

# Some Reference Problems of Picture Collections<sup>1</sup>

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ARCHIVISTS are the middlemen in a very specialized field of communication — the communication of facts and ideas. The written word is one form of communication, speech is another. But there is a great difference between the two. The voice adds or modifies meaning. It determines the impact of the idea on the listener by emphasis or by the lack of it. An idea can be presented in a positive or negative manner with the aid of inflection. There are other types of communication of ideas and facts adding dimensions through the use of form, color, or movement. The sound motion picture in technicolor is, of course, a complete example of these types. The modern archivist deals with all these types: textual documents representing the written word; sound recordings representing the spoken word; the pictorial record and motion picture representing form, movement, and color. With each additional dimension given to the basic fact or idea, additional problems present themselves to the archivist. These problems, however, are balanced by the pleasure that he derives from a more varied medium.

One of the more enjoyable phases of archival work lies in the management of photographic or pictorial records. Not only do such materials stimulate the mind, an advantage that is shared with paper records, but pictorial records also delight the eye. The photograph adds emotional content to the facts shown. Paper records may tell us that a certain Civil War gun factory covered 12,000 square feet of space, employed one hundred men, and produced ten guns per month. We know from pictures that the building looked rather forbidding, but that pickaninnies played in its shade. Washerwomen in voluminous skirts, the laundry basket carried firmly on the head, passed the factory daily on the way to work. The harbor was clearly visible from the windows and the workers

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could watch the activities on the gun boats, the schooners, and the transports.

Maybe these minutiae of daily living do not change the interpretation of history materially, but they give this interpretation a life and a warmth that the mere citation of statistics lacks. Not all pictorial records are so purely auxiliary as this sample might indicate. At the National Archives there are series of photographs taken during the exploration of the West after 1860, documenting systematically the new territory, its possibilities for continental transportation and for agricultural or mining operations. Other photographic and pictorial files document American military activities from the period of the Revolution to the present. There are other types of photographic records of more immediate use, such as construction views of ships and planes, of military installations, of housing projects, that are constantly consulted for reference in new construction activities.

All this sounds as if photographic records were all neatly arranged by large subjects. Nothing could be more misleading. The fact that photographs are records, has not always been appreciated. Where fiscal records were usually retained in proper files because of their legal aspects, where treaties and agreements were carefully preserved for historical and political reference, photographs were in most cases considered interesting but marginal records. If they were beautiful, they found their way frequently into private hands. Not until the period of World War I was the record value of photographs generally recognized. Although many photographic records had been created prior to that time, they were not often preserved in a cohesive form, but were scattered in library corners or miscellaneous reference files. An additional hazard, inherent in the photographic file, added to this diffusion. Negatives without proper identification were kept in one place, usually in a laboratory, while the corresponding prints were located in an office or a library and were not properly coordinated with the negatives. In this manner they soon lost all relation to each other. Often any information concerning the origin of either negatives or prints was thus completely lost, together with a good deal of identifying matter. Many early files were also very miscellaneous in character and represented remnants of various activities of one agency covering many decades. Modern photographic records, on the other hand, are for the most part homogeneous and their content is predictable from the knowledge of the agency's functions. It is one of the most interesting features of the archivist's job, however, to trace the fate of lost

negatives or prints, or to re-establish the remaining photographic records with the proper activity of the creating agency seven or eight decades ago.

The function of an archivist is, of course, not just to preserve and to gloat over the fascinating items under his care. The maintenance of technical records is an expensive business and archival work on photographic and sound records belongs in the luxury class of research facilities. Therefore storage and maintenance activities on these records are not warranted unless they contain research, administrative, and social utility.

It is therefore the duty of the archivist to make these records freely available to the historian, the sociologist, the publicist, the manufacturer and designer, as well as to John and Jane Doe, who want a picture of their grandfather as a Colonel in the Civil War. Archives, whether paper records, sound recordings, still or motion pictures, should be working capital and not inactive currency stuffed in a mattress or buried in a vault. We are not mausoleum attendants but public servants.

The types of reference help requested from technical records personnel are three-fold. These are also multiplied by the dimensions added by these records to the written word.

The first and of course the largest number of requests are subject requests. The field that the custodian of photographs is asked to document is only as large as the universe. The present trend is toward visual transmission of facts, ideas, and points of view. This is clearly discernible in the development of picture magazines such as "Life" and "Look," in the publication of pictorial histories of the United States that are so popular at the present time, as well as in the creation of training and propaganda films that are used so widely in military, industrial, and educational fields. This trend has created within the last decade an enormous demand for photographic records. Reference requests for such records will therefore range all the way from the picture of a propeller shaft on a certain submarine to a general request for pictures illustrating the growth of the social frontier in the Southwest; from a picture showing the earliest use of a "Bell" telephone to a series of comparative pictures showing the progress of soil erosion in Colorado during the last six decades; and from a picture of "sastrugi" ice in the Antarctic to a series of pictures showing the development of surgical practices on battlefields in all wars fought by the United States. This variety of requests is probably received by few institutions outside of the National Archives, and smaller archival depositories

may not have such a problem. But on a smaller or larger scale it is present wherever hopeful searchers expect to find photographs.

The next two types of reference requests received, pertain to the history of the medium and to its technical aspects. Paper records custodians will usually not be asked who made the paper, what type of ink was used, or how this ink got on to the paper. But the technical records custodian has to cope with all these phases relating to the medium with which he works. The most frequent type of request in this category pertains to the history of the medium irrespective of the subject matter. Typical questions asked are: Who was this photographer Brady who took so many Civil War views? Did he work for the Government? Who took the photographs on the Wheeler Expedition in 1871? What other work did O'Sullivan do, and where can I find other photographs made by him? The historical aspects of photography have not been thoroughly developed. One of our few reliable guides in this matter is Robert Taft's *Photography and the American Scene*. But the field covered by Mr. Taft is so large, that many lacunae remain to be filled. Little effort in this field has been made, and custodians of photographs often do not realize the value of photographs as historical objects in themselves. In small historical establishments there are many collections firmly glued in large volumes, so that any information about the photographer, that may be available on the back of the print, is forever lost. The study of the early practitioners of the photographic art is a most rewarding part of the archivist's work.

The third and last type of reference request met by the custodian of photographic records is for technical information. Were these photographs made by wet-plate or dry-plate processes? How long did it take to expose this photograph made in 1865? What was the sepia process used on these early pictures or why are salt prints often lavender in tone? Of course the archivist is often stumped by these questions. At the National Archives we are slowly gathering a body of knowledge on early techniques, so that eventually it will be able to give satisfactory answers.

The criterion of good reference work is "Service." Reference work on technical records differs greatly from reference works in libraries. For the most part only the archivist can find his way through the labyrinth of photographic records and he will therefore do the searching, whereas in libraries the reference work is a process of guiding the searcher to suitable material. Service on

photographic records requires a considerable amount of mental agility on the part of the archivist. Some technical knowledge in the medium is also necessary, as well as a high degree of historical knowledge and integrity.

As an example, let us take a searcher who wishes pictorial documentation of the social development of the frontier. He may come to the archivist with little knowledge of the type of material available to him, although he has in his mind an "ideal picture" of what he wants. He is also unacquainted with the medium and does not know what will be suitable for best effect in his publication. The archivist must first be able to understand thoroughly the searcher's thesis with all its minute ramifications. He also must understand clearly whether factual documentation or interpretive treatment is desired. The archivist must then select the records for subject matter, for ideological slant, and at the same time come as close to the "mental image" furnished by the searcher as it is possible to do. It is just in this matter of selection that the mental agility of the archivist enters into the search. In technical records divisions at the National Archives where *all* the pertinent records of *all* agencies are deposited, the number of items and even the number of files is so immense and their character so varied, that no detailed and accurate description exists. The cataloging of photographs is possible only with small and select series. For large bodies of photographs, cataloging is much too expensive and time-consuming. The subject content of many photographs is so rich, that an excessive amount of cross-references would be necessary to do them justice. The number of persons needed to catalog the million and a half pictures in the National Archives would surely form one of those famous lines, so dear to statisticians, stretching from Quebec to Washington. The archivist must therefore do without a catalog. He must, in pursuing the search on the social frontier which we are using as an example, look under agricultural records for early farming machinery and sod houses, under Navy records for vessels plying the Western coast, under Army records for corduroy roads and frontier posts, and under Interior Department records for pictures of land claims shacks. The archivist will have to visualize in how many ways Federal Government activities may have touched on this phase of the search and how these activities shifted from one Government agency to another in different periods of our history. He must know, for example, that exploration records for the period prior to the 1870's will be found in the records of the Corps of Engineers and the Navy Department but that for similar explora-

tions in a later period he must also consult the records of the Interior Department.

Now that the archivist's mental agility is — I hope — amply demonstrated, it is necessary to return to the search in question. After the selection of the best views is completed, the reference person must decide which of these pictures will reproduce well and tell the story best; whether cropping is indicated, or whether special methods of reproduction, such as the use of filters, may make a faded photograph usable.

Then follows one of the most important tasks of archival reference. The picture must be provided with historically adequate and correct identification. The searcher is apt to place infinite trust in the information provided by the archivist. The data given on early pictorial and photographic records are often sketchy and sometimes wrong. Some research is frequently necessary to date the photograph from internal evidence, to identify personalities from printed or manuscript sources, or to determine definitely the location of a fort or settlement with the help of early maps or other descriptive materials. It has happened that misleading photographs have been included in scholarly volumes, the pictures not being of the time or the locality described in the captions. The inclusion of such photographs will throw doubt on the veracity or the thoroughness of the research contained in the publication. It is the duty of the custodian of photographic records to keep the searcher from such pitfalls. The layman does not have the pictorial knowledge to avoid them without assistance.

Considering the three types of reference requests discussed previously and the comprehensive service needed to answer such requests, it seems absolutely necessary that a large body of reference tools should be available to the archivist. There should be lists, indexes, and catalogs of our own holdings as well as of the holdings in other archival agencies and libraries. There is need for historical and technical books on photography as well as reference books on innumerable subjects which the archivist can use for background research. The sad fact is, as you all know, that few of these tools exist.

Some of the difficulties of cataloging large bodies of photographs have been pointed out. The same difficulties hold true for indexes and lists. Such as are found occasionally are for small specific bodies of photographs and are an exception rather than the rule. As for historical books on photography — these for the most part have not been written.



What would the custodian of photographic records like to have, or, let us say, settle for? He would first like to have control over his own holdings. If lack of time and personnel prevents the preparation of catalogs and detailed indexes, at least checklists of photographic series might be feasible. He would also like to know something about the character of "live" files, now in existence in Government agencies. Within the last two decades the development of information programs in all major Government agencies has resulted in the retention of much historical material by those agencies. The contents of these historical files should be known to the archivist. At the present time such knowledge can be gained only through the archivist's own curiosity and on his own initiative. More should also be known about the pictorial holdings in county and state libraries, and in historical or archival institutions. Often collections in these institutions are small and varied and their diversity discourages the custodian or the librarian from preparing descriptions. There should be no reason for hesitancy where homogeneous subject collections have been assembled such as pictures of the cattle industry, the shipping industry, or the railroad industry. Finally, information on photo-historical material should be made available. We should be able to piece together the location of photographs made by certain early photographers, or to gather data on early photographic activities in certain regions. All this information is in our individual possession, but no effort has been made to share it with others by means of publication.

There are several reasons for this lack of interchange. We all, like Ko-Ko, the High Executioner in the "Mikado," *"have a little list."* But many of these lists never see the light of day. Many librarians and archivists suffer from an excess of conscientiousness. They find it difficult to handle the listing of photographs or photographic data to their complete satisfaction and according to the highest standard of library and archives training. But we are faced with such a drought of reference aids that I firmly believe that we should surrender the ideal and lower our standards to the practical.

Another reason for the lack of information is one that is found in many new fields. This is the reluctance to give to our more indolent colleagues knowledge that has been gathered with much difficulty and personal effort. We think of such information as our professional stock-in-trade. If we all pooled our little fragments of information, however, we would soon receive more in return than we individually contributed. In pooling our information, we would also find out which fields were still *terrae incognitae* and we

could then concentrate our combined efforts toward the unknown, instead of duplicating ineffectively our own individual research.

One handicap to publication, however, is not of our own making. The fact is, that technical records personnel are usually among the first to suffer from budgetary retrenchments or from chronic financial anemia. The reason for this is two fold. Many of the administrators in Government, business, library, and archival institutions, are still not fully convinced of the permanent value of technical records. They consider them "Johnny-come-latelies" and not on par with good "sound" paper documents. Therefore, when the administrator is faced with a budget cut, he will curtail those activities that he considers marginal. The second motivation for keeping down activities on technical records is that their maintenance is expensive and involves laboratory equipment, technical personnel, and special problems of storage and safety. Therefore work on technical records is so concentrated that the archivist has to "double in brass" and see to maintenance, safety, and special technical processes, and therefore rarely has the leisure and the concentration necessary for descriptive materials or for publication.

The last deterrent to publication for many of us has been the lack of an outlet. Library publications do not reach many of us in the archival field and the reverse is probably true. But it occurs to me that we might find a small forum in the News Notes section of *The American Archivist*. In these News Notes there already have been occasional nuggets of information on special holdings in our field. The format of the News Notes is not suitable for long lists, but it is adequate for much general descriptive information. This has not been discussed with the editors, but it is certain that they would not deny us some space for our specific needs.

In conclusion, it seems appropriate to repeat briefly what was said in the beginning. Technical records present their own problems; these are lack of cohesion, lack of reference tools, and lack of background information pertaining to them. Yet they repay our efforts with pleasures peculiar to them, and their obscurities give us a chance to play Sherlock Holmes to a greater degree than other archivists enjoy.

"Quick, Watson, the hand lens."