A few months ago, we got an e-mail from an English professor at the University of Missouri inquiring about a digital collection of ours he had discovered through a Google search entitled “Grand Rapids Oral Histories.” These are taped interviews of Grand Rapidians that were conducted in the early 1970s.

He wasn’t interested in the history of Grand Rapids, though. Instead, he was a linguist interested in doing a speech analysis of vowel pronunciations using a specialized computer algorithm.

We have compressed, streaming versions of these oral histories online, but he asked if we had higher quality versions available that he could use.

Normally, the answer to that question would be yes. But as it turns out we didn’t have preservation masters in Archival Storage for about half of this particular collection.

This is because, for this project at least, preservation masters did not get created consistently. And the preservation masters that did get created did not get stored consistently in managed Archival Storage (which at the time, eight years ago, consisted of a copy on local network storage and a copy on an archival CD).

Quality control wasn’t great, and when all this was discovered at the time we didn’t do anything about it because what we had done was “good enough for access,” and because we had a “just cross your fingers” mentality in place.

So, we started scrambling.

We still had the original reel-to-reel tapes, so we thought we’d just have them (re-)digitized by our on-campus digitization pros (they’re the one that did it in the first place).

And we did, only to find out that in the intervening eight years since they had been originally digitized our pros had gotten rid of their reel-to-reel player, and that in the intervening 40ish years since the original reel-to-reel tapes had been produced, they had developed what’s called “Stick Shed Syndrome,” and we couldn’t get a good read anyway.

Two reel-to-reel players later (long story), after ultimately deciding against sending the tapes out to be baked (it was prohibitively expensive), and after talking again with the English professor who assured us that some other interviews would do, we got what we could digitized, this time being sure to make a preservation master, which we now keep in Archival Storage, and which we shared with the researcher.

He was able to do his analysis, which is how we have the vowel chart for Mildred Shulz. It turns out that she is the earliest acoustic evidence of the Northern Cities Shift occurring in this area. Also, we’re getting thanked in the acknowledgements of his upcoming book chapter, which in my mind is kind of like a Holy Grail of librarianship.