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Records Recovery and Terrorism

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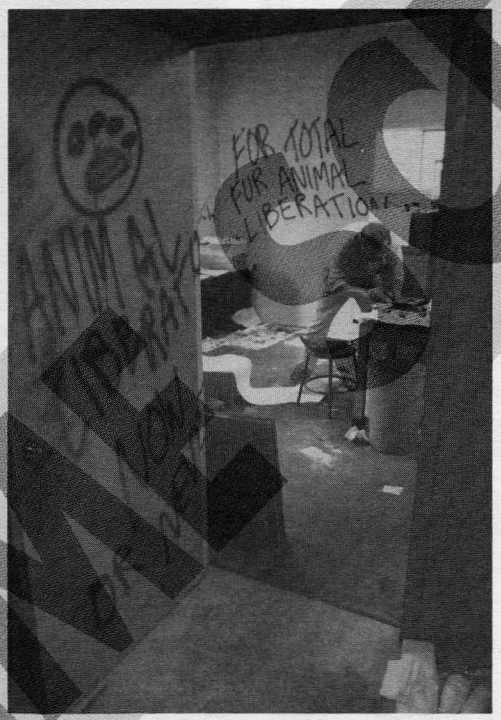
A recent disaster at Oregon State University did not occur the day after Christmas, on a Sunday, or even on campus. It was not the result of a water pipe accidentally breaking, an earthquake, or a fire. Instead, it was caused by an act of terrorism. Early in the morning of Monday, June 10, members of the Animal Liberation Front (ALF), a radical animal-rights group, vandalized the University's mink research farm. A storage barn was completely destroyed by fire, graffiti was spray-painted on the farm's office and laboratory walls, research records in the office were dumped on the floor, and color slides were stolen. An unidentified chemical agent was poured on a small amount of record material, and a nearby bathroom fixture was broken, flooding the office and the strewn records.

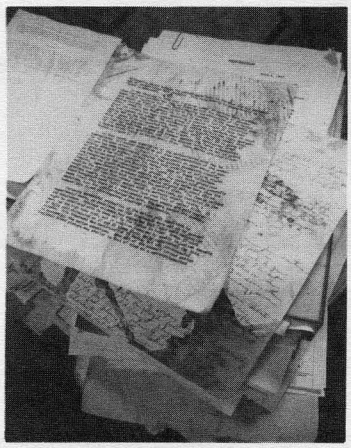


Michael Holland begins recovery procedures amid the rubble and graffiti. Photo: Mark Floyd, OSU News & Communications Services.

The farm, located approximately one-half mile south of the OSU campus, began in the 1920s as the Experimental Fur Farm. Since 1953, it has been part of the Department of Animal Science, within the University's College of Agricultural Sciences. The farm is a major facility for research in mink nutrition and reproduction. Commercial mink growers in Oregon and across the nation rely upon research conducted there to improve both their products and their profit lines. The Oregon State Furbreeders' Association provides significant financial support to the farm.

Animal rights extremism is nothing new in the western United States. In 1986, ALF struck a University of Oregon animal lab and freed more than one hundred primates and rodents. In 1987, the group claimed responsibility for a $4.4 million fire at an animal research facility located at the University of California at Davis. A medical research laboratory at Texas Tech University was burned by the group in 1989. On June 15, just five days after the OSU incident, ALF announced it was responsible for the burning of a cooperative in Edmonds, Washington, that supplies feed to Northwest fur farms. ALF sent a press release to the Associated Press in Portland, claiming the OSU farm was targeted for its role in the "barbaric fur trade."[1]

The attack was discovered at about 4:30 a.m. on Monday, June 10, when a neighbor reported the barn fire. Police investigating the attack posted the facility off-limits to virtually everyone until that evening. Tuesday morning, after hearing the news accounts that the incident involved damage to records, the OSU Archives staff contacted the manager of the mink research facility and offered assistance in records recovery. The manager was advised as to what to do immediately, and the Archives staff took stock of disaster recovery supplies on hand to determine what would need to be purchased. By 11:00 a.m. that



ALF-damaged materials. Photo: Mark Floyd.

day, five staff members had arrived at the farm with a modest quantity of essential disaster recovery supplies and equipment. (At the time, another staff member was attending the Western Archives Institute. Ironically, disaster planning and prevention was on the Institute's agenda.)

What faced the disaster recovery team at the mink research facility was not the usual disaster situation, as we have come to think of it in the archival and library community. The team was faced with recovering from an act of terrorism that had intentionally targeted the destruction of records as a means of shutting down a program. Records had been removed from the protection of vertical file cabinets and shelves, pilfered for photographic images of animal research, disheveled and disordered, and subjected to the destructive action of chemical reagents and water.

Normal procedure for recovering material from an accidental water and/or fire disaster hinges upon identifying the most valuable and irreplaceable resources (*i.e.*, the vital operating records), prioritizing their recovery, and retaining as much of the surviving intellectual control as possible. In archives, the intellectual control of records depends upon retaining original file order; in this case, original order had been the first and apparently premeditated victim of the ALF attackers. Active research records, focusing primarily on nutrition and breeding, were indiscriminately mixed in the same pile of wet paper with obsolete and active accounting records, correspondence of varying values, vintage photographs, and scientific off-prints. Many of the file folders that contained documents had been removed and/or emptied as a consequence of the dumping of the files on the floor. In the initial assessment of our recovery strategy, some alternative recovery tactics had to be formulated and implemented.

On-site salvage operation. Photo: Mark Floyd.

As is the case with most wet-record recovery operations, this disaster response team was engaged in a race with the clock to recover or stabilize the water-soaked materials before active mold and mildew growth commenced. The team's time was already running close to the 72-hour mold growth benchmark; the first thirty or so hours after the attack on the research facility, the police and fire inspectors closed the area to center employees and the disaster response team. Given the time limitations, and the disorder of the records, the team decided that all materials, except those easily and quickly identified as common or of little value, would have to be stabilized or salvaged as quickly as possible.

While the task of a full, or almost complete, records recovery of the facility seemed daunting, several factors encountered at the facility were encouraging. The farm possessed a largely empty walk-in freezer that had not been damaged in the assault. Another positive circumstance was that, despite the

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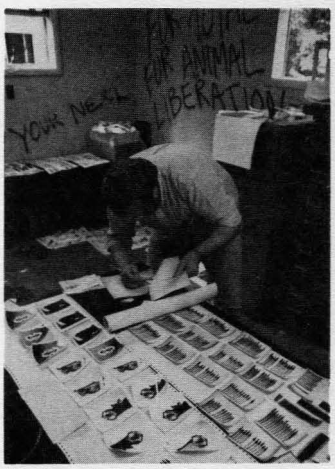
rampant destruction in the offices and laboratories, enough tables and surfaces were available for workstations. Similarly, there was adequate floor space and room to allow the stringing of lines for air-drying documents.

While a portion of the response team began the process of setting up fans, establishing building-wide air circulation, securing monofilament lines for air-drying documents, establishing workstations, and bringing to the recovery site the assembled supplies, another part of the team began a very rough sorting and distribution of salvageable materials to the several workstations. In the hurried sorting and evaluation process, scientific off-prints from common English-language periodicals, texts, and published reports on coated stock were initially discarded from the materials being prepared for salvage efforts. The recovery team was asked by the facility director to save as many of the older and non-American scientific off-prints as possible. The reason for this request to save these hard-to-replace published materials lies in the long-term policy of the mink research facility to keep a low public profile, and thereby attempt to avoid becoming an obvious target of radical activists. In its effort to maintain subdued visibility, the facility has collected and retained at the farm site many of the informational resources useful to its research work.

The attempt to identify and save these publications, which were printed largely on rapidly drying coated paper stock, slowed down the pace of salvage. The request to save these materials was based on thoughtful policy decisions and was thus honored. While some of these off-prints were too dry to recover or freeze (adherence had already progressed beyond reversal or recovery), the still-wet publications were salvaged by air-drying on monofilament lines in the presence of floor fans. The light structural weight of these off-prints made recovery much easier than recovery of periodicals printed on coated stock would have been.

Photographic materials that were water-damaged and torn presented some difficulties. The floor space, table surface area, and blotter paper needed to dry the prints, color slides, and negatives were rapidly exhausted. Drying the more water-sensitive slides and negatives became a priority. This decision necessitated freezing prints or waiting to spread them out to air-dry at a later time. Despite some cockling that resulted from keeping prints in the wetted state longer than desired, no significant loss of photographic prints was sustained.



Holland salvages wet photographs. Photo: Mark Floyd.

One of the most difficult problems encountered in recovering research photographs was inadequate identification of research projects. When negatives, slides, and prints were recovered, there was little to set them apart from thousands of similar items. Some negatives had identifying information written on their envelopes; however, the bulk of the recovered photographs are currently unidentified and potentially unidentifiable. Some of these materials await identification and labeling by knowledgeable and active researchers and technicians at the center. Simple labeling of the prints and slides with graphite pencils, and more scrupulous marking of negative envelopes, would have made recovery and the subsequent identification and classification effort much more productive and efficient.

Only minor physical losses of photographic materials were sustained due to water. This may be due in part to the photographic materials being dumped on the floor first, and thus remaining moist under a mass of wet paper until salvage workers could begin meticulously separating emulsion layers of adhering photographic materials.

Paper records made up the bulk of the approximately fifty cubic feet of vandalized records. Among the paper records were certain formats that were afforded immediate and careful attention. Research notebooks, laboratory data sheets, survey forms, any type of original tabulations of data, and holographic materials were singled out for meticulous recovery efforts. They were separated, interleaved

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Meeting Report

NARA Preservation Conference

Reported by Susan G. Swartzburg

The topic of the March 19-20, 1991 National Archives and Records Administration Preservation Conference was "The Preservation of Electronic Records," a timely topic for librarians as well as archivists. The conference focused on the issues and options for the preservation of information in electronic format. Don Wilson, Archivist of the United States, noted the preservation of electronic records is a priority for the National Archives.

NARA has established a Center for Electronic Records to study the routine work of government and to determine the scope of the preservation problem. Kenneth Thibodeau, its Director, described its role and its activities. The two primary concerns are changing technologies and the selection of records for preservation. The Center has identified the major databases in use throughout the federal government and will give priority attention to those that must be saved because of obsolescence of equipment and the fragility of the information medium. The goal of the Center is the preservation of the federal record so it will be available for future generations. Electronic media requires continuing preservation activity.

A panel of specialists, chaired by Michael Miller, Environmental Protection Agency, including Roger Blais, National Archives of Canada; Carolyn Geda, Interuniversity Consortium for Political and Social Research; and Fynnette Eaton, NARA; presented institutional perspectives. While the computer and computer-generated data in electronic format are a boon to researchers, trying to describe the life-cycle of such information, let alone attempting to preserve it, is the challenge. The panelists described their attempts and the media they employ.

After lunch, Mark Andrews, 3M Corporation, described the problems and potential benefits of optical storage systems. This was a positive presentation, but many of the participants were skeptical. Most of us consider optical technologies interim media, useful for information exchange but unsuitable for long-term storage of data.

A second panel discussion focused on the reliance and the role of logic and standards when dealing with developing information technologies. Earlier, Thibodeau emphasized the importance of standards as the world requires increasing communication between computers. Victoria Irons Walsh, a member of the Society of American Archivists' Committee on Standards, described how standards are developed and how participating organizations interact with one another. Librarians and archivists must become involved in the standards process. As Thibodeau observed, the "archival preservation of electronic records is a transportation function delivering information from the past to the future, using highways not yet dreamt of."

A Technology Forecast Conference was held at the National Archives on the following day. This conference focused on developing information technologies, and the opportunities and challenges they offer both researcher and archivist. Electronic data can move anywhere and appear in any format. What do we preserve? What should we preserve? On the immediate horizon is the need for organizational structures to acknowledge the change electronic technology has caused in the way we work and the recognition of how rapidly these changes occur in the workplace.

The conferences raised a number of important issues and answered few of them, but their purpose was to bring a diverse audience together to begin to define the scope of the problem.

(**Note:** A twelve-page report on the conferences is available from Susan Swartzburg, 1050 George Street, Apartment 4L, New Brunswick, NJ 08901.)

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when necessary, and given priority for air-drying, either on lines or on tables. Again, because of the deliberate nature of this attack, there was little surviving context for most of the research records recovered. The investigators or technicians working on the research projects will have to invest sustained amounts of time sorting and correlating the records. Although little, if any, original scientific data maintained on paper at the facility was lost to physical degradation, some of it will not be available for use and analysis until it is dried, sorted, and collated.

Damaged photographic records. Photo: M. Floyd.

A large proportion of files that were either too wet and heavy for convenient and rapid air-drying, or were of undetermined value, were prepared for freezing. Remaining file folders were removed from around the documents, the folder label tabs were torn from the folders and placed with the contents, and the units were wrapped in freezer paper and packed in plastic milk crates for quick freezing in the center's walk-in freezer. Heavy card stock file folders were removed from around documents before freezing because their continued presence would have impeded the rapid freezing of documents and the dehumidifying action of the

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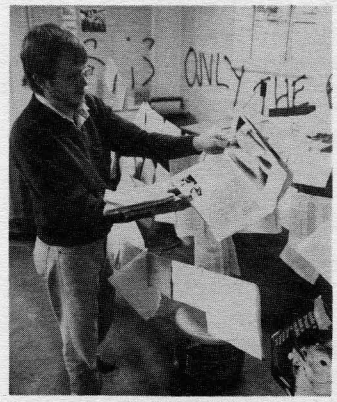
freezer unit on wet paper. Records without file folders (*i.e.*, without identification or context), were separated into one- to two-inch segments, wrapped in freezer paper, and placed in milk crates for freezing.

In mid-July, just one month after the attack, some of the frozen documents had dried sufficiently from the dehumidifying effects of cold storage to be removed from the freezer. These freeze-dried documents required no further salvage work. Approximately ten to twelve cubic feet of records remain frozen in the farm's freezer unit.

When the facility has adequately recovered its physical plant, clerical and technical personnel with knowledge of the work being conducted at the facility can assist archives staff in the recovery of these materials. Depending on the size of the record recovery effort, either all of the remaining freezer crates or individual crates may be unfrozen and subjected to careful appraisal. The important thawed records will then be prepared for air-drying, and the unnecessary and obsolete records will be discarded.



Larry Landis line dries damp off-prints. Photo: Mark Floyd.

The six archives staff members spent about fifteen hours over three days at the mink farm engaged in records salvage. Approximately fifty cubic feet of records, including thousands of photographs and coated paper offprints, were recovered. This represents an estimated eighty-five to ninety percent of all the material that the archives staff handled.

The recovery effort was a valuable experience. Foremost, it provided hands-on training that could never be replicated in a workshop setting.[2] Many other lessons were learned as a consequence:

◆Records disasters resulting from acts of terrorism are significantly different from those that result from accidental causes. Acts of vandalism require some adjustments to commonly accepted disaster response and record salvage strategies.

◆Without good security, even the best single-site vital records program is of little value against vandals. Heavy locking file cabinets, properly secured to the floor and walls and routinely locked, would have significantly reduced damage to the records. Similarly, the timely duplication and storage of research records at an alternative depository would have negated much of the impact of the attack.

◆When records are specifically the object of vandalism, loss of context and intellectual control makes appraisal and treatment evaluation time-consuming and difficult. In the type of circumstances previously described, one is left with a choice of two salvage alternatives: appraise records for value and recovery action on a document-by-document basis and risk extended exposure of paper to destructive conditions, or stabilize masses of documents with little individual appraisal or treatment analysis.

◆When no original order remains with the records, and recovery time prior to mold and mildew manifestation is short, heavy reliance on freezing or other mass stabilization techniques is necessary.

◆When all formats and values of records are dumped into a common jumble, recovery team members must be well trained in salvage techniques and in general records appraisal guidelines.

◆A recovery effort for records damaged in an act of vandalism needs the constant presence of a knowledgeable operations person to give immediate records and data appraisal judgments.

◆When salvaging records damaged by intentional acts of terrorism, extreme caution is necessary. After the recovery began and workers were thoroughly wet and dirty, the possibility was recognized that toxic chemical agents might have been dumped on the records. Fortunately for salvage workers, this speculation proved untrue. In recovering from acts of violence engineered by radical and perhaps unbalanced individuals, human life and safety must be made a priority.

◆As radicalism and intolerance of ideas and research continue to grow, records security and defense will need to be a serious component of disaster planning, both in prevention and in recovery.

◆Records disasters do occur outside of archives and library settings. Take the initiative to call and offer assistance; do not wait for the affected party to call you.

◆A detailed disaster plan focusing on the needs of individual offices or buildings is vital. OSU's campus disaster plan was written to address an "area-wide catastrophic event," and was of little or no use in the mink farm recovery action. A disaster plan addressing prevention and record recovery is a goal of the Archives for 1992.

The authors want to thank the OSU Office of Budgets for its support in developing a records disaster recovery potential at the University. The authors would also like to thank the University Archives employees and student workers: Elizabeth Nielsen, Susan D. Wheeler, Gayle Stevenson, and Jennifer Mathany. Without their efforts, a successful recovery would not have been possible.

Endnotes

[1]"Animal-Rights Activists Burn OSU Mink Farm," *Oregonian*, June 11, 1991, page B-1. Ironically, the news release was written on an old Oregon State University Department of Animal Science letterhead stationery.

[2]The authors had presented a disaster planning, prevention, and recovery workshop just six weeks earlier at the Northwest Archivists annual meeting.