Much of Baltimore’s television history is on film that is crumbling away. One woman is leading the effort to save and digitize those pieces of our past.

Inside the Baltimore City Archives warehouse, Siobhan Hagan sorts through a wooden crate filled with old film canisters.

It’s a small part of the archives of WJZ television — thousands of reels of film and videotapes from broadcasts dating back decades.

Somewhere in these reels, Ella Fitzgerald enthuses over her creative partnership with Baltimore band leader Chick Webb. Hundreds of hours of tape shows a young Oprah Winfrey finding her television feet as a local news anchor.

There are investigative reports on blockbusting, footage of the 1968 riots, copies of “The Buddy Deane Show,” and scores of interviews with everyday Baltimores — slices of life from an era of Charm City that’s rapidly fading from memory.

Hagan picks up a canister, a relic from more than 60 years ago, and pries off the lid. A yellowing shard of tape sticks up from the tightly wound coil of celluloid.


Someone, perhaps decades ago, spliced the film together with a makeshift bond. It will need to be repaired. Carefully. And soon.

“We’re running out of time,” she says.

Hagan, a 32-year-old archivist, is tackling...
She’s working to save some television history

Early in her career, Oprah Winfrey worked at WJZ television in Baltimore. Saving such footage from the region’s past is part of Hagan’s effort.

at New York University. Her excitement is palpable as she goes through old boxes containing everything from rare recordings of the dance program “Shakedown” to raw news footage from the field.

Until recently, WJZ’s collection was housed at the library of the University of Baltimore, where Hagan worked as an audio visual archivist.

The university maintains a similar archive from WMAR. It has received some grants to digitize a portion of those. But officials realized they lacked the resources to properly store and digitize the WJZ collection as well, library dean Lucy Holman said.

“We didn’t feel like we were the best steward for the collection,” she said. “The clock was ticking.”

So the university turned it back to WJZ, and last November Hagan made the station a pitch. She would take over the archiving through her new nonprofit - if WJZ granted her the rights to license the footage.

WJZ officials agreed. A spokeswoman said they were “pleased” to donate the archives to Hagan, given her knowledge and expertise working with the collection.

Hagan has arranged with the Maryland State Archives to store the WJZ collection at a warehouse in Better Waverly. In exchange, she is assisting the state archives with preservation of its own moving image collection.

Robert Schoebel, Baltimore’s acting archivist, emphasized the cultural importance of Hagan’s work.

“She has done a lot of work and research, and she’s very passionate about preserving the history of Baltimore,” he said.

“WJZ has a unique collection that is important to the community. It’s a way for us to connect with our past and remember who we are.”

Hagan has a daunting task ahead of her. She is working to save the archives of television station WJZ. Time takes its toll on old film and tape, and Hagan is hoping to digitize the station’s footage.

Winfrey recently began appearing on “60 Minutes,” a show she says has admired since her days as a young journalist. Those curious about Winfrey’s early days need look no further than a 1978 episode of Eyewitness News, in which she visits a country store and puts on Howard County.

The camera pans across the little log country store on Triadelphia Road. Tin buckets hang from the ceiling. The shelves are stacked with red and white packages of Beech-nut gum.

“There aren’t many things that can withstand the test of time,” she tells viewers. “Standing inside this old store built around 1850, you’re reminded of a precious part of the past that is often lost in today’s rush world.”

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WJZ ARCHIVES

Siobhan Hagan has a daunting task ahead of her. She is working to save the archives of television station WJZ. Time takes its toll on old film and tape, and Hagan is hoping to digitize the station’s footage.

Hagan says she will use any money she makes licensing WJZ footage to preserve the archive.

But she insists MARMIA will always make archived footage available to view online for free. “That’s a core part of our mission.”

Hagan has found another ally in the Smithsonian Institution. Archivists with the National Museum of African American History and Culture have helped digitize some news broadcasts and episodes of “People Are Talking” for possible use in an exhibition on Winfrey. And Hagan has arranged with the museum to help digitize additional tapes.

The National Museum of African American History and Culture recently launched an initiative called “Great Migration,” which allows members of the public to bring in their personal footage in obsolete formats for free digitization.

Forsberg said the museum will support Hagan as best as it can.

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