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Written in Light: Creating Access to Photographic Collections

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Written in Light: Creating Access to Photographic Collections

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The value in photographs is noted "in our culture because they are inexpensive, easy to acquire, and serve as accurate, detailed records of our environment and activities" (Schmidle, 1996). But, many challenges are presented to the archivist and librarian by the discovered or donated collection of photographs because in their abundance and variety, they can surpass all other forms of information housed in institutions. For a university archives, holdings include photographs culled from manuscript collections, from individual photographers and alumni, but the majority come from in-house production. For the librarian, the provenance of the photographs will be as varied as the images themselves. This article seeks to answer the question: What are we going to do with these file cabinets of photographs? Solutions and examples of how to deal with these are quite wide-ranging. This paper will review how an archivist and a photograph librarian/curator in a special collections department, are adapting cataloging strategies to meet the demands of researchers in the digital age, while foregoing item level processing and reducing cataloging time. The article also reviews familiar obstacles and alternatives in providing access to these collections.

A key element in answering this question was the examination of best practices on how to make multitudes of images available for general access through the Internet. The authors found that by using a digital resource management tool (PastPerfect) to digitize and document collections, and by paring down item level description, that more access was achieved. We also show how user input and knowledge can help to make these collections even more valuable. We had rich collections that we wanted to share and knew if access is not handled correctly, these materials will join the many already "hidden collections" contained in our libraries and archives. This "problem" of hidden collections is one of the oldest and most vexing in modern archives and libraries. Unprocessed and under processed back¬logs of special collections are, for all intents and purposes, unavailable and often unknown to scholars. They are demoralizing and frustrating to librarians and archivists. They prevent us from realizing to the full¬est possible extent our professional commitments to public service, to teaching, and to outreach" (Jones, 85).

The University Archivist first became aware of photograph cataloging while working at the Kansas State Historical Society (KSHS). In the KSHS collections, there were many file cabinets filled with photographs. The system was locally based and used the library's specialized county cutter system developed for books. The county photographs received an alpha-numeric, e.g. A3 = Allen County, P1= Pawnee County. The photographs were then further subdivided by alpha-numeric codes indicating towns and subjects, such as schools, homes, banks, and churches. Moving on to East Carolina University (ECU), the Archivist found a spreadsheet was created to describe images at the item level.   Every photo, slide and negative received a unique number. Photos were boxed by subjects and negatives/slides were boxed in numeric order. The spreadsheet included these fields: photo number, negative number, description, photographer, date, size, number of copies, and subjects. Using the KSHS system as a guide, ECU photos were regrouped into a system of twelve series: Views, Buildings & Structures, Portraits, Groups & Associations, Athletics, Events, Department, Fundraising, Logos & Symbols, Collections, and Non-ECU Images. These series were further subdivided using alpha-numeric codes to indicate buildings, fraternities, and individuals. Some subject groups were eliminated such as "snow" and "animals." Snow images were added to the most relevant series, and the term "snow" was moved into the database system as a subject heading.

The spreadsheet was reconfigured into a database wherein the subject and photographer fields were moved into new tables in order to become repeatable and searchable fields. New call number fields were added to reflect the levels of the new series/subseries system.   Item level descriptions continued to be created. Incoming photographs were no longer automatically divided by subject.   They were evaluated as collections, and wherever possible, kept together as organized by the photographer or collector. With the aid of ECU Library Systems programmers, the University Archivist created a live, online searchable, photograph database: http://media.lib.ecu.edu/archives/photo_search.cfm.   The entire cataloging system is outlined on the photograph collection website: http://www.ecu.edu/cs-lib/archives/photocat.cfm. Digitization was researcher driven, and an attempt was made to have representative images for each series. Whenever images were scanned, thumbnails were added to the online database. The digital copies were maintained on a server at various sizes so the originals are not subjected to multiple scanning.

At Western Kentucky University (WKU), building upon these previous experiences, the Archivist was able to further refine a cataloging system. The WKU archives

image collection was arranged in an alphabetical subject system: buildings, people, events, etc. There are also large collections created by Athletic Media Relations and University Public Relations that are housed separately, in addition to photographs found in departmental collections. Images, regardless of format, were placed in folders containing no more than 10 images each. There were many folders, especially for individual people with a single image. Each image in a folder was assigned the folder number. Access was gained through a set of photocopies arranged in alphabetical order and duplicated in a variety of subjects as necessary, which were placed in binders in the centralized reading room. Digitized images were placed on the server with a database describing individual images. Finally, with the implementation of PastPerfect, these images were given a unique cataloging number.

This software provides four components: archives, photograph, library, and objects for collection management. The ECU-style photo collection series and sub-series systems were modified to a numeric system and placed in the archives module. Container lists were created for each series or sub-series. These lists include names of individuals, subject headings, organizations, and other descriptive terms. Additionally, finding aids are generated from the PastPerfect database and posted in the university's institutional repository (TopSCHOLAR) wherein people can search across all finding aids (http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/).

Negatives and slides are being pulled from the file cabinets, assigned unique numbers, and placed in protective binders in a separate location. They are described in the series, subseries in which they belong. Oversized images are handled in a similar fashion. New individual photo collections are no longer being pulled apart and put into the alphabetical subject system. They are treated as a collection of papers with provenance and filing systems preserved. This speeds the processing of incoming photographs such as the Athletic Media Relations photo collection. This collection was organized by date and subdivided by sport when it arrived and the photos are housed in boxes and folders. The folder list has been duplicated in PastPerfect. Opposing teams and individuals are listed when that information is available. The University Public Relations photographs were transferred with box and folder lists and have been added to the PastPerfect database to facilitate access.

Descriptions of individual digitized images were placed in the PastPerfect photograph module along with thumbnails of the images. The digital files were renumbered to match the originals, e.g. images scanned from Folder 100 became F100-1, F100-2, F100-3, etc. PastPerfect allows for multiple images to be added to an individual record. As 35-millimeter negatives are scanned, they are attached to a single photograph record in the database.

New digitization and processing is researcher driven. As patrons look for images, they are scanned and the photocopies pulled from the binders. These are sent to WKU Archives, where the images are pulled, evaluated and

assigned to a series and/or subseries, and information entered into the archives module of PastPerfect. The images to be digitized are renumbered and item level descriptions are added to the photograph module. Again, incoming collections are being evaluated according to creator. Where images are found within existing archives collections, a photograph series is created and the photos and papers are linked through the allied materials field in the database. This aids in capturing the context while caring for different formats. Additionally, there has been an excellent response to the feedback feature in PastPerfect, as alumni, faculty/staff and students, who live in the area or across the country look at the images and provide excellent identification or information that we would not have had otherwise. The entire cataloging system is outlined on the photograph collection website: http://www.wku.edu/library/archvie/pc.php. Thus, institutional archives at WKU provide a sense of history and unity for both the university and community.

In addition to the WKU Archives photo collection, there is a larger community based photograph collection housed in the Special Collections Library/Kentucky Library Research Collections (KLRC) area. The collection holds items that represent a timeline of photographic history with daguerreotypes/ambrotypes, tintypes, glass plate negatives, stereo cards, cabinet photographs/carte-de-visites, black and white/color film negatives and slides, and some digital image files. For the photographs found in the Special Collections Library, the librarian began with a triage system that sampled the best of the collection. The most frequently requested, (usually of local interest) and those materials that are high research/reference value driven are among the first chosen for PastPerfect cataloging. The librarian also uses criteria such as the age, uniqueness, preservation problems, and the historical significance of the images to evaluate them for digitization and cataloging. Artificial but logical collections are created in many instances by user-generated contexts, family or subjects groups and arranged for patron convenience and retrieval. Consequently, these photographs may be of the same person or subject and only representative images are added to the online component of PastPerfect, but excellent, detailed descriptions, keywords and identifications are provided. The librarian also donates to other libraries, archives and societies, what may be excellent photographs, but that do not fit in the scope of WKU Libraries' collection policy.

An assessment by the librarian can quickly identify duplicates that may need weeding/deaccessioning, but it also provides the opportunity to find those photographs that should be retained. Boxes of unidentified images, that do not contain names, dates, events or even landmarks can be discarded because "stripped of its original context, an old photograph is reduced to mere curiosity" (Schmidle, 1996). The author is also experimenting with the idea of using existing paper finding aids, such as spreadsheets or scanned materials, and saving them to PDF files for inclusion in the institutional repository. This can then be linked to initial catalog records that are created in PastPerfect. Examples and templates for this can be found at

http://clir.pacscl.org/2012/03/19/excel-to-xml-the-spreadsheet-from-heaven/.

By using the PastPerfect system, the above methods and procedures, and adapting/modifying the strategies outlined, the authors have found that they are "plowing" instead of "plodding" through the backlog of photographs and thus have become better stewards of the photographs in their collections.

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