Playback Equipment: Interviews with AV Professionals
Transcript

Afsheen Nomai: We can do film and tape digitization. We have one 8mm film scanner, we have one 16-mm film scanner, we have two 16mm telecines, which are a little different than the scanners. That's the film side, and on the tape side we have three VHS decks, three Beta decks, and two 3/4" decks, and we also have a Video8 deck, which is the most difficult to keep running.

Roger Evans' MovieStuff Products
Steve Wilson: The first machine we got from the MovieStuff company was called a work printer and that was a modified Elmo projector that had an optical mechanism that you used your own video camera to capture the image and then it would send a mouse click with every time the sprocket moved. When MovieStuff came out with another machine, the Sniper, that did record soundtracks we went ahead and got one of those and that's what we've been using since. However, it kind of broke down about a year ago and we've had a hard time finding someone who would work on it. Apparently theMovieStuff company doesn't work on those machines anymore, they want to sell you the new version.

Justin Kovar: It's an ingenious invention. It's amazing and you can't beat it for the cost. But Roger [owner of MovieStuff] is very interesting to work with, especially coming from an archives background you can see a lot of the difference in mindsets of somebody who works with archives versus somebody who is working in production type environment. Even down to the way the manuals for the MovieStuff are all online so they could just suddenly disappear and the fact that he no longer repairs old units and things like that. It's interesting. Nothing is forever but it could be a little longer.
We have our MovieStuff Sniper 16 HD that was gotten from a place that's in Utopia, Texas. They actually got that right before I got here and I wished they had asked me before they got it because they got the standard definition one at the time when HD was already out. So the problem with using standard definition and non-progressive scanning with one of those Sniper decks is you're putting film, which is just a beautiful image on its own, through the interlacing process. So then you're seeing these multiple fields of lines and it's breaking up images and making it from something that's one solid thing into this thing that has two frames across for every other line of film. It just looks jagged all the time. And so I was able to justify an upgrade with my department, so we started the process of sending that into Utopia, Texas. So Zach Vowell and myself drove out there and brought it in and he told us he would get it ready in 30 days. And then a year later, year and a half later, we got it back. It was the most stressful buying experience/repair process I've ever had, ever, ever, ever.

Steve Wilson: The one that I worry about is our Beta SP machine. We have one machine and those are many order of magnitude more complicated than a U-matic. If and when that machine breaks down I don't know what we're going to do. Because people who know how to repair that kind of machine are getting older and dying off and there's just nobody who repairs those machines anymore.

Afsheen Nomai: I've got a request from Alamo Drafthouse wants to do a screening of legacy formats and I was asked if...it was couched as, "where could I find this equipment?" And when I was really like, "yeah I know you want to see if you can borrow from us." And that's fine, I have no problem with doing that. And I told him that as far as Digi Beta I could loan him a Digi Beta deck because we have a number of them. But he also needed 3/4" and I'm just like, "man, it costs us so much money to keep these things running that I just, I don't want to let it out of my sight, you know."

Justin Kovar: As Peter Brothers puts it, to repair those quadruplex machines you have to get the person out of retirement to make the tools to fix the machine.
Steve Wilson: There's a fellow named, or a company called Mr. Wizard up on Burnet Road who we learned about from the LBJ, the National Archives at the LBJ Library. And he can do things like projectors and simple electronics like VHS machines, and he's worked on our U-matic machines. But I'm not sure he can do a Beta SP.

Justin Kovar: We used to use Mr. Wizard who was an amazing vendor and then he suddenly just retired and left. It was really sad. Luckily I knew about Ground Zero who is in town and that seems to be a two-person operation. It's Dayna Crawley-Howell and then Roy who does the engineering stuff. And they are totally not an archives-centric place. They mostly do stuff for TV production companies, kind of keep their systems running, build racks for them. And then they also do post-production work, closed captioning, a lot of weird stuff. I just saw their studio and it was amazing. And it made me really happy because I know that as a business sector archives are not big enough to support maintenance, a place that does maintenance. That's why we can't keep places like Mr. Wizard around. Even though he would work for everybody, there's not enough profit in working on our stuff or just working on old equipment in general to keep a place in business.

Resources
Justin Kovar: Because Roger doesn't repair items any longer I definitely still use any kind of documentation that he has on his website. And I don't think I've done a whole web crawl of his website to save it but I've definitely saved documents that pertain to the equipment because I just don't believe they'll be there forever.

Afsheen Nomai: I was just on the MovieStuff website today actually when I was having problems with some software to check to see if there was a new software update, but there wasn't. When it comes to software problems I'll go to websites and look for software updates or driver updates. That's usually, if I can't get something to work by just noodling around with it, then I'll go to websites and do that. And then if I still can't get it to work that way then I'll go to an engineer, or in the case of the scanners, the creator of them. That's probably generally my progression.

Justin Kovar: You know, we're also looking at the issue of the software that he used for it which was kind of made for another developer and then he bought them out. But it's some weird thing where it's still under a different company's name, Alternaware, but it's definitely you buy it from Roger and then that other person is like a ghost, so

not involved in the situation. I don't know, it's weird. You never know if that's going to keep making the next operating system leaps too. So one thing I'm also doing is I try, and I know a lot of people locally try to do this, Afsheen at TAMI, Quinn at the iSchool, you know we're always trying to find ways to be able to use those cameras without having to use the software. So I actually had a researcher who found After Effects macro that could take those mouse clicks that the software uses and be able to process the film on its own, which seems like kind of an exciting development.

Afsheen Nomai: The software that he has is kind of clunky. It works, there is, you know, having worked with his telecines for seven or eight years I got very used to it, got a workflow down. The thing about his telecines is that they really always, just really worked. I mean they are very mechanical and, you know, it's just a camera and a projector and so the problems that we had with them generally came down to problems with our computer, not so much with the machines themselves. Sometime a part would wear out, but he would generally fix them really quickly. But now that he's not servicing them anymore that becomes a little bit more iffy. Like now I'm trying to find parts for some of our telecines to try and keep them running, but I'm having a hard time doing that. I was just at AMIA and there were people talking about various resources and I'm just going to get in touch with them because I know that they can point me in the right direction. I was at this committee meeting and somebody was talking about how he's having a hard time finding a part and somebody else said, "you can just get that machine." Apparently the plans exist out there, like the CAD drawings, to make this part for a 16mm projector. There are people out there making parts and 3D printing is also making that…replacement parts can be made that way now as well. I've found adapters and plans, like 3D printer plans or whatever they're called, for various adapters and even film reels and some 8mm projector parts. I've seen them online.

Standardization

Justin Kovar: The big problem is that for video and film there are no standards still. VHS, we're still totally following a local custom and that is what most likely started at TAMI, which is using DV for VHS. It's not quite right, but it's really nice for file management. It records at about 13GB an hour and it has intraframe compression so it's not dependent on other frames so it's pretty stable files. But it's terrible with color. It's not representing the original object as well as it could.

Afsheen Nomai: In terms of standardization of digital formats, from what I understand, I'm not a classically trained archivist, but I follow the debates out there. And from what I understand there is no one standard format that is agreed upon. And in terms of the formats that we use they were really largely dictated to us by the equipment. When we first started digitizing film, the telecines that we got digitized DV, that's just what they did, and so DV video became our format. So we standardized that across video, when we started doing video we just got the same AD converter that was being used for the telecine to use with the tape decks.

Steve Wilson: Abby, our digital archivist, and Liz Gushee, who's in charge of the digitization unit, they've been mostly in contact with other institutions about standards.

Usually it's metadata more than the formats or the digitization itself. Metadata seems to the big issue. I've heard, and I totally believe this, that the biggest reason for loss of data on videotapes is inadequate labeling. It's not deteriorating tape or machine obsolescence. It's just not knowing what's on the tape and not being able to afford to copy a blank tape.

Sharing Knowledge

Justin Kovar: Honestly, as far as communicating information and finding new information, I'm probably mostly local. And then most of dipping into the national conversation is through conferences or checking out the FADGI website and then through message boards and things like that. I tend to be just talking to people on a local level. That's kind of having working groups that aren't working groups in name but tend to function that way because it's more low pressure. And then [I] stay in contact with students who have worked here but have moved on. I'm mostly getting asked questions, I don't get to ask questions too much.

Afsheen Nomai: When it comes to repairs or if I have problems with equipment I tend to talk to people I know who do the same thing as I do. There's just a few people that I know. Then there's also people at the Alamo who don't do digitization, but they're very technically savvy. If I can't solve a problem that way, then I'll go directly to Telstar. I don't really have a very big network of people to talk to about problems with the equipment. Usually it comes down to the engineer.

Steve Wilson: Mostly depend on AMIA, the Association of Moving Image Archivists. The listserv and conference have been invaluable for us making decisions about whether it's the digitization standard or codex that we use or things like that. As far as analog video goes, I've been in contact with DC video and Specs Brothers. Those are our two go-to places for difficult transfers. I've seen a couple of very good sessions at AMIA conferences that were very helpful with us setting up our video copying stations and Bay Area Video Coalition gave a really good session and some handouts that we have used. We are pretty free with what we've been doing. We've been trying to put as much online as we can. I know that we do receive requests for information from other archives, but that's been going through Abby, our digital archivist, and Liz Gushee, who's in charge of the digitization unit.

Afsheen Nomai: A lot of the information that I get from talking to engineers or other people I don't really, I guess I don't, unless they're in emails, they don't get really put anywhere. Like when I was picking up a deck from Roy and he was telling me all these different things and different ways to clean, how often I should be cleaning, what to look for on the heads when they're scoring and stuff like that, I've talked to a few people about that outside and my experience with him and what he told me and I share that with other people, but that's not written down, until now, it's kind of there. I have manuals. I have a manual that I made for the use of our equipment, that's one thing. Then I download manuals for the various decks and stuff and store them on the server. As far as the more one-to-one knowledge that I get, that stuff's not written down. Maybe it should be.

Justin Kovar: So for sharing knowledge we definitely have an in-house wiki. It's not great for pictures so I'll tend to just make a Word document and attach it to it. I know RTF is way better and all that. It's just a crappy wiki, it really is. And then, and this might be an unfortunate thing, but most of the knowledge I share is one-on-one and person-to-person. Because we are a hub for so many people who pass through UT Austin and the iSchool, I have a really good amount of people that have passed through the Briscoe at some point and know that they can always ask me for advice. Then I'll speak at the school occasionally and do usually a lecture on Film and Video for the Survey of Digitization class. Those are the biggest ways I tend to do it. I probably need to work on making a little bit more public and getting some stuff online.