

"Perfect Preservation — A Lesson from the Past"

Philip H. Young
Director
Krannert Memorial Library
University of Indianapolis
Indianapolis, IN

The library profession is leading the way in identifying an impending crisis which threatens the very roots of modern culture—I refer to the acid destruction of books. For the last century, the paper used in books, magazines, and newspapers was made with acids which are now causing it to become brittle and to crumble into dust, bearing with it society's recorded knowledge of the last several generations.

Librarians are attempting to avert the cultural suicide of our era by preserving their library collections with the assistance of high technology. Deacidification programs are underway, as are microfilming projects to photograph key items in research collections. Even newer technologies promise other methods of saving the written record of the twentieth century, including digitizing it for electronic storage in traditional magnetic formats or using the new optical wizardry of CD-ROM.

Unfortunately, these efforts, though well-intentioned, have proven costly, slow and (worst of all) not really permanent. A deacidified book will still face the mechanical rigors of usage, including dog-eared pages and accidental drops into mud-puddles

during a rush to catch a bus. Microfilm, microfiche, and other photographic processes will greatly extend the print's life but are themselves vulnerable to chemical decay of image and film with the eventual loss of viability. Electronic media are also susceptible to long-term decay, as well as to short-term damage. (Who hasn't head of someone accidentally typing DEL *.* on their computer keyboard?) No one seems to know what the shelf-life of CD-ROM will be, but it is already apparent that surface scratches interfere with image-processing.

Is our effort to preserve the records of our age in vain? Is there no uncorruptible medium to which to entrust the essence of our era? Perhaps examining the methods used in earlier ages might provide an insight for us. Since antiquity, writers have used parchment, vellum and other skins, and non-acidic paper for perservation of their musings, but these media while stable when stored in a monastery or public archives do not guarantee a lasting record. In ancient times, records were also written on bronze, wood and stone. Although wood is clearly impermanent, metal and stone present the desired characteristics of

virtual indestructibility. We can read a sixth-century B.C. treaty of the Greek city Sybaris written on a bronze plate or any of the thousands of imperial Roman tomb inscriptions carved into stone (and now cluttering the world's museums) just as well as at the time of their creation. The written record has been preserved! Unfortunately, however, metal and stone are not inexpensive, easily obtained, rapidly inscribed, or efficiently stored in quantity. Who would want to chisel *War and Peace* into blocks of marble (or store the result in their library!)?

Happily, research tells us that there is yet another medium used for writing by ancient civilization which overcomes these problems—the clay tablet. Humanity's earliest surviving documents were imprinted in soft clay, baked to rock-like hardness, and

stored for systematic recall (or, as often happened, for posterity.) Do clay tablets meet our needs for writing permanence? They do, indeed, approach indestructibility. Granted, if you drop one, it breaks—but the text is not lost because any archaeologist worth his or her salt can piece it back together, good as new. (Try that with acid paper!) Furthermore, clay is easily and quickly inscribed, unlike metal or stone. It can be found almost anywhere and molded into manageable units for efficient handling and storage. And, most importantly, the writing lasts forever!

My fellow librarians, I submit to you that our preservation efforts have been misdirected. Instead of expensive deacidification, microphotography, electronic or optical conversion, we should be transcribing our hallowed texts onto clay tablets!