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Portal to History ~ by Rich Newberg



There's always a guy like me in the newsroom, cloistered behind stacks of tapes (I'm dating myself), memorabilia, files and press credentials from some of the more memorable stories covered. My cubicle was so cluttered that the station's general manager, on more than one occasion, had yellow crime tape draped around my workspace. One time, my collection toppled onto the desk of my colleague's cubicle next door, smashing her candy jar!

But even a newsroom hoarder has his moments of glory. I was also the “go-to-guy” for fellow reporters who needed that one historic moment in time that would make their stories complete. Those moments lived inside my cassettes and I knew where to find them.

Now you know why I’m in my glory when I enter the Buffalo Broadcasters Association film and video archive.

I liken it to a time capsule that measures twenty-three hundred square feet! Upon entry, I’m surrounded by the very people, issues and events that made or changed history as long as a half-century ago!

You can’t see their images or hear the stories they want to tell because they exist in a state of suspended animation, on frames of film and strips of magnetic tape.

They’ve been waiting for this very moment to be brought back to life, revealing valuable lessons from the past. The Buffalo Broadcasters Association has begun the process of digitizing the precious footage so anyone with a computer or iPhone will have access to Buffalo’s moving image history. Exceptional moments in time will be accessible using key words or names, just as you would conduct a Google search on any given topic.

We have to thank the visionaries who, early on, viewed newsfilm as the first draft of local history. Those nightly news stories helped define a region and its people, even as local television news was finding its own footing. Buffalo’s three TV network affiliates either held onto their archived newsfilm or handed it over to the Buffalo Historical Society for safekeeping. When storage became an issue, the footage was rescued from the dumpster time and again by those who feared that part of our heritage would be thrown away.

Losing the moving images from the 1960s would have been a pity for documentary producers like Susan Stern. Her late husband, Spain Rodriguez, was a product of that era, and became a nationally renowned “underground” cartoonist. He grew up in Buffalo, and, according to Stern, “was inspired by Buffalo’s multiracial bohemia of the 1950s and 1960s.”

When she began writing the story of his life for television, Stern reached out to the Buffalo Broadcasters Association in search of video.

“Many people told me I would never find television footage of these pieces of American history, so when I learned that the Buffalo Broadcasters Association had saved original

film footage from the '60s, I was hopeful." She became "ecstatic" after the Association provided her with film footage of the Road Vultures Motorcycle Club, an outlaw group of bikers. Rodriguez once rode with that gang, although, according to Stern, he tried to steer members away from criminal activity. The Buffalo clips will appear in "The Provocations of Spain Rodriguez," Stern's work in progress.

WIVB-TV (CBS affiliate), Buffalo's first TV station, became the first to grant the Association licensing rights to its copyrighted footage. WKBW-TV (ABC affiliate) followed suit. WGRZ-TV (NBC) is expected to come onboard this year. This would make Buffalo the first television market in the country where all the major stations participate in one effort to retrieve the region's moving image history.

It couldn't happen at a more opportune time. There are plans underway to establish a freestanding museum, featuring Buffalo greats in broadcasting, music and sports. The Buffalo Hall of Fame Experience would provide interactive exhibits and a resource center.

Thanks to the archives, giants like the late newsman Tim Russert, singer Rick James, and Buffalo Bills quarterback and congressman, Jack Kemp will again take center stage. The Buffalo story will be shared with the world, through the words and actions of its newsmakers, artists, and athletes, as captured through the lens of television journalists.

When it was time for me to say good-bye, I was given an hour special to retrace my own forty-six-year career as a broadcast journalist. Thanks to a trusted colleague at WIVB-TV, terabytes of my hoarded tapes were digitized. I was able to scan through all the big stories that defined my life as a newsman, selecting the nuggets of extraordinary events and people, who, I believe, cried out for curtain calls. The passage of time allowed me to reflect on the meaning of each and every story and its place in Buffalo history.

My fervent hope is that the same will be true for the people of Western New York and all who view their collective journey as a community. Actually seeing how they weathered some of history's greatest challenges should provide the knowledge that only comes with the gift of self-discovery.

[Rich Newberg, retired senior correspondent at WIVB-TV, Buffalo and previously a regional vice president of The National Academy of the Television Arts & Sciences, New York Chapter (NY NATAS), was inducted into the Buffalo Broadcasters Hall of Fame in 2006 and won his 11th New York Emmy Award in 2016 for his video memoir, "One Reporter's Journey." NY NATAS recently honored Rich for his 25+ years of contributions to the television industry by inducting him into the 2019 Silver Circle]