

AN EFFECTIVE PHOTOGRAPHIC ARCHIVES

by

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While the acquisition of negatives and pictures can be exciting and quite romantic, there is a great deal of just plain slugging to put all your material into an active useful file. An investigation into various systems of filing and storing revealed a great diversity of methods, many of which are very complicated and in my opinion virtually useless. I tried many experiments and eventually came to the conclusion that a straight-forward numbering system was the most practical. As I receive a negative it receives a number, consecutive to the one before it and these negatives do not necessarily have any relationship to each other although sometimes a related group comes in together. This number identifies that negative and subsequent prints for all time. Negatives are stored in filing drawers or boxes each individually sleeved, the sleeve carrying the number of the negative and other information useful and pertinent to that negative. Negatives come in all sizes - from 20" x 24" glass plates to kits of 8 mm. movie film, so it is impractical to try to fit sizes. I use 3 sizes of envelope, each larger than the negative it holds. This allows the numbered corners to be flipped and quick isolation of a particular number is easy. Negatives should be kept reasonably dry and in the dark. One of the most harmful conditions is fluctuation in moisture content. Under humid conditions an easy and economical control is to use silica gel - available from a professional supply house. Glass plates are difficult to handle and must be treated with tender, loving care. Remember, as glass gets older, it becomes increasingly brittle. Keep finger prints off - they contain acid and can do irreparable harm. The Kodak Co. puts out Advanced Data sheets periodically and a letter to them puts you on their mailing list.

I make it a practice to standardize the size of prints regardless of negative size. The prints are 8" x 10" fused together in pairs and looseleaf bound; that is, two prints sandwiching a piece of mounting tissue and put through a hot press, cut to size and punched to fit a special looseleaf binder. This method may appear to be expensive, but when you consider the durability, safety, and the useful reference tool this album of prints becomes, the cost is secondary. I can report that this method is received with delight by everyone who has had to refer to our albums. The looseleaf albums are numbered and each contains 100 prints. Thousands of

prints may be shelved in a very small space and the uniformity makes working with the system a pleasure. All prints are put through a special Archival wash developed for the Library of Congress, and it prevents continuing chemical action that yellows or fades the print. You have all seen prints that have turned yellow or that have faded.

We now have a properly-housed group of negatives and a quantity of easy-to-read 8" x 10" prints numbered alike. As we have to be able to find any subject that may be asked for, be it "Horse-drawn vehicles" or "Types of fencing used by settlers", a special list of subject headings has been prepared based on the requirements of the area and the subject content of B.C. pictures. These headings conform to the standard sources of subject headings - Sears, Dewey, etc., with necessary improvisations and with the built-in provision for adding new ones as necessary without upsetting the main file. Each area and in fact each town will need subject headings peculiar to its own needs. The town may be a religious settlement, a ghost town, or a company town and each will have some subject content that exists for them alone.

Studying a picture, we catalogue it by subject, area, people, buildings, data, etc. One picture may have as many as 20 subject index cards - these eventually wind up in an alphabetical master file. I maintain two other files using the same type of card. The first is by date so that a time-oriented development study of the area can be made. This file also supplements the "Information File" which we will discuss in a few minutes. The second file is merely an acquisition list by negative number. The cards are 3" x 5" and each card carries the negative number, photographer if known, donor, date, and a general description of the picture. I know this sounds complicated, but in use it is simplicity itself and precludes a lot of pitfalls that open up with more complex systems. I have sample cards of all types used, which you may see at your leisure.

One of the difficulties you will be faced with is the picture about which you have no information at all. All you know is that it was taken in your town and deserves a place in your files. Identification and dating can be very difficult, but it can be done within reasonable limits and the tools for this are street maps, directories, newspapers, published chronologies, old-timers and your "Information File".

The Information File is a simple card file recording facts and you keep adding facts as you acquire them. For example - Jones Building - built 1907 - 3rd floor added 1910, burnt down 1915, replaced by Globe Theater. Or Chester St. changed to Main St. 1922. Or, Rule-of-the-Road changed Left-to-Right, Jan. 1922.

Another method I have used both for picture identification and public relations is to make 35 m.m. slides of your pictures and give a slide talk to an interested group. Copying pictures is not difficult. Some fine books and pamphlets are available to guide you. You need a 35 mm. camera, a close-up lens, light, film and an exposure meter. I use color film and copy from the prints and by using warm lights (3200 deg. Kelvin), I can achieve an overall gold tone from black and white prints that projects beautifully and gives the appearance of an old print on the screen. On one occasion I gave a talk in Richmond. I showed some old pictures that created quite a stir among the old-timers present and not only did I get pictures located and dated, but I even got the names of some of the horses and cows on various farms! It is possible to make slides for projection from negatives using a light-box of ordinary black and white film. There is also a reversal film made for making slides from pictures, but I like using color film because you can vary the effects and occasionally throw in a slide of an early painting in full colour.

As time goes by, it is surprising how much information will continue to pile up and if you have set up files, the information can always be recorded.

So far we have been dealing with negatives, but many times your acquisition is an old print. These should be handled in a manner similar to negatives, but with an additional step. Your original print should be copied and your file print or album print made from the copy negative. This original print should then be safeguarded in a file so that you have an authentic source for your copy. Your file cards should indicate that this is a copy negative and also list the "Print number". At this time, I should mention that a professional photographer can make a very good negative from a faded print.

If the print has been lent to you for copying, be sure to record the name of the lender and the fact that there is no original in your files.

Incidentally, I have found that many persons let you keep the original providing they receive a copy print of good quality.

Remember that five seconds after a picture has been taken, it becomes an historical record - so there must always be room for contemporary material.

The old pictures you are saving were fresh and topical a few years ago. I am now in the process of plotting a map of the City of Vancouver, pin-pointing certain locations, and from these locations, a series of pictures will be taken annually.

In closing, let me remind you that the camera has been around for most of B.C.'s history and it would be a great shame if we, the people of B.C. who are interested in preserving the record of our development, should neglect the pictorial record of our growth and development.

The beauty of a photographic archives is that anyone can make use of it - children, adults, professional types, etc., and each will be satisfied as he reads into a picture that which meets his requirements. You can literally satisfy all your customers.

Establishing a collection is no more than work. Not that you haven't enough to do as it is, but a little time devoted now and then and it is amazing how quickly a small collection tends to develop. However, you must keep on top of it because as material accumulates, it tends to compound itself and unless there is some order to a collection, it diminishes in value. Any museum technician can at least roughly categorize and subject index the contents of a picture. Subtle social significances, such as the number of orientals in a work gang or the length of skirts can be left to the researcher.

Keep a display of photos at all times and periodically create a large display. A by-product of our collection is a series of postcards which are saleable and spread the word that the collection exists.

Remember the charm of an old print is universal.- both young and old are reached and a very beneficial rapport can be established that will benefit the museum in all ways.

(This is the second part of an article which appeared in the October 1968 issue of Museum Round-Up, published by the B. C. Museums Assoc. Ed.)

ARCHIVAL TRAINING

The University of New Brunswick, Fredericton, will offer a post graduate seminar in Archives Administration extending over the academic year 1969-70. The syllabus will cover the history and principles of archives administration as practised in Europe and North America, including a study of individual repositories, their problems and growth; the study of records in relation to the administrative structures that created them; the principles of modern records management.

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