

What Would a Television Preservation Task Force Look Like?

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Fuller French owns the The American Broadcast Television and Script Library in Fort Worth. This private collection encompasses over 130,000 scripts from nearly every program - the largest holding of television history in any one place - including pages from Johnny Carson's estate, the entire run of the original *Star Trek* series, and features pages with notes from legendary TV writers, producers and on-camera talent. The American Broadcast Script Library begins with scripts from Vaudeville and early radio, potentially containing one of the most comprehensive accounts of the medium and how its creative workers evolved from one medium to another.

French's Broadcast Library contains ephemera from almost every television genre and almost every type of worker, including early drafts of Abbott and Costello's "Who's on First" radio sketch, *Gunsmoke* radio scripts, radically different versions of the *Gilligan's Island* pilot, giant cue cards from *The Tonight Show*, notes from make-up artists and costume continuity scripts from *Moonlighting*, props, animation storyboards from *The Simpsons*, *G.I. Joe*, *Animaniacs* and *Batman: The Animated Series*, early game show (*Queen for a Day*) shooting scripts, storyboards for *The Jerry Lewis Show*, casting directors' scripts for *The Wonderful World of Disney*, stage directions and blocking from *The Jackie Gleason Show* (where he introduces "The Honeymooners,") bound volumes of the *I Love Lucy* show exclusively made for executive producer Jess Oppenheimer, and *Texaco Star Theater* reproductions. These additional notes, memos, and related TV-related items held in the Library complicate notions of the archive as merely scannable and reproducible. In other words, the archive *itself is the thing*, and the experience of wandering through it - encountering its massivity, its randomness, its bizarre connections borne of alphabetical order rather than chronological order - imbues an entirely unique sense of television history in and of this encounter. There is also the story of Fuller French himself -- how he came to collect the ephemera, the extreme television fandom that compelled him to acquire these artefacts and the experience of having him walk you through his collection.

The sense of history that the American Television Script Library imparts is wholly subjective, borne of *whose* script one holds (a producer, a writer, a main actor or below-the-line worker originally possessed), demanding a holistic, rather than a simple solution to the primary documents encountered in a single visit.

I have made initial contact with French and walked through this amazing resource. My TCU students have also visited the library, where they were overwhelmed by the scope of the massive collection and the experience of being amidst all that television history. French encourages research in his library, but has yet to align himself academically with a single institutio. One wonders what the next step of a Television Preservation Task

Force would even be, especially when dealing with someone who has spent a great deal of money accumulating these materials. Is simply raising awareness of this resource the first of many steps in this relationship, or there more salient strategies? If French is simply looking for capital investment, is there anything that such a task force can feasibly provide with the aid of a national grant (NEH), or would adding to the collection's reputation be enough? Is doing nothing a viable solution, given the Library's extreme potential to expand, if not entirely rewrite television history, or is this an "all hands on deck" occasion for scholars, institutions and governmental funding agencies to tap into this amazing resource.

To answer these questions with more questions, how does one recruit French to share this goldmine of material for the purposes of a potential Television Task Force, and what can such an entity offer him in return? Moreover, is it possible to reproduce the *original* encounter with the Broadcast Television Archive in reproduction, or even in a university library, or should one simply leave it as it is?

Still, given no university library has yet either bought and/or associated themselves with the American Broadcast Television Script Library, nor have there been any academics associated with French's collection (aside from my own, initial meetings) I sense that there are many opportunities to be had by a "Television Preservation Task Force," wishing to associate with French and his collection.

Certainly, something akin to the Media History Digital Library would be the ultimate ideal? This would allow scholars worldwide to access the collection, but would require a great investments of labor to complete, perhaps taking years and even the possibility of the collection changing hands. Alternatively, one of the draws of this, or any archival resource lies in the Benjaminian "aura" of the "original" script and the thrill of its discovery amidst the boxes of tv scripts packed next to each other.