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Short Subjects: Administration of Photographic Collections: A Bibliographic Essay

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Because the inherent nature of photographic images is self-destructive, those entrusted with their care should know what they have and how to assure the images the longest life possible. Information contained in photographs is just coming into its own as historical documentation, but several helpful books are available on the subject of administration of photographic collections. Many of them can be found in a good library and can serve as a basic resource library for any archival repository.

Images which find their way to repositories can range from 150-year-old processes, such as daguerreotypes and ambrotypes, to the latest process technology has to offer. Since different photographic processes require different
storage and preservation techniques, those dealing with photographic collections must be able to identify the varying types of images. Almost any book on photographic collections includes a guide to process identification. However, one of the best guides is *Collector's Guide to Nineteenth-Century Photographs*.

Written by William B. Welling in 1976, *Collector's Guide* not only describes the processes used in the nineteenth century but, through many photographs, shows actual examples. Identification of other photographica is included in the latter part of the book, including early photographic instructional literature and portfolios. Listings of nineteenth century photographers and photographic societies also can help to identify photographs already in house and to identify potential donors. Welling also advises which images are valuable and which are not.

Until recently photographic storage and conservation has been the almost exclusive domain of photographers and private collectors, so most books do not deal specifically with the concerns of archivists and their repositories. Two which do are *Administration of Photographic Collections*, by Mary Lynn Ritzenthaler, Gerald J. Munoff, and Margery S. Long, and *Collection, Use, and Care of Historical Photographs*, by Robert A. Weinstein and Larry Booth.

Weinstein and Booth offer the reader a step-by-step guide to the collection and care of historical photographs, as well as citing several uses for the images once they are acquired. Case studies give even more insight into what may be encountered when processing a newly acquired photograph collection and how problems may be handled. Since this volume was published in 1977, some of the information has become outdated, such as that on copyright and some cleaning procedures. Still, its simplicity and clarity make it one of the first books that should be consulted when studying the administration of photographic collections.
As part of the Archives and Manuscripts series published by the Society of American Archivists, Ritzenthaler’s *Administration of Photographic Collections* goes even farther into the real world of archives to discuss legal issues, copying, appraisal, arrangement and description, as well as realistic storage procedures, taking into account that more often than not, people have to work in the same environment in which the photographs are housed. Ritzenthaler also offers some alternative preservation techniques from what many authors suggest, again taking into consideration some of the compromises which must be made in the real world. If an archivist reads only one book on the administration of photographic collections, this should be it.

One of the major problems facing the archivist when confronted with a photographic collection is preparing it for storage and use. Photographs often arrive faded, dirty, cracked, and bug-ridden. They may require anything from preservation, or prevention of further deterioration, to conservation and restoration, in which the conservator attempts to return the photograph to its original condition.

Companies such as Kodak and Time-Life have published several manuals on the subject of care and conservation which deal with cleaning and repairing procedures. *Conservation of Photographs*, published in 1985 by the Eastman Kodak Company, offers the experienced conservator some procedures for archival processing of prints and chemical restoration of photographs. However, this manual is not for the average archivist, as the numerous disclaimers attest, unless he wants to get an appreciation of the difficulty a conservator faces in restoring photographs. In fact, most of it can be understood only by those with a thorough understanding of photographic chemistry. And while *Conservation of Photographs* also includes chapters on collection, storage, and early processes, the information contained in them can be obtained elsewhere.
Caring for Photographs, published in 1972 by Time-Life, falls into the same category as Kodak’s manual. However, it is more easily understood because of the step-by-step photographs which illustrate the procedure narrative. Before and after shots are also helpful in showing just what conservation can do to restore a photograph to its original condition. A section on storage, while intended for the working photographer, is helpful in terms of understanding which materials are safe. Again, this information can be found in other sources.

One such source is The Life of A Photograph. By Laurence E. Keefe, Jr. and Dennis Inch, this book provides more for the archivist than the name implies. Although the authors did not write it for one specific audience, archivists can extract what is appropriate to their work and disregard the rest. The book starts with archival processing of negatives and prints, but most of its content deals with matting, mounting, framing, and exhibiting photographs. Anyone whose collection is to the point where an exhibition can be planned should consult The Life of A Photograph to ensure that proper lighting and security measures are taken and that safe materials are used, as well as taking advantage of other useful tips the authors provide.

Chemically safe materials are a major concern of Keefe and Inch. A section on storage delves beyond shelves and cabinets into boxes and envelopes, each type of which gets its own section heading for easy reference. Another plus for Keefe and Inch is the book’s last section: Inspecting and Reframing Old Prints. Coming immediately behind Old and Antique Photographs, it gives three case studies of seemingly well-kept prints, which, once removed from their frames, were found to be in varying degrees of deterioration. In each case, the authors show through photographs and narrative how each photograph was treated and reframed so that the problem would be arrested before it worsened.
For those who do not wish to read volume after volume on the administration of photographic collections, many short articles have been published in journals and books, ranging from those geared toward photographers to those geared toward archivists. Professional journals such as *The American Archivist* or *Special Libraries* or specialized ones such as the *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation, Photographic Science and Engineering, Picturescope*, or *Technology and Conservation* can supply information about specific issues of concern. The American National Standards Institute's standards for film are also a valuable source of data.

Most books on the administration of photographic collections deal with nineteenth century and early twentieth century photographs. However, antique images are not the only ones which can be housed in an archives. Modern photographs such as those using the various color processes and both color and black and white processes using resin coated paper present even more challenges to those faced with assuring their permanence than do antique photographs.

An overview of more modern processes, especially color, was written by Bruce Pinkard in *The Photographer's Bible*. Most helpful under his entry "Archival Processing, Storage, and Presentation" are the charts listing a summary of archival practice and archival qualities of color photographs.

Once a photographic collection has been established and its existence assured as well as possible through preservation, conservation and storage, thought should be given to a disaster preparedness plan, part of which involves recovery of damaged records. Real horror stories exist of photographic collections that have been threatened or destroyed by natural or manmade disasters. Especially detrimental to photographic collections is contact with water. The water solubility of some photographic emulsions presents a nearly
impossible task to someone trying to salvage water-damaged photographs. Several of the books listed discuss this important issue.

The information provided by these sources is by no means exhaustive. Techniques and practices for the administration of photographic collections continually evolve as more is learned about the nature of photographs. And, as historians and others learn to glean the information photographs provide, it will become even more vital that they are afforded as much archival attention as are written records.


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NEWS REELS

The Mississippi Department of Archives and History has been awarded a $5,000 grant from the Unitarian Universalist Association for the conservation of the papers of Judith Sargent Murray, an early advocate of female rights. The National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) is funding both the microfilming of the Murray papers and microfilming of selected Mississippi newspapers that are in danger of deterioration. The newspaper portion of the grant is $26,317.

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Preservation Day was held 26 April 1988 on the steps of the Old Capitol in Tallahassee, Florida. Highlights of the day's activities included a legislative briefing session and a reception honoring F. Blair Reeves of the University of Florida for his years of service to the cause of historic preservation.

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