

PROCESSING EXTREMELY LARGE COLLECTIONS OF HISTORICAL PHOTOGRAPHS

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ABSTRACT: The photo-archivist frequently encounters large collections to which traditional item-oriented processing techniques are poorly suited. The author draws on his experience with projects at the Sacramento History Center (1,000,000 negatives from a newspaper photo morgue) and at the California State Railroad Museum (100,000 photographic images, mostly prints) to discuss an overall approach to the appraisal and weeding, arrangement and description, and conservation of large photo collections. He discusses appropriate division and specialization of labor on such projects and argues that "something is better than nothing" in improving access.

Photo-archivists are currently encountering a situation analogous to the one earlier in this century when archivists and manuscript curators, armed with techniques suited for small collections of rare personal papers, confronted the enormity of modern records. The evolution of photography from an arcane and highly technical craft practiced by a few professionals to a popular pastime of millions and a standard tool for documenting news, science, and business has resulted in voluminous collections that render traditional graphic cataloging techniques inadequate if not obsolete. The consequent lack of accessibility often transforms what should be valuable research resources into veritable "white elephants."

During 1982, two historical agencies in Sacramento, California, received custody of extremely large collections of historical photographs. The Sacramento History Center accessioned the photo morgue of the Sacramento *Bee* newspaper — a group of over one million negatives. The California State Railroad Museum acquired, as a loan in perpetuity, a collection from the Railway and Locomotive Historical Society, which contains approximately 100,000 photographic images, mostly prints. Neither institution has a large curatorial staff, and, although in both situations the donors provided grants to hire part-time processors, the magnitude of the collections necessitated deviations from standard methods for processing photo accessions. As a participant in both projects, the author experienced some of the problems typical in such collections.

Conventional processing techniques for pictorial collections presuppose that photographs must be treated individually — much as librarians catalog books.

From the 1950s when Camilla P. Luecke stated that "each photograph must be considered singly," to the 1970s when Kenneth Duckett wrote that "arrangement by provenance only creates unnecessary work," archivists have usually accepted the idea that regular archival methods are not generally applicable to photographs.¹ However, the fact that a part-time cataloger using *Anglo-American Cataloging Rules* (2nd edition) needed nine months to catalog 1100 images demonstrates that individual cataloging is not appropriate for collections of modern size.² Even an efficient self-indexing system such as the one devised by Paul Vanderbilt requires that each image be separately classified and filed, thus limiting that system's effectiveness to about 10,000 photographs per accession.³

Because of these limitations, photo-archivists have recently begun using principles and methods designed for textual records in processing their more sizable acquisitions. To be sure, some are moving reluctantly. In 1972, Renata V. Shaw asserted, "When neither self-indexing files are suitable nor individual cataloging needed, pictures and photographs can be cataloged in groups," implying that this is a last resort.⁴ Now, however, the last has become first. For instance, the new basic manual on administering photographic collections from the Society of American Archivists emphasizes the treatment of photographs as groups of records.⁵ This shift eliminates neither individual cataloging nor self-indexing files; it merely places the question of arranging and describing historical photographs in a proper perspective. Archivists should address the processing of photographs as they would any other accession: evaluating strengths and weaknesses, determining the requirements of the material, and developing an approach that accounts for all possible techniques. The larger the collection, the greater is the need for careful planning and reliance on standard archives and manuscript practices.

The first steps in this process are an appraisal of the collection and the establishment of guidelines for weeding. Are there any groups of photographs that may be excluded prior to full-scale processing, for example, files of unidentified mug shots? If so, and if they can simply be lifted together from the remainder of the images, one may save considerable time and resources. Just as important is the development of criteria to permit quick weeding during processing — guidelines that will allow for effective, efficient elimination without excessive agonizing over single images. A newspaper photo morgue may have a substantial number of "Dog of the Week" pictures, an attention getter for canine-loving subscribers, but hardly an important historical record. These images can probably be discarded with little or no individual consideration. Another possibility may be the elimination of multiple images beyond a certain number, or perhaps even the deletion — in some subject classes — of all but one or two shots in a series taken of the same subject at the same time. How many versions of a portrait or a standard publicity group picture are necessary, regardless of the different angles from which they are taken?⁶ The archivist must carefully consider standards for weeding, taking into account evidentiary and exhibitionary values and keeping in mind the goals and policies of the repository. Also, the processor should save any image that does not fall positively into one of the disposable categories. With careful forethought, the bulk of a photographic collection can usually be reduced by some significant fraction — as if it were an accession of written records.

During the appraisal period, the archivist should identify any characteristics of the collection that may govern or aid in the arrangement and description. Many extremely large collections of photographs will already have an order. A newspaper photo morgue, the portfolio of a commercial studio, or the pictorial records of a business, professional, or government organization will usually have an existing filing system. If so, the principles of provenance and original order may be useful as bases for access.

The majority of the million-plus negatives from the Sacramento *Bee* morgue arrived at the Sacramento History Center in one accession arranged first by photographer and then chronologically. Each of two later accessions from the *Bee* came in subject order. The archivist decided that the original filing order in each of the accessions would be maintained; consequently, rearrangement in the larger collection was a mere matter of correcting obvious filing errors. The two smaller collections received minor changes in subject headings to provide more consistent filing, but, once again, most of the rearrangement consisted of rectifying misfilings.

Even a large artificial collection, such as the one owned by the Railway and Locomotive Historical Society, will often possess a usable system still intact. This collection came to the California State Railroad Museum in some disorder, but with a majority of its nearly 100,000 images (mostly prints of locomotives) roughly arranged by railroad company in several files, separated according to photograph size. Some of the photographs were also in order by locomotive number. The decision to adopt this scheme — only interfiling the different size prints (those within the 3x5 to 8x10 range) and loose images — was the obvious course, considering the project's one-year limit.

At both the Sacramento History Center and the California State Railroad Museum, the maintenance of provenance and the adherence to original order permitted the establishment of self-indexing files for these collections with minimum effort. Patrons at the History Center may easily peruse a typed list of subject headings from the *Bee* photo files; at the Railroad Museum, the locomotive images of the Railway and Locomotive Historical Society may be quickly searched for particular engines by ownership and engine number — the customary access points used by researchers in this field.

The other more voluminous group of photographs from the *Bee* morgue, organized by photographer and then chronologically, also offers a certain amount of access based upon arrangement. Because the Sacramento *Bee* is indexed for many of the years covered by the morgue photos, researchers can gain access by finding illustrated articles related to a subject and then searching the morgue for the time indicated by the date of the article. Moreover, some photos published by the *Bee* have a credit line for the photographer, which makes the search somewhat simpler. Even if there is no illustrated article in the *Bee* for a particular event in Sacramento regional history, it is still possible to search the files on that date for related photographs, because photojournalists capture many images that never appear in print. The only finding aid prepared for this portion of the *Bee* collection was a list of photographers and the years that they worked for the newspaper. The limited access provided by this arrangement is better than none at all, which is precisely what would have been available otherwise.

Applying the principle of provenance to photo collections permits group description, either through traditional inventory series description or by using a cataloging technique. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints in Salt Lake City has used provenance in its picture holdings for years; the individual collection is the fundamental level of description for photographs at this institution.⁷ Mildred Simpson, the librarian for the Atlantic Richfield Company (ARCO) photograph collection, has described a system applying a computer data base program in conjunction with the principle of provenance, a method that seems particularly appropriate because corporate photographs are likely to be taken in groups for specific purposes.⁸

The Sacramento History Center routinely uses group description for large accessions unless a collection is too heterogeneous for the scheme to be effective. For example, recently the Center processed the Benning Collection, a portfolio of nearly 20,000 negatives made by a local commercial photographer. The collection consisted largely of shots of school groups with the addition of one major series of images related to the photographer's property near Lake Tahoe. Volunteers arranged the images by school and then chronologically, with a separate series for the Lake Tahoe photos, reestablishing an order partially lost over the years. The plan now calls for description almost entirely by series.⁹

Outsized collections of photographs dictate a special consideration of conservation. The number of images may prohibit treatment in depth for any but a few of the items. Indeed, there may be so many images that all but the most basic cleaning or even individual sleeving may be impossible. Such was the case at the Sacramento History Center during the processing of the *Bee* photo morgue. Workers simply dusted negatives with Static Master Brushes and then stored them five to a sleeve, fronts to backs.¹⁰ Because photographs require special environmental controls, the archivist must anticipate the need for an adequate storage area when accepting extremely large collections. Merely securing a sufficient number of containers may be a formidable and expensive task. Furthermore, this problem will be aggravated should an accession contain nitrate-based or glass negatives."

After the processing needs of the large photo collection have been identified and plans for arrangement, description, and conservation drawn, the archivist should give additional thought to their efficient execution. One way of achieving this end is to divide and specialize labor. A basic principle of industrial management, this method functions on the premise that motion and time are saved when one person performs one action. Applications of this principle include assigning one person to weed the collection, another to clean and sleeve images while transferring any information from the old container, and another to file the images in proper order. As the work progresses, another person can begin surveying the results and preparing finding aids. Other applications may also be possible.

Another benefit of the division of labor is that the skill level required to perform the work drops together with the pay scale for the workers. Cleaning, sorting, and filing call for little training or initiative, although they do demand a high degree of meticulousness. Weeding and description will require more proficiency. Nevertheless, if the archivist prepares detailed and standardized procedures, supervises their implementation, and performs regular quality control checks, even these jobs may be performed by non-professionals or

trainees: clerks, interns, and docents. This method of project staffing can certainly reduce costs.

Dividing labor has at least one major drawback, that is, its potential for boredom. Some possible remedies include providing pleasant work surroundings, regular and generous breaks, and occasional changes in routine. If full-time employees are performing the work, the archivist may want to restrict the repetitive activity to only a segment of the workday.

Despite the need to deal with extremely large photographic collections on a unit basis, the archivist may make exceptions. Collections will almost always contain images important enough to warrant individual attention, and a good processing plan will allow for these exceptions. Flexibility is a major criterion for handling large photo collections. It is the rigidity of traditional methods of dealing with historical photographs — the inability of those techniques to bend to the demands of size — that makes them inappropriate for the large collection. More than individual pictures or smaller accessions, large collections require special planning.

The final point to remember about the extra-large collection of historical photographs is that “something is better than nothing.” Any accession of a hundred thousand images or more is unlikely ever to be entirely accessible, but less than satisfactory access is far more desirable than none at all. Also, the work that is done to make such collections partially accessible can serve as the foundation for future refinements should resources become available. In any case, the extremely large photographic collection need not be a “white elephant.” With proper planning and efficient execution, it can be a valuable historical resource.

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FOOTNOTES

1. Camilla P. Luecke, “Photographic Library Procedures,” *Special Libraries* 57 (December 1956): 457; Kenneth W. Duckett, *Modern Manuscripts: A Practical Manual for Their Management, Care, and Use* (Nashville, TN: American Association for State and Local History, 1975), p. 197. Although most authorities have mentioned the use of provenance and group cataloging as possibilities for processing photo collections, few have discussed them in any great depth. One exception is T.R. Schellenberg, *The Management of Archives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), pp. 322-343.
2. Marilyn I. Levinson and Martha Lause, “Cataloging of Historical Photographs in Small to Medium-Sized Archival Operations,” *Midwestern Archivist* 8 (May 1983): 25.
3. Paul Vanderbilt, “Filing Your Photographs: Some Basic Procedures,” *History News* 21 (June 1966), AASLH Technical Leaflet No. 36.
4. Renata V. Shaw, “Picture Organization: Practices and Procedures, Part 2,” *Special Libraries* 63 (November 1972): 505.

5. Margory S. Long, Gerald J. Munoff, and Mary Lynn Ritzenthaler, *Archives & Manuscripts: Administration of Photographic Collections* (Chicago, IL: Society of American Archivists, 1984).
6. Some caution is necessary here. The evidentiary values of many subjects — buildings or machinery among others — may be enhanced by multiple shots from different angles. For a full discussion of the various factors involved in appraising photo collections, see Long, Munoff, and Ritzenthaler, *Administration of Photographic Collections*, pp. 55-61.
7. Max J. Evans, "Handling Photographs in the LDS Church Archives," *American Archivist* 40 (April 1977): 173-177.
8. Mildred Simpson, "Photographs in a Business Setting: Atlantic Richfield Company," *American Archivist* 45 (Summer 1982): 315-319.
9. Susan Searcy, telephone call, October 9, 1984.
10. Even this meager amount of conservation took a year for three part-time workers. The brushes are manufactured by the Nuclear Products Company. Each contains a minute amount of radioactive material — not large enough to be hazardous — that generates a positive charge. The brush transfers the charge to the photographic negative, causing it to repel dust until the charge wears off.
11. Collections of metal images, such as daguerrotypes and ambrotypes, or of wet plate collodion negatives will usually be small enough to merit item level treatment.