

Reel Connections - Issue #7

When Mold Attacks Memories!

A Weekly Sunday Newsletter from Stilson Video Services



If one or more of your tapes look like this, take action now

Lately, we've had a lot of mold show up at our studio 😞
You might wonder how that's possible in our sparkling new, climate-controlled facility. The answer is simple: **our customers are bringing it to us.**

For example, a customer called last week and was excited to tell me he found family tapes that were thought to be lost forever.

Good, I thought.

But then he mentioned they were found in the basement in the bottom of a box that had been there for decades.

Uh oh.

Sure enough, he finally confessed that these newly found treasures were a moldy mess.

Sigh

After an initial examination, I believe we can salvage them—but it's going to require a lot of extra work to remove the mold before we can even think about transferring them successfully.

Why mold grows on video tape

Ok, so if we leave cheese in the refrigerator too long it's no surprise when it turns a bit green. But videotape? Why would that be prone to mold? Isn't it just a bunch of plastic and magnetic particles?

It is, mostly. However, videotape includes a layer called the **binder**, which holds the magnetic particles in place. This binder is made from **organic compounds**, and mold feeds on organic material.

In the right environment, mold spores that land on this material will grow and spread all across the wound edge of the tape. The ideal environment is one of high humidity, poor airflow, and a place that remains undisturbed for a long period of time—like basement storage.

Other risky places to store videotape are garages, attics, barns, and some storage units for all the same reasons.

In these environments, the mold can spread to other tapes as well. One moldy tape can actually contaminate an entire box.

Why national transfer companies refuse moldy tapes

Large national transfer companies are built around workflows that emphasize speed, efficiency, and automation. Cleaning mold requires isolation, manual handling, and extra time. So when your little fuzzy tape shows up, all that efficiency would go out the window if they stopped to try and fix it, so they don't.

I don't agree with that approach because preservation of what's recorded on these tapes requires **care, patience and respect**.

We regularly see customers come to us after their tapes have been rejected elsewhere. When that happens, we step in and do the work that others won't—even when it's unpleasant.

Do we like cleaning mold off tapes? Certainly not—it's messy and time-consuming. But sometimes it's the only responsible way to preserve what's been recorded.

In Summary

If you discover mold in a collection of tapes you want transferred, don't play them in the VCR to assess their condition. Playing a moldy tape can:

- scrape magnetic material off the tape
- permanently damage the recording
- tear the tape
- contaminate and damage the VCR
- spread mold to other tapes

You'll want to act quickly. Don't wait to call a professional for evaluation and cleaning.

- mold doesn't stop growing on its own

- the longer it sits, the more it spreads

- early intervention improves outcomes

We can't save every tape—some are simply too far gone. But we will always do our best to save all, or at least some, of the recording—that I can promise.

Lives are important.
Our mission is to connect them to future generations the best way possible.

Finally, if you have a topic you'd like me to write about, let me know at stilson@stilson.com and I'll add it to the list.

— Bill Stilson
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