

THE DAY THE EARTH MOVED UNDER OUR FEET

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1. Abstract

This paper presents a personal account of a series of natural disasters — namely earthquakes — that my colleagues and I lived and worked through, and how those events affected our archive — *The New Zealand Archive of Film, Television and Sound* (then Sound Archives/Ngā Taonga Kōrero). In particular, I intend to describe the recovery and relocation process, and our experience of restoring order to the physical archive.

2. The sequence of events

I began working at Sound Archives/Ngā Taonga Kōrero — an archive predominantly focused on collecting and preserving New Zealand's recorded radio heritage — in 1994. In 2002, I moved to the United States where I would spend five years preserving Civil Rights Era oral histories in Mississippi. When Hurricane Katrina struck the southern United States in August, 2005, I experienced my first encounter with a major disaster.



Image 1. Clock stopped at the time of the September earthquake after falling off the wall.

Hurricanes are destructive and traumatic, but they do not usually arrive unannounced; earthquakes come without a warning. There is no opportunity to prepare, nor can their magnitude or duration be predicated — this fact was made evident to me three years after I had returned to Sound Archives/Ngā Taonga Kōrero, when a 7.1 magnitude earthquake struck Christchurch on September 4th, 2010, at 4.35am.

Like most people, I was woken when I was thrown out of my bed onto the floor, and — over the top of the earthquake's rumble — I could hear the sound of things smashing in my house. Owing to the depth and distance of the earthquake's epicentre, there were no fatalities, and our archive was more disheveled than damaged. When we returned to work after the events of that weekend, we discovered that many of our collections — consisting of open reel tapes, DATs, CD-Rs, cassettes, nitrocellulose discs, and documentation — had been ejected from their shelving. Our disaster plan did not prescribe a particular course of action, but common sense suggested that we should return our collections to their shelves and do what we could to secure them from ongoing aftershocks. On a very limited budget, John Kelcher — a fellow conservator — and I purchased cord and packing tape, which we secured over the front

of each shelf as a temporary measure until proper earthquake bracing could be installed. Amazingly, this stopgap solution protected some items throughout the sizeable aftershocks that would continue to rock us over the next four months. On February 22, at 12.51pm, however, a magnitude 6.3 earthquake hit Christchurch. It was shallow, relatively close to the centre of the city, and profoundly destructive. Due to building collapse and falling masonry, 185 people would lose their lives.

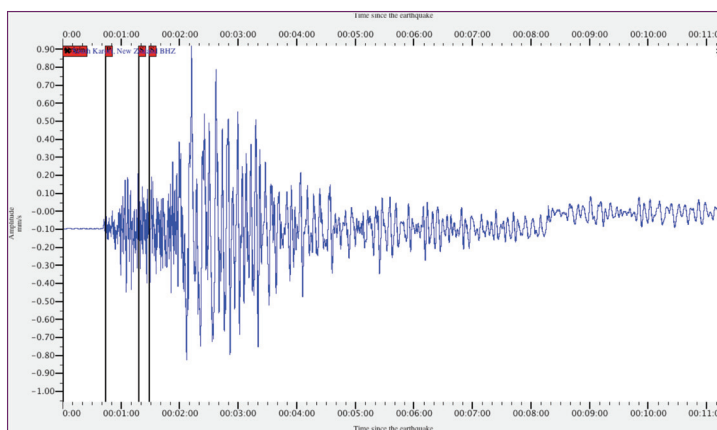


Image 2. Graph of the February 22, 2011 earthquake.

I was just leaving the restroom when the earthquake hit. The force knocked me to the floor, and I could only watch as a solid wall cracked open in front of my eyes. The multi-story building that housed the archive was compromised, but still standing; however, the Methodist Church opposite our building collapsed immediately. The city centre was evacuated, and our building was immediately cordoned within a perimeter known as the ‘Red Zone’ — an area in which civilian access was forbidden. Uniformed army personnel secured every point of thoroughfare through this zone.

3. Back to work

Ten days after the earthquake, we were granted access to our building. We were given a fifteen-minute window in which seven people — four Urban Search and Rescue personnel, an engineer, and two staff members — were allowed to enter the building. Their goal was to take photographs of the damage that would inform our recovery planning. During a subsequent effort, a member of our IT department would retrieve the servers that contained our digital repository.



Image 3. First entry into our building.

For a time, an emergency generator provided power to our floor, though it was shut down due to the concern that a power surge from ongoing aftershocks could cause a fire; naturally, we became concerned that the collection's climate could no longer be regulated. For three months, we would work out of a hotel room while our collections continued to reside in our inaccessible building. In May 2011, despite a dearth of rental space, our manager successfully secured a new building — previously an air conditioning sales office — with a warehouse space attached that seemed suitable as a temporary home.²⁸

4. The recovery operation

In late-May 2011 after all of the final engineering inspections had been carried out and it was deemed safe to re-enter our damaged building, our recovery operation began.

Everybody was required to be processed at the Civil Defence headquarters, and we were each provided with photo identification that gave us the necessary credentials to enter the building and the Red Zone for a specified period. Everyone was required to wear a fluorescent jacket and a hard hat.

We worked in two teams of three, and in as logical a manner as possible we filled sturdy polypropylene crates with collection items that belonged together. Those crates were numbered and photographed, and log sheets for each crate listed their contents, image number, room number, aisle number, row number, and shelf number.

We had made a point of having a number of archivists on the team; this was important because together we were able to ensure that the handling and record keeping was methodical, and could support the re-ordering process that would follow.



Image 4. Loading bay.

28 This was to be our temporary home for six months, though, as of this publication, we still occupy this space. A permanent archive is still being sought.

We took advantage of our damaged building's old loading bay to load pallets with these crates. A moving company would then transfer these to a removal truck, and drive to our new site approximately two kilometres away.

It took us about 3 weeks to get everything out.



Image 5. Audio pickup sticks.

Aside from the threat of ongoing aftershocks, we stayed cognizant of the threat to emotional well-being. Everyone was encouraged to be honest about how they were coping — all of my colleagues were dealing with complex issues at home, some with condemned houses, and the ongoing stress of the continual aftershocks.

5. The sorting process

With all of our collections relocated, it was important to re-impose order on the material that we had rescued. Although the content of our archive had been moved in its entirety to our new site, the crates in which our recordings had been transported could not be shelved on arrival due to the fact that shelving had not yet been installed; moreover, the contents of the crates were only partially ordered. While the shelves were installed, and subsequently populated with crates, I took the opportunity to make use of the documentation that had been created during the recovery process. I transcribed our handwritten logs and paired that information with approximately 800 images to generate a spreadsheet that could be used to keep track of the location and provenance of a given crate as it moved around during this period of disarray. Although all of our crates had been shelved, it was clear that we were dealing with a 'sliding puzzle' — the crates were shelved in no particular order, and both the crates and their contents would need to be sorted in-place in order to re-impose a logical structure on our archive.



Image 6. Wall with images.

To do this, I first sorted our images in such a way that images pertaining to large, homogeneous collections were grouped together. Given the link between images and crates, we could now pull several crates out of the shelves; order their contents according to each item's numerical identifier (using the images to track down any items that were missing); and then return that group of crates to the shelves so that a collection — although it may be partitioned over many crates — was now stored contiguously. Of course, this methodology was not practical for our smaller, heterogeneous collections, especially those arising from external sources (perhaps with awkward numbering or poor representation in our finding aids). To sort these collections, we laid out seven crates — one for each media type — and progressively filled these crates. We used whatever finding aids we could to compile a list of identifiers for recordings that we expected to find, and attempted to fill these crates in numerical order. Accordingly, a 'missing' recording could result in several hours' worth of searching through finding aids, crates, and images in order to determine whether a recording was truly 'missing' (or if it ever existed in the first place!).



Image 7. Sorting workbench.

The sorting process began in July 2011, and concluded in July 2012. Over the course of these twelve months, John and I sorted 105,000 sound recordings into order, as well as documents, photographs, and other ephemera. As a result of our methodical process, we were able to produce spreadsheets listing every item in the collection, and that data could subsequently be imported into our catalogue. Importantly, we were able to establish the existence of over 2,000 recordings that were not previously represented in any of our finding aids. For the first time since the Archive's inception, perhaps, we had a complete, centralised record of our entire collection.

6. The silver lining

Since September 4th, 2010, Christchurch has endured over 14,000 aftershocks. Prior to these horrific events, many aspects of our collection suffered from poor documentation, or awkward identification and physical storage. Moreover, thousands of items in our collection were not known to exist.

Had we not suffered these earthquakes, I expect that our archive might have remained in that state, with little impetus to improve. It is because of this disaster that we now know everything we have and where it is located, and this profound level of organisation is proving immensely beneficial to our ongoing conservation and preservation efforts — this is our silver lining!

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