



## PROLOGUE

# Technological advances may enable us to disappear without a trace

A number of years ago someone commented that when future archaeologists dug up the relics of that era, the dominant symbol of civilization would be the Coke bottle. Since that uniquely shaped artifact now has all but disappeared from the scene to be replaced by the generic aluminum can, those far-distant scientists may be hard pressed to unearth a similarly meaningful vestige of life as we know it.

A computer disk ought to be a candidate—but not the familiar old floppy, now replaced by the ZIP, fast losing out to the CD, all of which can be bypassed completely by email. And forget about a videotape as we speed from Beta to VHS to DVD with no end in sight. A cell phone, perhaps—but which one? Take the cell phone in a bag—already antediluvian, its replacements coming so fast they cannot rightfully be considered next generation developments.

Technology is making technology obsolete. Computers that once filled entire buildings now are reduced to laptop size. I would gladly offer my personal computer to be excavated from some landfill by and by—but it would be more of a mystery to its discoverers than it has been to me.

Archaeologists may struggle to unearth the past that is our present, but they always have had such fun doing it and can conjure up some sort of picture without too much fear of contradiction. I empathize more with the historians and archivists whose dilemmas in preserving our story are immediate, much more pressing.

Each time *Sooner Magazine* publishes an article such as “Window to the West”

on Page 22, I am struck by the near-impossibility of collecting and preserving the minutia of future life the way our ancestors did for the past. Who among us keeps journals like Edith Tantlinger’s? Who even writes letters—meaningful letters—like John and Abigail Adams—or even like the ones my family wrote during my homesick freshman year at OU? What post-Watergate public figures are going to leave behind the recorded or written records of unguarded moments that affect their place in history and tell us who they really were?

We contact each other by cell phone, where time is money, or by email, where privacy issues and the danger of missent messages are cause for pause. How painful is it to imagine John and Abby hitting the delete button and sending all that history into cyberspace?

Even if our official records were being printed on paper that would stand the punishment of the centuries, as have the volumes in OU’s History of Science Collections, for instance, they would not be stored for long; there simply is not room. Records deemed important are transferred as quickly as possible to the latest paperless technology, while the rest are shredded. Readily perishable newspapers were put on microfiche for a while; now publications, including *Sooner Magazine*, are being scanned and digitized and eventually will be accessible on the Internet.

In an ideal world, with each technological advance in this field, the previously stored information would be updated to the new system. WHC Curator Don DeWitt tells me that this is “refreshing the data,” and it is a very expensive

proposition. Enter selectivity. The Adams letters surely would survive, but would a Wild West Show cowgirl’s daily diary be worth the expenditure to a given institution?

And there is the integrity of the information to be considered. Technologically stored documents easily could be manipulated, changed for whatever reason to affect unintended results.

If future researchers have trouble divining what we said, wrote and sounded like, they may be equally puzzled in determining how we looked. *Sooner Magazine* files are crammed with photographs dating back 25 years, and hundreds more have been shipped to the OU Photo Archives. But with each issue, fewer and fewer photographic prints are being added to these resources. Of the 57 photos in this issue, only six were prints. The rest were either scanned and emailed to us or were shot digitally and delivered on CD. Originals may exist, but not in our files.

The new systems are so fast and so easy as to be truly miraculous. But permanent they are not. And we often can correct our oversights. Glare on the subject’s glasses, someone’s closed eyes, telephone pole spoiling the landscape? No problem; the computer can take care of that. Pretty benign stuff for the most part—but proof that, yes indeed, the camera can lie.

Undoubtedly there are great minds at work on these glitches in historical archiving, and I will have worried for naught. But just in case, I am photographing a Coke bottle, keeping an 8-by-10 glossy and having the image chiseled into granite down at the landfill. —CJB