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Wild Wild Archive:

Analog Videotape of the Rajneesh Movement at the Oregon Historical Society

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In 1989, local Portland television station KGW donated 512 U-matic videotapes to the Oregon Historical Society (OHS). Shot between 1983 and 1985, the collection consists of more than 300 hours of footage related to the Rajneesh movement in Oregon—when followers of the spiritual teacher Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh set up an intentional community three hours southeast from Portland. The donation included minimal documentation and



U-matic videotape collection of the Rajneesh movement in Oregon, donated to OHS in 1989.



no finding aid. The tapes were the end result of several years' worth of work by local camera operators and reporters at the news station. Ranging in location from downtown Portland to Berlin discos to the building of the town of Rajneeshpuram in Wasco County, the tapes are a thorough documentation of a specific moment in history. For Oregon, it was an engaging story—one which the stations recognized as newsworthy almost immediately, though no one at the time could imagine how it would end.



Spiritual teacher Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh in Wasco County, OR circa 1984 (still photo from video footage).

By the time the tapes were donated in 1989, the story of the Rajneesh movement was a recent memory. Rajneeshpuram no longer existed, the ranch had been sold, and many of its followers had moved on. KGW, in looking to maximize the physical space at its station as well as ensure that the tapes wouldn't be erased for re-use, reached out to OHS to provide long-term access. The tapes were accessioned and moved to an environmentally-controlled storage facility for long-term care.

In many ways, the advent and accessibility of analog video allowed for the events surrounding Rajneeshpuram to be documented in such an exhaustive manner. If recorded only a few years earlier, the stations would have used 16mm film, which was bulkier, more expensive, and limited in sound recording capabilities. By the early 1970s, though, video tape had started to come down in both price and size and, by the late 1970s, it was in use in almost every station across the country. U-matic tape, sized at $\frac{3}{4}$ " and housed in a cassette, was the tape of choice for most stations and public access television organizations (as opposed to the $\frac{1}{2}$ " tape that home consumers came to know as VHS). It offered recording times of up to one hour, it didn't require additional processing, and one could record live audio with an attached microphone.





One of the many videotapes from the U-matic collection of the Rajneesh movement in Oregon, housed at OHS.

For the next 25 years, the tapes remained at the Oregon Historical Society. The footage was made available by request in various forms, including for an Oregon Public Broadcasting episode of *Oregon Experience*, but the vast majority of the footage went unseen until a few years ago. In the summer of 2014, directors (and brothers) Chapman and Maclain Way had just finished their first film, *Battered Bastards of Baseball* (also set in Oregon). The two were kicking around ideas of what project to work on next and, in conversation with staff at OHS, the story of Rajneeshpuram (including the 512 tapes) was mentioned. After some initial disbelief and subsequent research on their own, they started to pursue the project actively later that year. By 2015, with the assistance of OHS, the tapes were shipped to AV Geeks in Raleigh, North Carolina, to be digitized. In a process that took over two months, the tapes were transferred to uncompressed digital video files, totaling over 15TB worth of data.

Now, for the first time, the majority of the 300+ hours of footage was readily available for viewing. The filmmakers were able to start sorting and tagging the footage, all the while building out the documentary through a series of interviews both in Oregon and abroad. Through their research, the Ways found additional footage from other news stations, home movies from a number of Rajneesh followers, and a variety of other sources. The end result, *Wild Wild Country*, is a documentary that runs more than six hours and, for the first time, explores the entire story of the Rajneesh movement in Oregon. It is a sprawling example of the role archival footage can play in the documentary process. The film, which took almost four years to produce, was released by Netflix in March 2018 and became a sensation around the world almost overnight.





Still photos from 1983–1985 video footage:

Rajneeshee in prayer.



Wasco County Sheriff's office, located in The Dalles, approximately 90 minutes north of Rajneeshpuram.



Ma Anand Sheela, personal secretary of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh from 1981 to 1985.





Rajneeshpuram community member.

The role of OHS in this project was simultaneously one of promoter, conservator, and researcher. For a number of reasons, film and video collections are often the type most difficult to provide public access: they are tricky to incorporate into book or manuscript-based library catalogs; their size makes them difficult to make available online; and they require huge amounts of staff time in order to flesh out the descriptive metadata. By promoting the collection and the story to the filmmakers, OHS was able to find funding to digitize the entirety of the collection, something that would have been unlikely without external support. Moreover, while the physical tapes will continue to be stored in temperature- and humidity-controlled vaults at OHS, after 30+ years, the 300 hours of digitized footage is now accessible for use by future researchers and members of the public. Furthermore, the success of *Wild Wild Country* has led to an increase in visibility for the collection as a whole and, in turn, for the institution. It was a multi-year process, one in which OHS played a relatively small role, but the end result has successfully shined a spotlight on one of the largest and most diverse media collections on the West Coast.

The Moving Image Collection at the Oregon Historical Society includes early travelogues, feature films, public access television, artist films, home movies, and a large number of industrial films. Each week, archivists work with researchers, filmmakers, and artists to make the footage available for use in documentaries, podcasts, and other assorted media projects. For more information about the collection, including contact information, please visit the OHS website at www.ohs.org. 

