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Short Subjects: How to Catalog Negatives Without Money

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How to Catalog Negatives Without Money

Ted Ryan

One of the dilemmas facing visual materials archivists is the rising cost of properly cataloging and preserving their images. By their very nature, photograph and negatives are expensive to reference and store.

In September of 1989, photojournalist Kenneth G. Rogers willed a large and important photograph collection to the Atlanta History Center's Library/Archives. Rogers had been a photographer for the Atlanta Constitution, and then the Atlanta Journal, from 1923 to 1973, and was head of the photography department from 1928 to 1950. The collection contains over 12,000 4x5-inch black and white negatives and color transparencies of Atlanta and the surrounding area photographed by Rogers which provide a rich view of
Atlanta's growth from a bustling southern town into an international city. Rogers, known for his excursions into rural Georgia to photograph the local population, was called the "Dean of Southern Photographers," and this collection shows why.

When the collection (over four hundred glass plate negatives, several thousand acetate negatives, and a small amount of nitrate-based negatives) was donated, it was stored in either 4x5-inch negative boxes or in envelopes (which contained anywhere from one to seventy negatives) and labeled by event. The identifications tended to be rather vague. For example, one box had "Galogly" written on the outside. The box contained twenty-seven glass plate negatives of trial scenes. It took considerable research to discover that what the caption referred to was a murder trial which took place in 1927.

Once the donation of the collection was announced in the Atlanta Historical Society's Newsletter and in the Atlanta Constitution, the society received numerous telephone calls from individuals requesting permission to use the collection. This instantaneous demand for the collection posed problems. First, the negatives, particularly the glass plate negatives, were fragile and could not be used by the patrons. Second, in order to make contact sheets following our usual method of cataloging would have been extremely expensive (approximately $8,000 to $10,000) and would have taken approximately eight years to complete. The patron demand, plus the in-house need for the images in several projects, coupled with the preservation concerns, required swift action.

At a conference in New York a few years before, David Horvath of the University of Louisville had demonstrated a method of videotaping glass plate negatives as a temporary
method of displaying fragile images to researchers. With this demonstration in mind, the society archives staff began to experiment with filming the Rogers negatives. The larger negatives, including 4x5-inch ones, as in this collection, can be filmed full frame, which eased the process. Also, many video cameras (including the one used by the society) have character generators which allow any institutional cataloging codes to be filmed on each image. As a test, approximately 100 images were filmed with their cataloging codes. The results seemed to satisfy demands. The filming could be done quickly, in-house, and at a low cost. In January 1990, society staff decided to begin filming the rest of the collection, and by March 1990, the task was complete.

Steps for Filming 4x5-inch Negatives

1) Select a camera with the ability to reverse polarity (change a negative to a positive picture). The society used a Panasonic WV-3255/8AF Color Video Camera which is an older camera. Some newer video cameras do not have the Negative/Positive reversal feature. It is also important to select a camera which will produce external titles. These are used to provide the identification codes on the filmed negatives. The character generator on the camera used provides for subtitles up to fifteen characters—ample space for an identification code.

2) Place a light table (angled is preferable) on the ground. Create a frame for the negative to be filmed by cutting a 4x5-inch rectangle out of heavy black construction paper, and place it on the light table.

3) Set the camera on a tripod approximately six feet high, and angle down to face the light table.
4) Put a negative in place on the light table and zoom the camera focus in until the image fills the screen.

5) Follow the camera directions for generating the sub-titles and reversing the polarity.

6) Film each negative for five seconds.

7) Continue the same process with next negative. If this sounds relatively easy, that is because it is.

Steps for Filming 35 MM Negatives

Tameron has introduced a new product called "the Photovix," which is available at most photographic supply stores. The Photovix will reverse the polarity of 35 mm negatives and can also be used to film 35 mm transparencies. The process is the same as above, except an additional piece of equipment is needed. A character generator by JVC is available to add the sub-titles.

The decision to videotape the Rogers collection was made after careful consideration of the alternatives. The society compared various methods for providing reference images and long term negative preservation, investigating photo-microfiche, optical disk, laserdisk, contact printing, and making reference and security enlargements. All of these methods have arguments for or against, but the one thing they all had in common was the great expense; the least expensive being contact printing (cost cited above). The photo-microfiche was quoted at $1.95 an image, security prints at $3.50 an image, and laser or optical disk equipment costs were prohibitive. Grants, another route to consider, would have taken too much time, and there seems to be disagreement between the various granting organizations as to the proper reference and preservation procedures. Technology is changing so rapidly that it is
particularly difficult to select a format to provide reference of visual materials.

After studying these different methods, the society decided on none of the above. Choosing to film the images on video tape and make contact preservation copies as time and money allowed was a difficult decision. It is known that the life expectancy of video tape is relatively short (fifteen to twenty years), and each generation video tape reproduction produces a poorer version. Also, videotaping does nothing to preserve the negatives. That cost would still have to be borne somewhere down the line. In addition, video players are sometimes difficult for patrons to use and it can take longer to look at numerous images than using some other formats. Looking at an image at the beginning of a two-hour tape and then fast forwarding to the end of the tape can take several minutes.

The potential benefits outweighed the cost. First, this method can be accomplished quickly. The first series of 8,000 negatives was filmed in three months primarily using student interns and volunteers. Second, the cost is minimal. Video tape recorders and players can be purchased at a small cost, the only other expense being the purchase and duplication of tapes, both of which are reasonable. Cost per image is approximately thirteen cents. Third, even though the video tapes have a short life expectancy, if they are duplicated every ten years, the institution should get forty to sixty years of life out of the first filming. By that time, contact prints or some other more permanent method of reproduction for reference can be employed. Fourth, the process can be done completely in-house. Finally, utilizing this method allowed the society to open a collection without letting patrons handle the originals. The collection would
otherwise have joined a back-log of unprocessed collections.

The final result supports the society’s actions. It took an additional year and a half to complete the written inventory to the collection, though the collection was completely filmed by March of 1990, and the videos were available to the staff of the history center as well as to the public. By the end of 1991, the index was prepared, edited, printed, and ready for use. In the year the collection was available on tape, it was used by a wide number of patrons with nothing but positive feedback. The society has continued to make contact prints from the negatives for preservation and reference purposes. Encouraged by this positive response, the society has since filmed two other large negative collections (and has plans for several other collections) utilizing student and intern labor.

This method is viewed as strictly a temporary one, but it does allow time to examine newer technologies, which become more affordable daily, while new collections are opened for patron use. Large collections of negatives are available for use, and at a reasonable cost, before the move up the technological ladder is made.

Ted Ryan has been Visual Arts Archivist for the Atlanta Historical Society since June 1989.