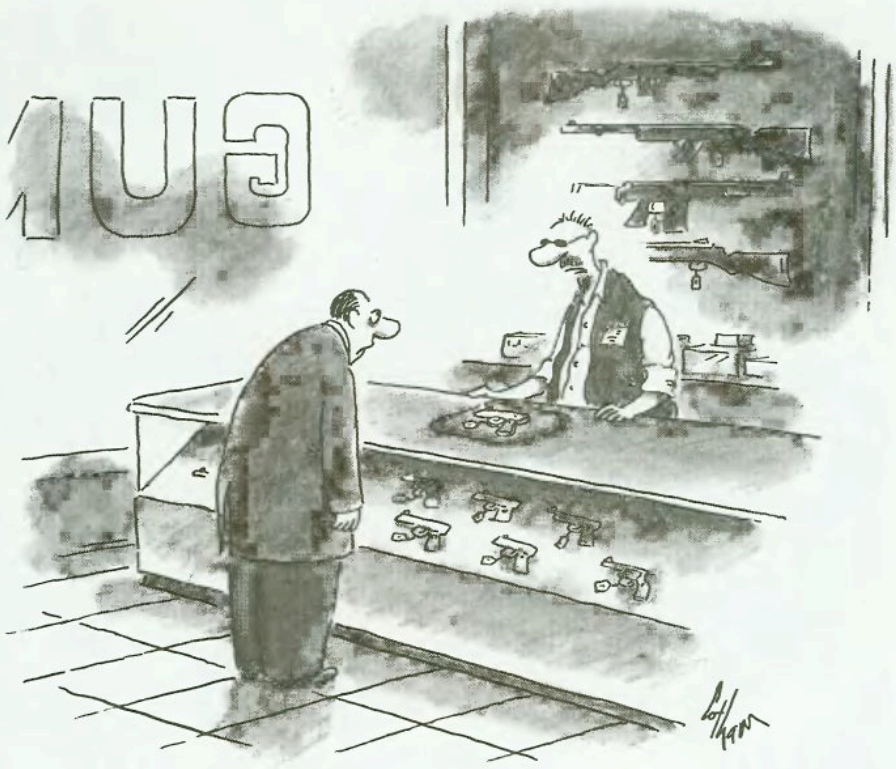
The plan, blessed by the British Library's board, was to offer the papers to libraries first; whatever the libraries left

unclaimed would be sold to dealers; anything dealers didn't want was to be thrown away. Brian Lang, then the director of the British Library (he retired from the post earlier this summer), reiterated the plan in a letter he sent me in October of last year: "The intention is that runs of newspapers for which no bids have been received will be pulped."

If American libraries had been doing the job we trusted that they were doing over the past several decades, 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 be the sort of disastrous loss to future historians that it threatened to become when I found out about it. Fifty years ago, there were bound sets, even double sets, of all the major metropolitan dailies safely stored in libraries around the United States.

Today, you can flip through memoirs, biographies, scholarly studies, and original holograph letters of Joseph Pulitzer at Columbia (whose school of journalism Pulitzer founded), at the New York Public Library, and at the Library of Congress: 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 eighteen-nineties—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 microfilmed (wretchedly) in monochrome and thrown out by the New York Public Library, probably in 1950. Columbia said goodbye to its *World* at some point thereafter; the New-York Historical Society did so sometime in the early nineties.

Harvard University, the University of Chicago, the Chicago Public Library, and the Chicago Tribune Company once owned the Chicago *Tribune*. They don't now. (An employee of the reference department of the Chicago *Tribune* told me that he was "sorry to say and appalled to say" that the volumes were gone. "It was before my time.") The University of Chicago library produced a woefully bad microfilm copy of the Chicago *Tribune* in the fifties. The Library of Congress was quick to clear its shelves of the *World* and most of the *Tribune* and replace them with copies of the N.Y.P.L.'s and the University of Chicago's microfilm. Prints of that mid-century microfilm—edge-blurred, dark, gappy, with text cut off on some pages, faded to the point of illegibility on others—will now have to serve for patrons of the British Library, too.



"This is the perfect choice for whatever you're perpetrating."

All the major American newspaper repositories 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. The Kansas State Historical Society, founded by a group of newspaper editors in 1875, had 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 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. She 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 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."

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). Yet wood-pulp newspapers of fifty and a hundred years ago are often surprisingly well preserved. Binding is extremely im-

At Historic Newspaper Archives, in Rahway, New Jersey, volumes are gutted for birthday gifts. Photograph by Abelardo Morell.

portant. 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 go bad, 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 paper suffers a good deal 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 newsprint mills in this country, paper-making pulps consisting of cooked rags gradually began to give way to pulps made of stone-ground wood. 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 adoption 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." Thomas Martin, the assistant chief of the manuscript division of the Library of Congress in the thirties, agreed with the Recordak salesman: "Old wood-pulp files 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. In 1941, Keyes Metcalf, a microfilm pioneer and the director of the libraries at Harvard, predicted that the "total space requirements" 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.

A promotional photograph for Recordak from the nineteen-thirties shows a wall of volumes of the New York *Times* at the New York Public Library, heaped and ranked willy-nilly to heighten the sense of oppressiveness; in front of them stands a prim wooden cabinet full of Kodak-made microfilm. Recordak succeeded early in winning over Keyes Metcalf. Metcalf, who was then the chief of reference at the New York Public Library, bought two microfilm readers; later, at Harvard, he launched, with Rockefeller Foundation money, a large-scale project to film foreign newspapers, in order, as he wrote a friend, "to help push microphotography." Luther Evans, who eventually became a Librarian of Congress, made a name for himself in the thirties as the head of the W.P.A.'s Historical Records Survey, where he supervised a large amount of nearly unreadable make-work microfilming around the country. In those days, microfilm was shot on the same stock as movie film (on some prints you can still see sprocket perforations from the original negative), and one has a sense that the library administrators saw themselves in the role of studio moguls, bringing multivolume reference classics to the silver, or at least the gray-green, screen.

Microfilm had an air of enticing sneakiness as well—of important covert operations performed in the national interest. This tradition goes back to the siege of Paris, in 1870, when the Prussians cut all telegraph links to the city. In a peasant's disguise, René Dagron, already a microphotographer of note, sneaked his optical apparatus to Tours in wine barrels, and there photographed military communiqués at reduced size on emulsions that he gently rolled up, slid into quills, and tied to carrier pigeons. The birds, which had been plunging exhausted from the sky when burdened with heavy paper, now flapped to Paris without incident.

In the Second World War, microfilm again came to prominence. In 1942, a young but growing company called University Microfilms landed a contract with the Office of Strategic Services, later to become the C.I.A., to film millions of pages of Axis scientific papers and other documents gathered by British agents. Around the same time, the O.S.S. needed an efficient way to sort thousands of vacation photographs of Germany which it had solicited from the public in order to plan bombing runs. A forward thinker named John F. Langan hired a team of women to mount microfilm snippets of each vacation photo (along with selected stills from Axis newsreels) into a rectangular hole cut in an I.B.M. punch card that was coded to correspond to the subject of the photo. In "The Hole in the Card" (a company history published in 1966 by 3M's Filmsort subsidiary), Neil MacKay writes, "For example, if a request were received for a shot of a bridge in occupied France that the allies wanted blown up, the cards were mechanically sorted at high speed to segregate all 'bridge' cards. The film in the cards was then projected on a screen to select the exact shot wanted." Langan was aided by Vernon D. Tate (later M.I.T.'s librarian), who moved to the O.S.S. from the National Archives, where in the thirties he had supervised the filming and destruction of a boatload of primary sources. Tate wrote in 1942 that microfilm "ranks in importance with any secret military weapon thus far disclosed."

After the war, the most influential microfilm booster was a polymathic, bow-tie-wearing career librarian named Verner Clapp. Clapp became the No. 2 man at the Library of Congress under Luther Evans ("We're going places Verner," Evans wrote him in 1945, "and I'm very glad you're a good sailor"); after narrowly missing the chieftaincy himself, Clapp went on in 1956 to direct the new and very flush Council on Library Resources, which bestowed hundreds of thousands of Ford Foundation dollars on technologies of image shrinkage. One of Verner Clapp's cherished bulk-reducing projects was the Verac, built by the AVCO corporation (it was at work on the reëntry system for the Minuteman missile at the time)—a cubic-foot set of stacked photographic plates layered with a super-high-resolution emulsion that could hold a million page images, each accessible by a servomechanism that, as Clapp put it, "brings the addressed image into the scanning position through a paroxysmic effort of approximately one-tenth of a second's duration." The Verac could make you a hard copy (Clapp uses this Cold War term in 1964) or the image could be made to appear on a "vidicon," or closed-circuit-TV screen. It didn't work, though—the words were blurry. Or perhaps the blur accurately reproduces Clapp's own tears of frustration, for the paroxysmic Verac was an expensive

"It's very, very important that you try very, very hard to remember where you electronically transferred Mommy and Daddy's assets."

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failure. Like missile defense, leading-edge library automation is a money pit.

At the 1959 annual meeting of the National Microfilm Association, Clapp gave the keynote address, entitled "A Good Beginning." He spoke of a hoped-for day in which microfilm machines "can be made a personal accoutrement, as homely and as natural and as essential as the toothbrush, the ball-point pen, or as eyeglasses." He also told delegates that microfilm "has come to the forefront again and again in time of war, and some of its best-known achievements are associated with espionage." Most of his listeners that day were unaware that Clapp himself was a consultant for the C.I.A., and that since at least 1949, while he was still at the Library of Congress, he had been an intelligence contact with top-secret clearance.

Clapp's own C.I.A. file includes documents from 1953 and 1954 stating that his task was to "maintain liaison on mutual library matters as well as monitor certain CIA-financed Library of Congress activity." In Clapp's handwritten daily minutes, now held in the Library of Congress's manuscript division, there is a note from December, 1951, when he was chief assistant librarian—"Round up on CIA projects"—and then a list of names, including that of Frederick Wagman, later the director of the University of Michigan's library and president of the American Library Association, who was a lifelong microfilm enthusiast. Around the same time, Clapp notes that the "CIA contract is in mill."

All Verner Clapp's notes are on paper, easily read today. Clapp's C.I.A. file, on the other hand, looks to have been an unfortunate victim of the Cold War enthusiasm for micro-preservation: it apparently was inexpertly filmed at some point, and it has faded severely, as microfilm does when technicians don't take care to rinse off the hypo developer. The copy that the C.I.A. sent me is poignantly stamped with the words "Best Copy Available" on almost every nearly indecipherable page. Some of the pages are, though uncensored, completely unreadable. The same sort of cautionary language—"Best Copy Available"—accompanies printouts from microfilmed newspapers that one can order from the Library of Congress and the New York Public Library.

Vilified though it may be, groundwood 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 necessary 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," the founder of the New York *Sun* wrote 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 1867 imported a German machine that shredded logs to pulp by jamming their ends against a circular, water-cooled grinding stone, brought paper prices way down—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 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. In the absence of real long-term data, predictions have relied on 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. But paper has a complex and as yet ill-charted chemistry, with many different molecular and mechanical processes proceeding concurrently; the results of the tests, invoked with head-shaking gravity by library administrators, have been uniformly wrong.

Yet, in a way, all surviving newspaper collections, in and out of libraries, are taking part in a self-guided experiment in natural aging—an experiment that confutes the doctrine of newsprint's imminent disintegration. Peter Waters, a former head of the conservation lab at the Library of Congress, told me that he sees no reason that old groundwood-pulp paper can't hold its textual freight for "a hell of a long time" if it is stored in a cool, dry place. He notes that most of the cellulose-sundering chemical reactions that can happen to a book or a newspaper volume seem to take place in the first decade or so of its life; forty

years of handling paper (Waters is a master bookbinder) tells him that the rate at which paper loses strength "slows down enormously" over time—the curve of decay levels out. There is a good chance, then, that a volume of the New York *World* that is doing O.K. at the age of 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 size of newspapers is indispensable to our experience of their content. The newspaper reader proceeds nonlinearly, not as he would holding a typical book but circling around the opened double-page spread, perhaps clockwise, or counterclockwise, moving his whole head as well as his eyes, guided by island landmarks like photos and ads. Even papers that have no pictures at all have a visual exorbitance, a horizon-usurping presence that a microfilm's image (which one observer in the seventies likened to "kissing through a pane of glass") subverts and trivializes.

Still, there is nothing intrinsically wrong with microfilming. Taking tiny black-and-white pictures of things isn't objectionable so long as the picture-taking isn't destructive. In fact, microfilm can be extremely useful: it is portable and reproducible, and for many kinds of simple referential research it can serve as a stand-in or buffer copy that will reduce wear on irreplaceable and fragile originals. Nobody objects to postcards of Dürer woodcuts, or coffee-table books filled with reproductions of vintage ocean-liner posters, because the existence of handy copies of these works of art, in reduced size, does not induce museum curators to slice up or throw away the originals.

But the microfilming of old newspapers (which contain many thousands of woodcuts, by the way, not to mention Easter-egg cutouts, paper dolls, dress patterns, and illustrated sheet music) has, right from the beginning, been intimately linked with their destruction. The disbinding of every volume in order to speed production and avoid gutter shadow (the middle area of an open volume, where the pages turn down toward the binding, is a region hard to light and keep in focus) was, and still is, the preferred method of newspaper microphotography in the United States. The technique was systematically applied at the Library of Congress. Luther Evans described a pilot project to film a run of the Washington *Evening Star* in 1941: "The entire back of the binding was sheared off under a power cutter and the pages photographed individually." Evans called this "the ideal technique for microfilming bound newspapers." S. Branson Marley, who was a chief of the library's serial division, wrote years later of that disbinding, "This was a major decision, for it meant that in order to film a file for preservation, it was necessary to destroy it; once the volumes were cut for this purpose it was impractical, and usually impossible, to restore them."

There was a palpable glamour to microfilming in those early days, difficult though it may be to feel it now—a hot chemical whiff of cinematography and high-stakes intelligence work. And there was, as well, the entrepreneurial appeal of creating a product you could sell to other libraries. But the main reason that microfilm (and its higher-reduction cousin, microfiche) has always fascinated library administrators is, of course, that it gives them a way to clear the shelves—to "expand without expanding," in the words of a full-page University Microfilms advertisement in the July, 1976, issue of *Microform Review*. The picture in the ad is of a squeezed, feather-shedding American eagle, and the headline is "AMERICA'S SPACE PROGRAM IS IN TROUBLE":

> We don't have enough of it. Space. Not in the cities. Not on the land, and, as we don't need to tell you, not in the libraries. University Microfilms can give you more space. More space translates as more ways to expand without expanding, more options open.
>
> Serials Management in Microform is our own slum clearance program.

Newspaper collections were the first slums to be cleared (books came later), and, because the Library of Congress had the largest newspaper collection in the country, it was one of the first to go to work. (The Library of Congress had "files of American and foreign newspapers more complete and in greater amount than in any other library," one celebrant wrote a decade before the clearance began.) In 1950, an energetic soul named Clyde S. Edwards was put in charge of the library's serial division; an internal report for that year pointed out "the badly congested condition of the bound newspaper collections, and the urgent need for space in which to expand them." But the newspapers were never to have enough space again. Verner Clapp, microfilm futurist,

"I couldn't agree more—but, then again, I hate even non-lethal injections."

was by this time running day-to-day operations at the library (Luther Evans, the chief, was out of the country for long periods, on missions for UNESCO), and he was not a believer in "merely more of the same—ever and ever larger bookstacks and ever and ever more complicated catalogs." He subscribed to what is sometimes called the steady-space model. The ideal research library (as he described it in a 1964 book, "The Future of the Research Library") would reach a certain fixed physical size and stay there forever: high-powered techno-shrinkage systems would allow librarians to "retire" their originals in favor of ever more densely packed micro-surrogates. (The curious twists of meaning that surround microfilming were not entirely lost on Clapp. "It is an art," he told the conventioneers in 1959, "dedicated to preservation, yet it is often practiced as a preparation for deliberate destruction.")

Rather than putting up more shelves for the newsprint collection or, if necessary, building or leasing a warehouse—traditional reactions to a space shortage—the Library of Congress responded in 1950 by abandoning the binding and storing of many new newspapers: incoming papers were discarded after a few months, as soon as commercial microfilm arrived to substitute for them. That practice saved dramatically on binding costs, thus helping to subsidize the cost of the microfilm. But there was only one sure way to relieve the overcrowding, Edwards advised in a later report: "I am convinced that the only solution to this problem lies in an intelligently planned reduction of the original files."

In a "conference decision," the library's managers sanctioned, as Marley put it, "the disposal to other libraries of bound newspapers replaced by microfilm." An unobtrusive footnote follows Marley's innocent-sounding sentence: "Volumes for which there are no takers are destroyed." None of this epochal activity, in which the Library of Congress began its slow betrayal of an unknowing nation, was mentioned in its published annual reports.

Volumes for which there are no takers are destroyed. Increasingly, there were no takers, because such is the prestige of our biggest library that whatever its in-house theoreticians come to believe—however anathematic to the ideals of reasoned stewardship—other research libraries will soon believe as well. The cleanout continues. Since the mid-eighties, the vast U.S. Newspaper Program, a government project whose aims are to catalogue as many newspapers in the country as possible (a worthy goal) and to microfilm those local papers which were passed over in earlier decades, has given away to 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," originals after they have been sent out for federally funded filming. ("The N.E.H. has never taken a position on the eventual disposition of brittle volumes that have been microfilmed to preserve their intellectual content," George Farr, the director of the N.E.H.'s Office of Preservation, wrote me. "We believe that this is a decision that is more appropriate for the grantee libraries to make.") The effect of all this N.E.H. 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 a 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. And high-quality digital facsimiles of our major papers will never 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

"Frank! Frank, honey, wake up! Your lamp—it's humongous!"

to scan the available microfilm but found that thirty per cent of the resultant images were bad. In the end, the company worked from original sets of the journal, which had to be disbound so that the pages could be placed flat on the scanner.

Amid the general devastation, there are some librarians of 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 heritage 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 the recent output of Boston and selected Massachusetts papers, wrapped in brown paper, right up through the present; and it has taken ownership of important sets of bound Boston newspapers once owned by Harvard and other regional libraries. Longley was lucky: his views were shared by the city's longtime librarian, the late Philip McNiff; very 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 through gifts and by 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.

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. "Pennsylvania was one of the first states 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 Pennsylvania State Library did not keep its original bound set of the Philadelphia *Inquirer*, and neither did the Philadelphia Free Library—a librarian there wrote me that wood-pulp newsprint "falls apart." Bell & 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 & Howell 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 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 & Howell has successfully privatized our past: whether we like it or not, the company possesses 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 state filming projects progress—but a colossal residue rests at a company called Historic Newspaper Archives, the biggest name in the birth-date business. If you call Hammacher Schlemmer, say, or Potpourri, or the Miles Kimball catalogue, to order an "original keepsake newspaper" for the day a loved one was born, you're buying something that was once part of a library's collection. Historic Newspaper Archives has twenty-five thousand square feet of warehouse space in Rahway, New Jersey; there innumerable partly gutted volumes wait in lugubrious disorder on tall industrial shelves and in four-foot piles and on pallets. I paid a visit one winter afternoon. The Christmas rush was over, and the place was quiet. Torn sheets, sticking out from damaged volumes overhead, slapped and fluttered in a warm breeze that came from refrigerator-size heaters mounted on the ceiling. When an order arrived for a particular date, a worker would pull down a volume of the *Herald Tribune*, say, slice out the issue, neaten the rough edges using an electric trimmer, and slip it in a clear vinyl sleeve for shipping. Every order comes with a "certificate of authenticity" printed in florid script. The *Herald Tribune* set that Historic Newspaper Archives 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 announce 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 insuring 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 *Tribunes* from the New York Public Library. Gordon sold me one volume from the set (including rotogravure sections and color cartoons by Rea Irvin), at a discounted price of three hundred dollars plus shipping.

(The N.Y.P.L.'s librarians divested themselves of their *Tribune* run, but they must be commended for keeping one of their huge sets of the New York *Times*, from 1857 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 "semi-rare" material is served under supervision. 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 microfilm.)

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. Historic Newspaper Archives owns what is probably the largest "collection" of post-1880 United States papers anywhere in the country, or the world, for that matter—a ghastly anti-library. The company owns it in order to destroy it. "Here are rare and original newspapers with assured value many from the Library of Congress," the archives' brochure boasts—all for sale for thirty-nine dollars and fifty cents an issue.

In April of 1999, several months after my visit to Hy Gordon's warehouse in Rahway, I came across a brief description of the British Library's disposal project on its Web site. I called up a friendly-sounding person named Bhavna Tailor, who is in charge of Acquisitions and Stock Control at the British Library's Newspaper Library ("stock control," I have since learned, is English librarianship's gentle phrase for "getting rid of all the stuff you don't want"), and I did my best to convey to her the preciousness of the things on her disposal list, and the mediocrity of some of the microfilm copies in which the British Library was placing its trust. The same day, I E-mailed her a letter. "My hope is that this extraordinary trove can be kept intact and available for future scholarship," I said, "not cut up and sold piecemeal by dealers." I would be willing to pay for removal and storage if I had to, I told her, either via a nonprofit or as a private citizen, if it came down to a choice between that and seeing the papers irretrievably dispersed. Ten days later, I got a response from Tailor. She would keep my letter on file, she said, "and if there are no takers for the remainder of the US titles, then I will contact you and we can take matters from there." I forwarded the list to Lucy Caswell, at Ohio State, because she was the only librarian I knew who was actively taking in large wood-pulp back files; but she was still trying to digest the six tractor-trailer loads of material that her library had bought from Bill Blackbeard.

In August, after sending two further notes of inquiry, I got a letter from the British Library, attached to which was a disposal list amounting to about a hundred and thirty newspapers and other miscellaneous periodicals—more than three times the number of titles that the library listed in its newsletter and on its Web site. The New York *World* was still there—unbelievably, no library had snapped it up—as were most of the other big papers; and there were pictorial vehicles, like *Leslie's Illustrated Weekly* and the Chicago *Graphic*, and a bewildering array of ethnic papers and periodicals (the *Gaelic American* from 1916-19, the *American Hebrew* from 1905-20, the Boston *Dielli*, the Jersey City *Svoboda*, the New York *Irish World* from 1880-1946, the *British Californian*, the Chicago *Katolik*, the New York *Vienybe Lietuvninku*, the *France Amérique*, and on and on), and political papers (volumes of the Yiddish socialist New York *Forward* from 1917-75, for instance, and of the New York *Worker* from 1943-68), and a number of uncommon trade periodicals, such as *Combustion* and *Fur Trade Review* (both from the thirties). "It has been decided," Bhavna Tailor stiffly wrote, "that it would not be appropriate for us to donate the remaining material to individuals rather than to institutions." The material, she said, would be "offered to the highest bidder." The list was evidently sent out to newspaper dealers at about the same time I got it; the deadline for bids was September 30, 1999.

As I stared at the titles, I felt a wave of premonitory misery. The timing of this development was not good. I was two years behind in everything; I owed letters of thanks, apology, correction, or friendly encouragement; and my wife and I had drained our cash reserves, having just bought an eighteenth-century house with no doorknobs in Maine. I didn't want to get caught up in some kind of mind-consuming, hideously expensive wrangle with the British Library.

But, gee, the list was long. The library, while perhaps technically complying with disclosure rules, was trying to minimize the scope and ruthlessness of its deaccessioning. And then there was the phrase "to the highest bidder." Apparently, it was a matter of indifference to the library's managers whether the newspaper collection held rarities or not; they were perfectly willing to act in a way that would all but guarantee its quietus at the hands of the paper knackers. They wanted the money. So I made calls, wrote letters, hired lawyers, formed a nonprofit corporation, and appealed to the British Library's sense of decency.

It takes time to microfilm back files amounting to millions of pages; at the Library of Congress, the "planned reduction" went fairly slowly at first. Blackbeard told me that when he first began

saving newspapers, in the late sixties and early seventies, the library still had a huge collection, handsomely bound, stored in a naval warehouse on Duke Street, in Alexandria, Virginia. "They had virtually every major American newspaper from a large city," Blackbeard said.

A few times a year, the library would publish in its Information Bulletin a list of the papers it was replacing with film: if no federal agencies wanted them, they could go to other libraries or nonprofit organizations; if no nonprofits wanted them, they went into dealers' trucks; if dealers had got their fill, they went to the dump. "Their files were just immaculate, white paper, good-looking stuff," Blackbeard said. "They couldn't wait to get rid of them."

Two documents together disclose the extent of the Library of Congress's print-purgation program over the past several decades. One is a forty-six-page mimeographed list entitled "Holdings of American Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Newspapers Printed on Wood Pulp Paper," prepared by the Library of Congress's serial division in May of 1950, just before Clyde Edwards strode onto the scene to begin disposing of things. The other document is a detailed inventory, prepared in the summer of 1998, entitled "19th and 20th Century U.S. Newspapers in Original Format: Inventory of Volumes Held in Remote Storage."

According to the mimeographed 1950 count, there were more than sixty-seven thousand volumes of post-1870 wood-pulp newspapers in the Library of Congress—everything from the Alaska *Daily Empire* from 1917-49, in a hundred and five volumes, to the Laramie, Wyoming, *Republic & Boomerang* from 1916-49, in a hundred and three volumes. From that gigantic landmass of print, a few thousand volumes now remain. Whispers of this secret history are to be found in the small card catalogue kept behind the reference desk in the newspaper reading room. Above the typed entry for the New York *Herald Tribune*, for instance, is a handwrittten note: "All on film—(817 vols discarded)."

"Generally, we retain the ink print until we have a microfilm available," Diane Kresh, who is in charge of the Library of Congress's Preservation Directorate, said to me on one of my visits to the library. I asked her if she thought that was a good policy.

"I do," she said. "I've seen bound newspapers that have become so embrittled that they can't be used. They are still intact—things aren't falling on the floor. But you can't open them, and you can't turn the page."

So the library got rid of the newspapers because of their condition, not because of space requirements? Or was it some combination?

"Oh, no, it wouldn't be the space," Kresh said. "It's the inherent vice of deteriorating paper, and particularly newsprint."

But it was the space, unquestionably. The Library of Congress once owned the Chicago *Tribune*, the Detroit *News*, the New York *Forward*, and the New York *Times* in ultra-durable thirties rag-paper editions—printed, in other words, on stock that is significantly stronger than practically all book paper of the twentieth century. The library banished these titles anyway. Charles La Hood, the chief of photoduplication at the Library of Congress in the seventies, wrote, "Microfilming came at a propitious time, as the Library of Congress was experiencing an acute space problem in its newspaper collection."

When I pointed out to Kresh that ex-Library of Congress newspapers find avid buyers every day, and thus could not be nearly as decrepit as she was implying, she admitted that "there is, obviously, ultimately a storage issue."

Why, one wants querulously to ask, is our national library so often in the throes of a space crisis? (In 1997, the library's Working Group on Reference and Research described "a crisis of space, in particular in general collections stacks.") A year of a daily paper would fill fifty-two volumes and occupy less than half the Barbie aisle in a Toys R Us. Compared with the sort of human artifacts that the Smithsonian Institution must store (locomotives, dynamos, space capsules), or those that the National Trust is entrusted to protect (office buildings, battlefields, neighborhoods), newspapers and books are marvellously compact. Lack of money isn't the problem. The library has spent huge sums on microfilming, and its preservation budget is more than eleven million dollars a year—enough to build and

"Mrs. Jennings, can Billy come out and smoke?"

outfit a warehouse the size of a Home Depot, which would hold a century of newsprint. Are the library's senior managers unable to plan for the inevitable growth of the single most important hoard of human knowledge in the country? Why is it so difficult for this great research institution to do what any steadily growing concern—a successful pet-food discounter, say, or a distributor of auto parts, or a museum of sculpture—manages to do year after year, without fuss?

I asked James Billington, the current Librarian of Congress, what he thought about making room for original papers. Billington, a Russian historian who was, in the fifties, a C.I.A. analyst under Allen Dulles, has raised large quantities of private money to pay for the library's American Memory digitization project. "The embrittlement process is not just a question of degrading—these things disintegrate," Billington said. "There's always a tradeoff. The happiness and satisfaction of seeing the whole thing in the original is a short-lived privilege for today's audience. It's likely to be, in the real world, at the expense of the variety and richness of what future generations will be able to see in the microfilm version."

Inherent vice indeed. Everything goes wrong in time—the germane question is whether the Library of Congress, and the many institutions that followed its example, got rid of things that were, at the time of their jettisoning, both usable and valuable. I bought, on eBay, a 1908 volume of the Panama City *Star & Herald* (published in English during the building of the Panama Canal); it has the Library of Congress's oval stamp on the spine. From a dealer, I bought a volume of the New York *Post* for April, 1943, also spine-stamped by the Library of Congress. Both these objects are in excellent fettle; they can be opened and the pages turned with impunity.

Timothy Hughes, who sold me a volume of the New York *World-Telegram* from February, 1934, couldn't say for sure where he got it. "It possibly came from the Library of Congress," he wrote me. "I buy from a variety of sources and even my sources get them from various people—[the items] often get passed down to three or four dealers before they end up in my hands, so who knows where they originally came from."

ONE HUNDRED WHITE-SIDED DOLPHINS ON A SUMMER DAY

1
Fat,
black, slick,
galloping in the pitch
of the waves, in the pearly

fields of the sea,
they leap toward us,
they rise, sparkling, and vanish, and rise sparkling,
they breathe little clouds of mist, they lift perpetual smiles,

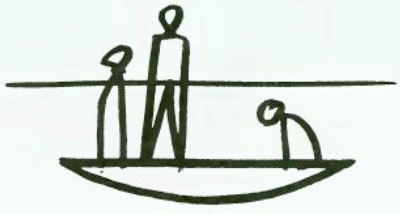
they slap their tails on the waves, grandmothers and grandfathers
enjoying the old jokes,
they circle around us,
they swim with us—

2
a hundred white-sided dolphins
on a summer day,
each one, as God himself
could not appear more acceptable

a hundred times,
in a body blue and black threading through
the sea foam,
and lifting himself up from the opened

tents of the waves on his fishtail,
to look
with the moon of his eye
into my heart,

The *World-Telegram's* pages have yellowed, especially at the outer margins, where light and air have penetrated, but they are whole and sound. You can open this magnificent public diary without harming it; you can turn its pages without trouble; you can peruse it with a moment's pleasure or a day's fascination. Joseph Mitchell, who was already freelancing at *The New Yorker*, writes about the arrival of Emma Goldman in the United States after years of exile. "The anarchist wore a snakeskin print dress and a Paisley shawl," he writes, and a photo confirms it. A. J. Liebling, another



World-Telegram writer, gets a color quote from a cabbie while covering a violent taxi strike: "I come first. The customer comes second, and I don't care if you miss your train, mister." Heywood Broun prints a letter he got from Robert Benchley. Gretta Palmer, on the woman's page, says that the speakeasy ended the male-only bar, but that segregation is returning: "Don't the men like us any more now that their judgement is unclouded by the gasoline in the old-fashioned gin?" In a sports section, a huge cartoon has Robert Moses, the new city parks commissioner, hitting a hole in one, because he has promised to spruce up the city's golf courses. And on February 22nd there is a nice anonymous lead—maybe by Liebling again?—on page 1: "Miss Florence La Bau, an alumna of Goucher College and Columbia University, a young woman of wealth and social position in Ridge-

3
and find there
pure, sudden, steep, sharp, painful
gratitude
that falls—

I don't know—either
unbearable tons
or the pale, bearable hand
of salvation

on my neck,
lifting me
from the boat's plain plank seat
into the world's

4
unspeakable kindness.
It is my sixty-third summer on earth
and, for a moment, I have almost vanished
into the body of the dolphin,

into the moon-eye of God,
into the white fan that lies at the bottom of the sea
with everything
that ever was, or ever will be,

supple, wild, rising on flank or fishtail—
singing or whistling or breathing damply through blowhole
at top of head. Then, in our little boat, the dolphins suddenly gone,
we sailed on through the brisk cheerful day.

—*Mary Oliver*

wood, N.J., was doing a fourth mate's job on the freighter Wichita when the ship plodded into port today with a cargo of human hair from China, tea from Formosa, silk from Japan, sugar from the Philippines and two strange bears from the mystery land of Tibet." 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. Nothing makes an amateur historian of you with more dispatch.

Real historians of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries aren't reading the old newspapers very much anymore, though—not page by page and month by month, for pleasure—and the texture and content of historical writing has, one suspects, undergone subtle changes (thinnings of specificity, losses of groundedness) as a consequence. Historians don't read the old papers because their libraries don't keep the old papers to read, and microfilm is a brain-poaching, gorge-lifting trial to browse. It's oddly difficult sometimes to do the equivalent of turning the page, especially when you're handling heavily scratched or faded microfilm and must crank up the magnification to make out the words. (This is particularly true at the Library of Congress, where the reader-printers in the newspaper room are in such poor repair that some of them pull forward rhythmically on their own at times, their takeup reels afflicted by a sort of electro-parkinsonism.) You feel as if you were mowing an endless monochromatic lawn, sliding the film gate this way and that, fiddling with the image-rotation dial and the twitchily restive motor switch. If you have a date and a page number, you look up that one citation and leave; you aren't tempted to spend several hours splashing in the daily contextual marsh. "Certainly the patron's desire to browse through back issues of newspapers is almost completely gone—people rarely browse through microfilm": so wrote E. E. Duncan in *Microform Review* in 1973. At the National Archives of Ontario, one of the microfilm readers had an airsickness bag taped to it; since the seventies, image ergonomists have known of a kind of motion sickness which seems to be caused by the difficulty of visually tracking the creep and lurch of passing textscapes. Ben Procter, a recent biographer of William Randolph Hearst, appears to us stoic, brave, unflinching, because he was actually willing to read what Hearst published. "Oh, yes, microfilm, yes," he told Brian Lamb, on "Booknotes." "It can be brutal, but you find out a great deal about the man and about his papers."

There are nice things about microfilm, too: the congenial clicks of your neighbor's forward button; the way the chosen image fuzzes and bows modestly offscreen as you press "Print," as if it must retire to another room to change; the warbly whine of the reel's motor when the glass plate lifts to let the film rewind at straightaway speed; the loud confident slaps of the freed leader which proclaim to everyone in the room that someone has finished his or her research. Because microfilm readers frame text arbitrarily, conferring equal eye weight on all segments of a page, you occasionally discover tiny items you wouldn't have seen if you read the paper conventionally, favoring the areas that its editors and layout artists expected you to look at first. And, of course, questing scholars cheerfully endure the ocular and neckular ordeal of microfilm if they have good reason to—if they want to make copies, or if the paper is indeed so fragile that it can't be touched without damage. But librarians have misled us: for more than fifty years, they have disparaged paper's residual strength, while remaining as "blind as lovers" (as Allen Veaner, former editor of *Microform Review*, once wrote) to the failings and infirmities of film.

The infirmities are worrying. After nitrate film stock proved hazardous, a compound called cellulose acetate became, in the nineteen-forties, the medium in which microphotographers placed their faith. At the National Bureau of Standards, experimenters baked samples of it in an oven,

tested them for residual strength (the research was subsidized by "several manufacturers of photographic films and equipment"), and declared that "cellulose acetate motion-picture film appears to be very promising for permanent records." Charles Z. Case, of Recordak, seized on this wishful governmental verdict, assuring library administrators (some of whom didn't need much convincing) that his company's product was "in the same category of permanence as the finest book-papers."

Unfortunately, acetate has a way of releasing (or "off-gassing," to use the conservator's term) the acetic acid employed in its manufacture; over the years, afflicted microfilms can begin to shrink, buckle, bubble, or stick together in a solid illegible lump. Responding to what a former chief of microforms at the New York Public Library called "the dreaded vinegar syndrome"—so named for its sinus-clearing smell—the industry switched, by the mid-eighties, from acetate to rip-resistant polyester. But millions of rolls of acetate images remain in libraries; indeed, a sizable portion of the preservation budget in some large institutions now must go toward the reduplication, with an attendant loss of detail, of old micro-negatives or positive prints onto fresh polyester.

Better plastic doesn't solve all the problems, either, since microfilm's emulsion—the soft layer of gelatin and silver that holds the image—has vulnerabilities as well. The silver can rise to the surface (a condition called "mirroring"), and it can develop colorful "redox blemishes"; a 1981 study at the Public Archives of Canada revealed that thirty-five per cent of a sample of rolls of microfilm had some redox damage. Certain fungi prosper in microfilm's gelatin, too; in 1991, a survey of microfilm masters in the University of Florida's collection (which includes "the only extant copy of many Florida newspapers") found that more than half had fungal troubles.

According to Allen Veaner, microfilm is the "invisible product," meaning that librarians file it away unlooked-at. "Serious defects often do not show up until months or years later," Veaner writes, "when an angry faculty member or student complains of an illegible or missing page, or when images have faded owing to faulty processing." Nancy Kraft, a librarian at the State Historical Society of Iowa, estimates that about a third of her library's reels of pre-1960 microfilm

SHOWCASE BY
BRIGITTE LACOMBE

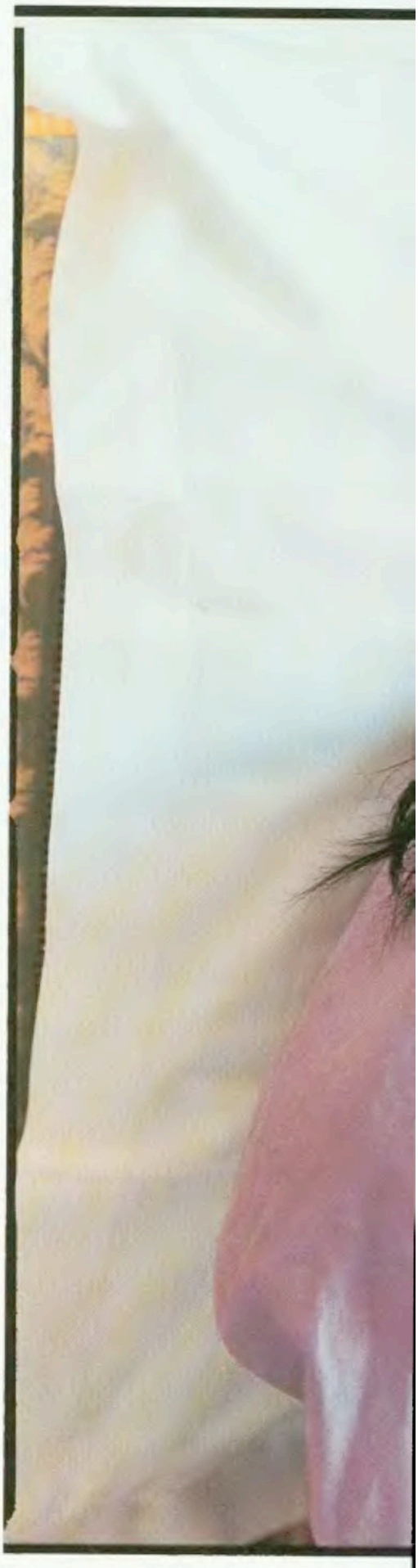
ICE QUEEN

You want her to be a little taller than she is, in the way you always want your stars to be just so, as they are in the mind. Or maybe you want her to be a little less precise when you see her live, this thirty-four-year-old Something Else attacking the fantastically guttural notes she sings like an A-plus student on all three of her well-crafted solo albums. Because you know it's in there—an emotional messiness that reminds you of Judy Garland, with her guts and roses.

Like Garland, Björk was a prodigy: the responsible child of hippie parents, she cut an album in her native Iceland at eleven. Then, as the lead singer for the Sugarcubes, Iceland's first internationally successful rock group, she helped organize tours, looked after the band, and didn't take shit from anyone: a new kind of pinup. When she sings "Thought I could organize freedom / How Scandinavian of me," this control freak knows what she's talking about.

Now she's in a movie, Lars von Trier's "Dancer in the Dark," which opens the New York Film Festival in September. If you read this year's coverage from Cannes—where Björk won the best-actress award for her portrayal of a woman going blind who takes the rap for a murder she didn't commit—you probably know that she and von Trier didn't get along. (He's from Denmark. Iceland was part of the Danish kingdom until 1944. You do the math.) Still, her controversial performance astonished the Cannes audience. It shouldn't have. Björk has been preparing for "Dancer" for nearly twenty years. She knows how to hold an audience, both because she's worked for it and because it comes naturally to her. She's as primal and theatrical as the Icelandic sagas, which she should adapt into a song cycle in true Björk style—a style that von Trier, in his shallow and cruel film, couldn't obscure.

—Hilton Als



of Iowa newspapers (seven thousand reels, 8.4 million pages) "represent files that will have to be refilmed"—in the event, that is, that there are originals left on shelves somewhere to refilm.

When the N.E.H. began paying for mass-microfilming projects, in the early eighties, it compelled some improvements in standards; and labs such as Preservation Resources, in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, and the Northeast Document Conservation Center, in Andover, Massachusetts, do fine work. Nevertheless, serious mistakes still occur. Nicholas Noyes, the director of the Maine Historical Society's library, told me that in one recent job a company failed to film an entire year's worth of newspaper issues. Fortunately, his library's policy is to save its originals: the year isn't lost forever. Steve Dalton, who moderates the Northeast Document Conservation Center's popular "School for Scanning" conference, said in 1998 that one of the benefits of microfilming compared with digital scanning is that microfilmers have had time to learn from their mistakes: "I must also admit there is still a ton of really poor-quality microfilm that's produced—hopefully not here at N.E.D.C.C., but it is produced nonetheless."

The fading problem is the most serious one, in my experience. Recently, I tried to read the microfilm of a 1914 issue of *Foster's Weekly Democrat & Dover Enquirer*, published in Dover, New Hampshire. There were whole pages in which little more than the headlines was legible. I was able to read:

NORTHAM COLONISTS
HOLD MEETING

Two Interesting Papers Read
at January Session

And then, below, there was a column of nothing. No originals of this weekly survive, as far as I know: the New Hampshire State Library and the Dover Public Library discarded theirs. The new head librarian at the Dover library conceded that she's been frustrated at times, looking up a particular article on her library's film and finding that "you just can't read it." On the other hand, as she pointed out, there's more space in the library. "It's so wonderful to have a hundred and fifty years of newspapers in a cabinet," she said.

Few film copies of old newspapers are complete—not necessarily because the microfilmers skipped pages by mistake (although they have certainly been known to do that) but because the original run lacked issues, or had items razored out by maniacal collectors. But, in a marvellous bit of redefinitional insanity, a microfilmed newspaper is "considered complete" by the Library of Congress (according to its reference guide "Newspapers in Microfilm") if "only a few issues per month are missing." If collection managers in major research libraries replace their own imperfect, even badly broken original runs of a given daily paper with copies of a filmed set that, though known to be incomplete, is "considered complete" by indexers, and believed to be complete by trusting buyers, the replacement process necessarily leaves permanent, unfixable impairments in the documentary record. Before, we had four different Ace combs in our pocket, each with a different missing tooth; now we have four miniature photographs of the same Ace comb with the same missing tooth. If that tooth happens to contain an article about the building of the new gymnasium in the high school where your parents met, or about the trolley-car line that once went down your street, forget it, you're out of luck.

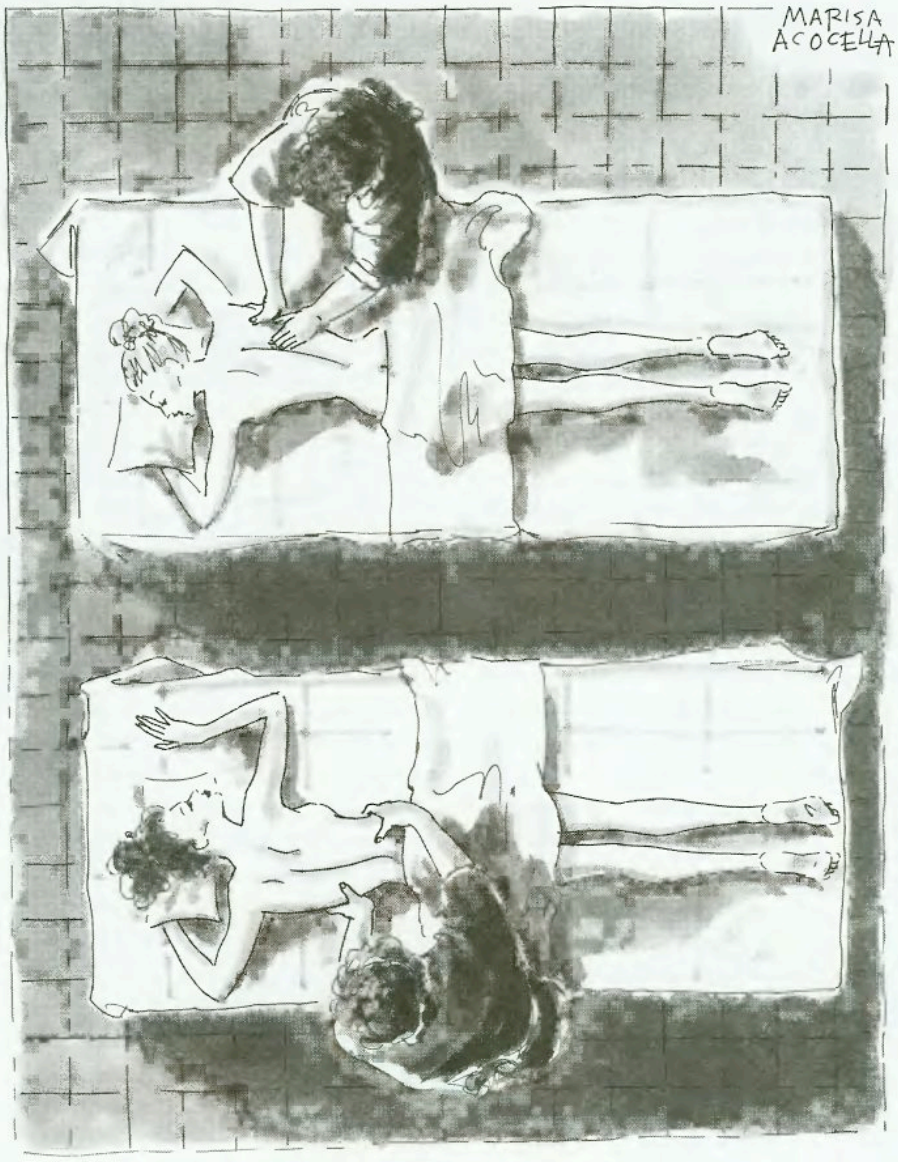
Some years ago, David Bosse, who is now the librarian of the Memorial Libraries, in Deerfield, Massachusetts, was compiling an annotated list of maps published in northern newspapers during the Civil War, when he found that the microfilm for some of the Chicago papers had "significant gaps"—gaps that couldn't be filled, because he could find no original paper for that period. Worse, he discovered a six-month void in the filmed record of the New York *Sun* for 1862. (The *Sun* is one of the great New York dailies; in a later era, it published Don Marquis's "Archy and Mehitabel" columns.) "What I discovered was that everyone I contacted had purchased the film from the New York Public Library," Bosse said. "Some of them, I think, probably had runs of originals, decided to get rid of them, and replaced them with film—and there was a six-month gap in the film." Bosse was unable to locate any extant originals of the *Sun* which could supplement what the film lacked.

Lucy Caswell was working on a study of the first woman political cartoonist, Edwina Dumm, who drew for the Columbus *Monitor* in the teens. Caswell had a scrapbook of original cartoons cut out of the paper, which Dumm

"I don't bug you about your catnip. Don't bug me about my Martinis."

had given her before she died, but they lacked dates and surrounding news. Using the microfilm of the *Monitor*, she found some of the cartoons, but some she couldn't find, as a result either of missing issues or of filming errors. Caswell tried to locate an original set of the paper, but there wasn't one: the copy in Columbus had been destroyed after microfilming, and the State Historical Society's copy had been given or sold to a man in Detroit who cut it up for the circus ads and threw the rest away.

I asked Caswell what she thought, given this sort of difficulty, about the prudence of keeping originals. "You're talking to somebody who values the object, so I would always keep the paper master," she said. "I know my cohorts in the past have not." Caswell is diplomatic, as I'm not, about the losses: "I think that people did it in good conscience under circumstances that in some cases were beyond their control. Boards of trustees and administrators were saying, 'You have to do this, we can't afford to do otherwise.' " She senses a change of outlook, though. "It seems to me that maybe, for lots of reasons, our collective consciousness about history is getting a little better, and maybe we won't repeat the errors we've made in the past."



"He didn't want to end it, so I told him I wanted to get married."

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All this, I hope, explains why, once I'd got the list of available titles from the British Library, I formed the American Newspaper Repository in a mad rush, with my mother, my father, and my wife on the board of trustees. (They were the only people I felt I could ask to serve on such short notice.) The repository's purpose was, as a lawyer phrased it for the I.R.S., "to acquire, preserve, and make available to the public, original newspapers of historic and scholarly interest that would otherwise be destroyed or dispersed into private ownership." Having faxed off letters of inquiry to the MacArthur Foundation, the Knight Foundation, and the Getty Foundation, I flew to London a week before the British Library's September 30, 1999, deadline for bids. About forty volumes were set out for inspection by potential purchasers, and I was given a tour of the shelves. I wasn't allowed to take pictures. I suddenly felt, turning the pages of a beautiful Chicago *Tribune* volume from 1909, as if I'd stumbled on a lost, jewel-encrusted city in the jungle, and that curio dealers were waiting for a sign to begin chiselling away at it.

Edmund King, the director of the Newspaper Library, gave me tea in his office. I described to him, at the point of tears, the historical importance of Joseph Pulitzer's *World*, and I asked if there was some way to persuade the library to call off its sale and keep the papers, or to act responsibly by transferring them to a nonprofit entity such as the one I'd just started. I explained how the vintage-newspaper market worked in the States, and I told him that there were almost no sets of these papers left. The decision to dispose of the foreign papers had been made by the board several years earlier, King said. "As things stand, because we have gone to dealers, perhaps the best thing to do is to act as if you are a dealer, and place a bid for the runs."

A few days later, on a Saturday, with the help of Nicolas Barker, the editor of *The Book Collector* and a former head of preservation at the British Library, I got in touch with Brian Lang, the library's director, on his cellular phone. (He was waiting in line at a supermarket when I first reached him.) I asked him to call off the sale. "I don't have an answer for you now," Lang said, but he seemed somewhat taken aback and willing to give the problem thought.

Heartened, I got back to the States and faxed Lang a long followup letter that I thought would clinch it. "The very best

thing for these papers would be for the Newspaper Library to reshelve them carefully, tightly control their use, and keep them safe," I wrote. I acknowledged the library's space difficulties—but perhaps there was a way to turn that problem around, I suggested, and use the present disposal emergency to inspire a major donor to endow a new rare-newspaper storage facility in Colindale. If the library's decision to dispose of the listed papers was firm, then I hoped it would consider donating the papers to the American Newspaper Repository. I listed the members of the repository's advisory board, thinking that some impressive names might help sway him. (Two of the advisers, who have since become trustees, are William Hart, the chairman of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, and Thomas Tanselle, a vice-president of the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation, who is a bibliographical scholar and the author of several strongly worded essays against microfilm-and-dump programs in research libraries.) I closed the letter by asking Lang again to suspend the September 30th sale, and to "take steps to ensure that this great surviving collection is kept intact for future scholarship."

Lang got the letter, c.c.'d to Edmund King, on Monday afternoon; Thursday was the deadline for bids. I heard nothing on Tuesday, and on Wednesday morning I started to get nervous. I called Lang's office, and then I faxed a letter to King requesting "that no irrevocable sales or other dispersals of any of the foreign newspapers listed take place at least until I have gotten a response to my letter to Brian Lang." At 5:30 P.M. British time, on the eve of the deadline, Mike Crump, the director of Reader Services and Collection Development at the library, E-mailed me. Brian Lang was in Estonia, he wrote. "We believe that at this stage we cannot stop the sale of material to dealers who have been examining it in good faith."

There was also the good faith of international (and intergenerational) scholarship to consider, but no matter. By then, it was too late to lodge protests with upper-level luminaries. The only thing to do, I realized, if I wanted to save at least some of the papers was, as Edmund King had suggested, to bid on them myself, on behalf of the American Newspaper Repository. At one-thirty in the morning on September 30, 1999, I faxed in more than fifty thousand dollars' worth of blind bids, distributing the money unequally over every lot that was for sale. (I kept it to around fifty thousand dollars because that's how much my wife and I figured we would clear if we liquidated one retirement account and payed taxes and early-withdrawal penalties. If no grant money came though, we planned to buy the papers with that money, and then pay for the shipping and storage of the collection by cashing out our other retirement account.) I bid £9,200 (about fifteen thousand dollars) for the *Herald Tribune* and the same amount for Pulitzer's *World;* £4,875 (about eight thousand dollars) for the Chicago *Tribune;* £300 apiece for the St. Louis *Globe Democrat*, the New Orleans *Times-Picayune*, and the short run of Hearst's *American;* £2,875 for the New York *Times;* and £2,440 for the San Francisco *Chronicle*. And I bid three pounds each for a hundred or so other titles. I stressed that the bids didn't constitute a withdrawal of my plea that the British Library keep the collection or donate it as a whole to the repository, and I asked the library to keep in mind, in the event that my bids were below what others offered, that the repository was committed, as dealers were not, to keeping the volumes whole. A day later, on the advice of William Hart, I submitted a second bid—a global "preservation bid" equal to the sum of all outstanding high bids received by the deadline plus a thousand pounds.

Mike Crump acknowledged my first bid letter as received and then there was silence. I wrote to Prime Minister Tony Blair, and to Chris Smith, Britain's Heritage Secretary, and to John Ashworth, the British Library's chairman of the board, and again to Brian Lang. Thomas Tanselle wrote a letter urging the library to reverse its position. Nicolas Barker wrote to John Ashworth to say that the sale of the newspapers, under conditions of secrecy, would cause an "international scandal." Barker observed that "no good has ever come from previous dispersals from the Library." (The last significant dispersals came early in the nineteenth century, Barker said: "The gain was temporary and soon forgotten; the loss is permanent and irremediable.") Lucy Caswell introduced a resolution at the annual meeting of the American Journalism Historians Association entreating the British Library to act responsibly; it passed unanimously and was sent by the association's president to Brian Lang.

These efforts got nowhere. Alan Howarth, the Minister of Culture, Media, and Sport, wrote me that he was "assured that the procedures for disposal were rigorously followed in this case," and he added that he had "no power to intervene in the Library's decision." Two weeks after the sale deadline, the library sent out its official notification: everything on the list was going to the highest bidder; no allowances were made for nondestructive intent. (The "preservation bid" was disallowed, as coming after the deadline.) My offers prevailed in the case of the *World* and the *Herald Tribune*, and for ninety other titles, but failed in the case of the Chicago *Tribune*, the New York *Times*, the New Orleans *Times-Picayune*, the Philadelphia *Public Ledger*, the San Francisco *Chronicle*, *Motion Picture Daily*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, and about thirty others. The library required payment by March 31, 2000, which was, thankfully, five months away and allowed time for fund-raising. Its invoice said, "Deselection (Newspapers) £19,282.00."

As it turned out, most or all of the titles I failed to get for the American Newspaper Repository went to Timothy Hughes, the dealer in Pennsylvania. I was especially unhappy about the Chicago *Tribune* (my great-grandfather was a Chicago newspaperman), and I called around to libraries in Chicago to see how serious a loss the destruction of that title would be. A helpful cataloguer at the Chicago Historical Society wrote, "I went through the online database that contains the holdings records of the U.S. Newspaper Program and found that no one has a good run of the *Trib* on paper. Many institutions have the full run on microfilm, but the hardcopy issues that exist are mostly scattered issues and short (under 5 year) runs."

Reading that, I found I couldn't tolerate the idea that the British Library's *Tribune* would be broken down. I asked Timothy Hughes to quote me a price. He wrote back that "its value to me is in selling the individual historic issues as well as the potential for birthday sales as I currently don't have any runs from the mid-West. Exploring its potential to me over the years I've decided that the very

least I would have to sell the run for would be $63,000. Otherwise I will just keep the run as it would be more profitable to me in the long run." I told him he had a deal. The MacArthur Foundation came up with a grant of fifty thousand dollars, which covered much of the purchase price, and my mother and my mother-in-law made contributions, as did Viscountess Eccles, a scholar-collector of Boswell and Johnson who with her late husband endowed the British Library's David and Mary Eccles Centre for American Studies. Later, the Knight Foundation made a hundred-thousand-dollar grant.

Sixty-three thousand dollars, or about fifty dollars a volume, may seem like a lot of money to pay for old news, but it's actually a bargain. To buy the equivalent microfilm run from Bell & Howell would cost about a hundred and seventy-seven thousand dollars. We're at a bizarre moment in history, when you can have the real thing for considerably less than it would cost to buy a set of crummy black-and-white snapshots of it which you can't look at without the help of a machine.

The San Francisco *Chronicle's* fate also bothered me, so I got in touch with Gray Brechin, the author of "Imperial San Francisco," who uses old newspapers in his historical work; he and I made a case to the California State Library for buying the *Chronicle* directly from Timothy Hughes, which the library did (seventy years for sixty thousand dollars), with the help of the Wells Fargo Foundation. "We're trying to keep a library here that doesn't go goofy—that pays attention to the immemorial challenges and trusts of libraries," Kevin Starr, the State Librarian of California, told me.

And then there was the New York *Times* from 1915 to 1958. At first, Hughes was hesitant to sell it as a whole ("It sort of defeats my purpose," he said), but eventually we were able to agree on a price of fifty-six thousand dollars, which is, at a guess, five times as much as he paid for it, but still a fair price. With the money he's making, Hughes plans to buy an electric lift to speed the retrieval of volumes on high shelves, and he is thinking of building another warehouse.

In February, shortly after Hughes's lots, amounting to approximately sixty-four hundred volumes, arrived at his warehouse from England—each volume dutifully stamped "Discarded by the British Library"—I drove to Williamsport to make sure that the Chicago *Tribune* volumes were properly wrapped and labelled, and I handed Hughes a certified check. Sixteen pallets, ten tons of major metropolitan history, were forklifted onto a truck, which took them to New Hampshire, near where I live. On June 29th, forty-seven hundred or so more volumes arrived direct from the British Library, in two large Hyundai shipping containers. I cut the bands of a five-foot-high pallet and tore away some of the transatlantic shipper's black plastic: there were the words "The World" repeated over and over on the stack of spines. Pulitzer's originals were safe. What I have to do now is buy shelves and put the collection in order.

Maybe someday a research library will want to take responsibility for these things, or maybe not—whatever happens, at least they aren't going to be cut up and sold as birthday presents. Sometimes I'm a little stunned to think that I've become a newspaper librarian, more or less, and have the job of watching over this majestic, pulp-begotten ancestral stockpile. And of course I worry about running out of money, and about devoting months and years of my life, and my wife's life, to this effort. But at the moment nobody else seems to want to do what must be done. Six thousand square feet of space in a nineteenth-century brick mill building in Rollinsford, New Hampshire, with room to shelve all the papers and to hold a small reading room, costs about twenty-six thousand dollars a year to rent—about the salary of one microfilm technician. That seems cheap to preserve more than a century's worth of inherent vice, and virtue. ♦

"I say it's genetically altered, and I say the hell with it."