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Newspaper Microfilming at the University of Oregon

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Robert Clark, former president of the University of Oregon, is also the biographer of one of Oregon's most important pioneers, the geologist and minister Thomas Condon.¹ In researching his 1989 biography, Clark investigated a wonderfully diverse array of sources, including diaries, scientific papers, letters, church and university records, government reports, and histories—each one shedding its particular light on this many-sided man. But it was the newspapers that revealed the public side of Thomas Condon: the popular lecturer, the educational leader, and the Christian Darwinist debater. Clark, in fact, used over 30 different newspapers, from The Dalles, Portland, Oregon City, St. Helens, Albany, Salem, and Eugene, as well as from cities in California and New York. In his acknowledgments, Clark recognized the assistance of the staff of the University of Oregon Library's Microforms Collection, which had served up reel after reel

of Oregon history in the form of newspapers on microfilm: Rory Funke, Joy Halliwell, and Karen Schleicher.

Funke and his staff could tell many more stories like this one, not only of academic historians, but of genealogists, journalists, educators, amateur history buffs, and the merely insatiably curious, who have looked into the papers for the answers to their scholarly or personal inquiries. Recent theses and dissertations have explored the description of women in frontier Oregon newspapers, attitudes toward Chinese Oregonians, the language used in reporting forest fires, and the decline of the locally written editorial. Like President Clark, many of these writers have properly recognized the assistance of current library staff. I would like to acknowledge the contributions of an earlier generation of library staff, at the University of Oregon and elsewhere, without whose vision and perseverance this resource would itself have become a thing of the past.

In 1995 the University of Oregon Library became a participant in the United States Newspaper Project (USNP), a program begun in 1982 with funding by the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). Oregon thus became the 49th state to join this cooperative national effort to catalog and microfilm all existing U.S. newspapers. But it was in 1952, 30 years before the NEH program was announced, that the UO Library filmed its first newspaper.

By 1952 newspapers were well recognized for their historical value, and microfilming was agreed upon as the most reasonable hedge against their tendency to self-destruction. The Library of Congress had published the first edition of its *Newspapers on Microfilm* in 1948. Some large national papers had been filming their own files since the 1930s. In Oregon, by 1952, the Pendleton *East Oregonian*, the Salem *Statesman*, and the Portland *Oregonian* were putting their files on film. The Oregon Historical Society (OHS) began a selective filming program in the early 1950s, including its collection of WPA scrapbooks. Libraries were conducting well-established indexing programs for major Oregon newspapers, including the card index to the *Oregonian*, which the UO Library's reference staff had produced since the early 1940s. A Pacific Northwest Library Association committee formed in 1950 created a valuable union listing of Northwest newspapers held by libraries and publishers.

In January 1953 the Oregon Newspaper Publishers Association (ONPA) announced to its membership that "the University of Oregon Library has installed new microfilming equipment and is well along on its first newspaper file filming project."² Elizabeth Findly, head of the library's General Reference and Documents Division, described in her biennial report for 1952-54 "a rather ambitious microfilming project."³ Lack of storage space and paper disintegration were given by both as the major reasons for the project. The ONPA gave the project its blessing, but left it to the library to enter into contracts with individual publishers, whereby the publishers would give current subscriptions and loans of their backfiles, and purchase positive copies of film at \$18 per 1,200 page roll. About a dozen newspapers became "contract papers", but Findly affirmed her intention to film all Oregon newspapers with or without the cooperation of their publishers. "All Oregon newspapers" is understood to mean general interest newspapers published at least once a month. The pilot paper for the new program, now named the Oregon Newspaper Microfilming Project (ONMP), was the Bend *Bulletin*.

Discussion of such a project had appeared in internal library memos as early as 1949, and in February 1952 University Librarian Carl W. Hintz put forward a detailed proposal to the ONPA asking for their good will, and for the publishers' assistance in funding the project.⁴ But credit for the original idea probably belongs to Findly, who joined the library's Reference Division in 1934 and served as head from 1947 to 1970. She had a well known enthusiasm for newspapers as research materials.⁵ In each biennial report she noted her success in arranging subscriptions to nearly every current Oregon newspaper, as measured against the ONPA's own list in the *Oregon Blue Book*. One year she even obtained subscriptions to papers not on the official listing.

Until 1970 Findly managed every aspect of the microfilming project except, during its first decade, the actual filming. That was done by other library units whose efforts on behalf of newspaper filming were never quite up to her expectations. In each biennial report Findly laid out in cold figures the

average output: twelve rolls of film a month was typical. The production of positive film copies was contracted to Eastman Kodak's Portland bureau, and the additional travel time merely prolonged the agony. This speed did not even keep up with the rate of newly received papers, and the stacks were bulging. Her ambition was to film all the historical files and keep up to date with current papers, but she was only falling further behind.

Meanwhile there was plenty of work to be done simply acquiring newspaper backfiles. For the next 25 years Findly, and later Frances Schoen, traveled around the state of Oregon, searching out every known publisher, including the smallest weeklies, and bringing back their papers for the camera. Findly was often accompanied in her capacious Oldsmobile by Pearl Watts, retired head of the Reference Division, sometimes traveling thousands of miles in a biennial period. Schoen, appointed in 1961 to oversee the Newspaper Room, soon assumed the travel duties. Often her three children and husband went along, both to help load the papers and to see a side of small town Oregon not glimpsed by many others. There is no record of her mileage⁶, but Schoen recalls that she went through three station wagons, and that there were "no back roads in Oregon that we did not travel."

While many of the older papers were found still in the custody of their publishers, the contribution of other libraries was essential. The collections of the Oregon Historical Society were at least as large as those at the UO, and OHS cooperated generously in lending those papers that had not been part of its own microfilming effort. The non-permanent collections at Oregon State College often filled in gaps for the filming of current papers. Occasionally private individuals came forward with unique items. The oldest paper published in Oregon, the February 5, 1846, issue of the Oregon City *Oregon Spectator*, was generously offered for filming by a resident of Jackson County, according to Schoen. This issue was the jewel in a special microfilming of the *Spectator* (1846-1855), put together from files borrowed from several sources, and offered in 1967 for the unusually high price of \$50.

On rare occasions the project met with resistance. The publisher of a small Willamette Valley weekly stoutly refused even a paid subscription to his newspaper, stating a political aversion to the University of Oregon. Reyburn McCready, who succeeded Findly in 1970, tried several times to win him over. McCready reasoned with him that 1) a number of students from his town attended the University and would benefit from access to his paper, and 2) putting his papers on microfilm would protect them against loss by fire, as had happened recently with another paper—but happily not before the UO Library had filmed the whole set. But where reason fails, patience may succeed. McCready declared that, as the University of Oregon would remain long after the publisher was gone, "we would simply wait him

Table 1: Newspaper Titles on Microfilm
(exclusive of apparently labor papers)

	1953	1957	1961
Idaho	16	28	43
Montana	3	2	5
Oregon	6	57	101
Washington	43	69	99

Source: *Library of Congress.*

Newspapers on Microfilm (2d, 3d, and 4th eds).

out."⁷ Recently, back copies of that newspaper were acquired and filmed.⁸

In 1961 Findly was given control of the filming operations and engaged Schoen to manage the operation. Schoen, with a staff of from five to 15 student employees, pushed the project's output up to 40 reels per month in 1963 and 1964, and 68 per month in 1967 and 1968. This no doubt pleased her subscribers, which included the contract publishers, a number of libraries, and the Oregon Historical Society. Findly's complaints notwithstanding, the project had made notable progress by 1961, at least by comparison with similar programs in other Northwest states (see Table 1).

Productivity was not, however, the last of the two women's problems. Dependent as it was upon sales of film, the project was periodically in financial trouble. The managers were forced to announce frequent price increases as they tried to keep ahead of their own increasing costs, complicated by failures of equipment and untried technologies. An unfortunate commitment in 1965 to Kalvar technology, to enable the project to produce its own positive film, forced the project later to replace hundreds of rolls of film. (Kalvar film emitted hydrogen chloride gas, which eventually forms hydrochloric acid, eats away at film boxes and even metal cabinets, and eventually destroys the film.) The most profitable newspapers, such as the Portland *Oregonian*, the Eugene *Register-Guard*, and the Salem *Statesman-Journal*, had already been scooped up by a commercial micro-publisher, so the project had to rely for most of its income upon single subscriptions to the smaller, less frequently filmed papers. And even this source of revenue was unavailable to cover the costs of "dead" papers, those titles that had ceased and had no successor. The UO Library eventually decided to purchase one positive copy of every roll of film produced, thus improving the base of support. Even in 1997 subscriptions paid by the UO and one other subscriber account for 60 per cent of ONMP's revenues. The UO Library is the sole subscriber to 32 of the 90 currently filmed titles.⁹

As if this weren't enough, Findly had to cope with the decline of Western Civilization. In her 1960-1962


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report she reflected on the difficulties of collating the papers before filming, always one of the project's most time-consuming tasks: "Clipping and theft has become a problem for the first time ... It makes one wonder whether larger enrollments mean more people with no regard for public property, or whether this indicates a general moral breakdown in our society."

Under Schoen, the project completed the filming of all historic papers that had been located, and she was able to concentrate upon current titles. In 1977 Funke succeeded Schoen as project manager and directed its work until his retirement in 1997. During the Funke years the project has achieved a condition of consistent production and financial stability, so elusive during the early years. In Funke's view the project is strong and viable because a number of critical problems have been solved. Filming is now performed by a full-time expert camera woman, Pat Duval. Well-designed work flows, quality control checks, and standards-based filming and processing procedures help guarantee an accurate, lasting product. The acquisition of a processor and duplicator permits in-house production of positives. An accurate database of microfilm holdings provides useful control over the collection and provides information for potential customers. The acquisition of a film vault meeting archival atmospheric standards guarantees the optimal storage for master negatives.¹⁰

The U.S. Newspaper Project has now given the UO Library the resources to round off the work of 45 years by cataloging all existing newspaper microfilm holdings in Oregon, including those in the UO's collections, as well as any papers found elsewhere through the acquisition portion of the program. About 1,350 Oregon titles have been filmed to date, either by the UO's project or others, but gaps still remain. A major goal of the USNP is to identify the size and extent of those gaps and fill them in wherever possible through the cooperation of libraries, historical societies, publishers, or other owners of historic newspapers. 

NOTES

1. Clark, Robert D., *The Odyssey of Thomas Condon: Irish Immigrant, Frontier Missionary, Oregon Geologist*. Portland: Oregon Historical Society Press, 1989.

Other important Oregon histories making heavy use of newspapers include Scott, Harvey W. *History of the Oregon Country*, Cambridge: Riverside Pr., 1924; and any of E. Kimbark MacColl's histories of Portland.

2. Oregon Newspapers being Microfilmed, *Oregon Publisher* 21 (January 1953) 1.

3. All information in this paper attributable to Elizabeth Findly is found in the Biennial Reports of the General Reference and Documents Division, University of Oregon Archives.

4. Carl W. Hintz to C. C. Webb (Executive Secretary of ONPA), February 20, 1952, University of Oregon Archives.

5. Carl W. Hintz (University Librarian from 1948 to 1973), telephone conversation with author, March 24, 1997; Reyburn McCready (head of the Reference Division from 1970 to 1976), conversation with author, March 20, 1997; Frances Schoen (Assistant Administrative Librarian and Head of the Newspaper Room, 1961-1978), telephone conversation with author, March 27, 1997.

6. In his biennial report for 1972/74 Reyburn McCready noted 1661 miles of travel during one four month period, in which visits were made to Oregon City, Salem, Gresham, Portland, Hillsboro, Forest Grove, McMinnville, The Dalles, Lakeview, and Klamath Falls.

7. McCready conversation.

8. Funke, Rory. *Oregon Newspaper Microfilming Project Manual*. Eugene, OR: University of Oregon Library, Documents and Microforms Dept., 1997. Funke mused that McCready's philosophy "gave me some perspective on a library's view of time."

9. Number of subscriptions by type of subscriber, as of November 1996, are as follows: University of Oregon Library (90), historical societies (38), public libraries (48), 4-year college/university libraries (17), community college libraries (5), newspapers (11), other (4). The most popular title is *Willamette Week*.

10. Funke, Rory.