

Handling Photographs in the LDS Church Archives

MAX J. EVANS

THE PHOTOGRAPHIC COLLECTIONS held by the Library-Archives of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints consist of approximately 100,000 items in about 700 separate collections. This vast resource, which is used to document and illustrate the story of the Mormon Church and its people, poses problems of arranging, describing, cataloging, use, and preservation. These problems have been attacked in a comprehensive system, described below, which might find a place in other repositories with large collections of photographs.

The objective of the system is to provide a low-cost method of making the photographs easily available to research, while, at the same time, eliminating excessive handling of the archival prints.

A two-pronged approach is used: first, a finding aid system, based heavily on archival practices, but using, as well, library cataloging techniques; and second, a miniature visual shelf list, which serves as a surrogate for the archival print, the use of which reduces the handling of the original.

The finding aids are a reflection of the arrangement of the photographs. The photographs are arranged by collection. The term "collection" is applied to photographs in the same way it is applied to manuscripts or papers. A collection may be either a body of photographs having a common source, usually a photographer or collector; or an artificial accumulation devoted to a common theme. The principle of provenance is applied to photographs, whenever possible, for the same reasons it is applied to records and papers. Many of the collections are the work of pioneer Utah photographers, or of twentieth-century LDS Church administrative departments. Each individual photograph, in addition to its informational and illustrative value, becomes more important by its context. Since all of the photographs are in collections, the collection level is the fundamental level at which photographs are described. A set of catalog cards is made for each collection, with entries for photographer, collector, and subjects. These cards are interfiled in a dictionary card catalog with entries for archival and manuscript material. In many cases the card adequately describes the collection; in others, additional finding aids are required. The catalog card, then, refers the user to a register or calendar, which lists the photographs folder-by-folder or item-by-item as appropriate. In some few cases, individual items within collections are separately cataloged with analytical cards. And, in addition to the entries in the card catalog, a separate simple portrait index is maintained. It includes entries for people who appear in the photograph, with only their name and the call number. The emphasis, however, is at the collection level;

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the size of the collections precludes extensive item-by-item cataloging. The user is, therefore, required to browse through a collection to find what he may want. Using the visual shelf list allows him to do this relatively easily, and without handling the original prints.

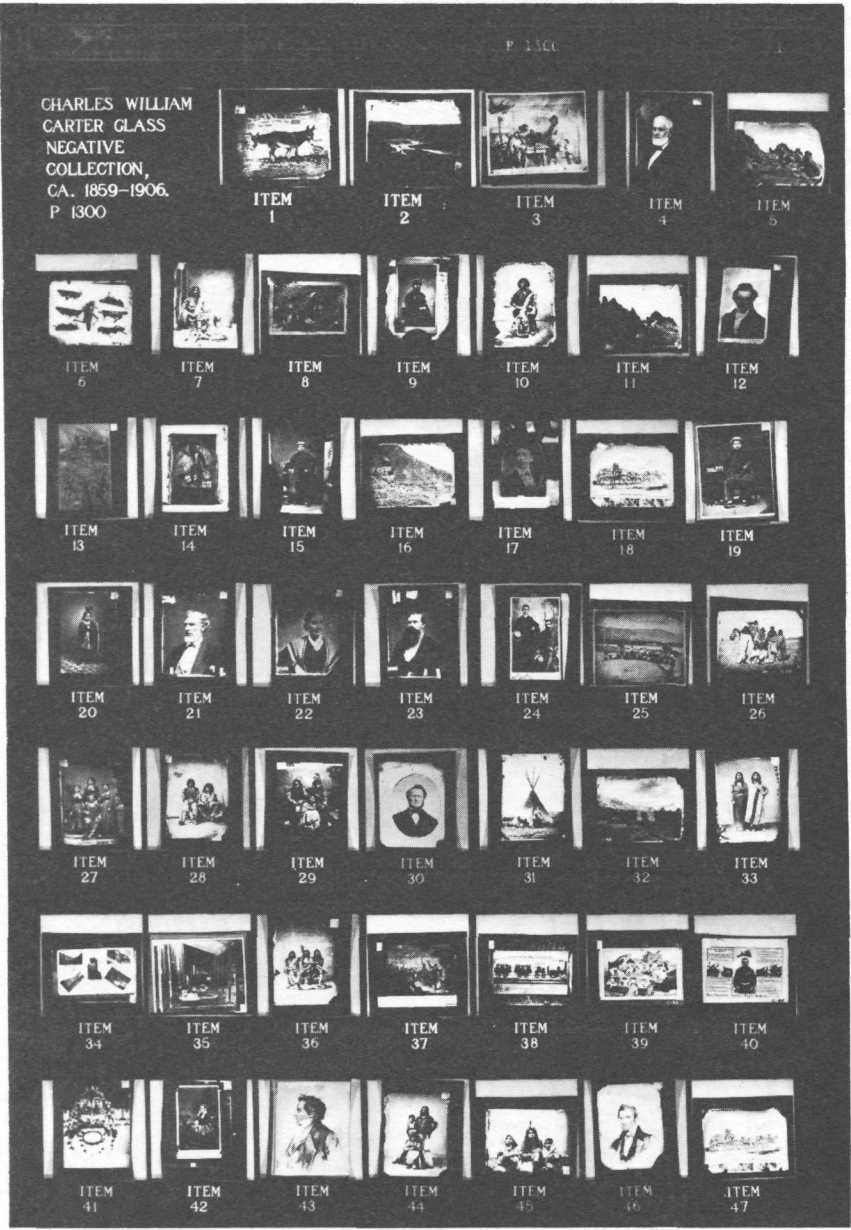
The visual shelf list is created as each processed collection is microfilmed. The film (35mm. negative) is then cut into strips, approximately eight inches in length, and placed into clear plastic jackets. The jackets, which measure 8½ x 11 inches, have seven channels, a strip at the top for titles, and a left hand binding margin. The completed jackets are then contact printed on 8½ x 11 photographic paper. The prints are punched for a three-ring binder and placed in the Archives Search Room, near the card catalog. The jacketed strips are maintained for future reprinting.

The microfilming and film processing is done by the church's Genealogical Society. A low contrast film is used, and is processed to enhance its low contrast characteristics. The titles filmed are limited to a beginning title for each collection, an ending title, and the folder and item number of each photograph on a title board at the bottom of each exposure. The reduction ratio varies for each print, depending on its size, so the image fills each frame. The negatives are jacketed in such a way as to maintain the collections and the items within the collections in numerical order. Since the contact prints are in looseleaf form, collections can be interfiled, and items can be added to existing collections.

The advantages of this system are: first, individual cataloging of each photograph is not required and detailed descriptions of physical characteristics can be avoided, thus allowing the cataloger to give more attention to the intellectual content of the collections; second, an accurate but simple record of holdings is maintained; third, staff time required to retrieve and reshelv photographs is reduced because the researcher asks only for those items which he has selected by using the visual shelf list; fourth unnecessary handling of archival prints is avoided and; fifth, the researcher is aided in his work, well served by having immediate visual access to all collections.


The costs of this system include the costs of cataloging, of microfilming, of the jackets, of personnel to strip and jacket the film, and the cost of the contact prints. The costs of cataloging, compared to the costs that would be required to provide this same level of control and access, are actually reduced by using this system. The other costs are more than offset by the savings. Microfilming (done at cost by an agency of the church) is 11.4¢ per exposure. The jackets cost 16¢ each, or approximately .5¢ per exposure. The labor involved costs less than 1¢ per exposure. And the contact prints cost \$1.00 each, or about 3¢ per exposure. The total cost per photograph in the preparation of the finding aids described above, then, is about 15.9¢.

The objectives of the system have been met. The method is low cost, it provides easy access for research, and it reduces handling of the archival prints. Altogether, we feel that the system is a success.




The visual shelf list reproduced above is from the Charles William Carter Glass Negative Collection in the Church Archives, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. This large collection comprises more than 900 glass negatives.


AMI LORENZO
ANDERSON
PHOTOGRAPH
COLLECTION,
1905-1940.
P 123




FD ITEM
1 1




FD ITEM
1 2




FD ITEM
1 3




FD ITEM
1 4




FD ITEM
1 5




FD ITEM
1 6




FD ITEM
1 7




FD ITEM
1 8




FD ITEM
1 9




FD ITEM
1 10




FD ITEM
1 11




FD ITEM
1 12



FD ITEM
1 13




FD ITEM
1 14




FD ITEM
1 15

AMI LORENZO
ANDERSON
PHOTOGRAPH
COLLECTION,
1905-1940.
P 123 END


WILLIAM WEST
SEEGMILLER
PHOTOGRAPH
COLLECTION,
CA 1942
P 124




FD ITEM
1 1



FD ITEM
1 2




FD ITEM
1 3




FD ITEM
1 4

WILLIAM WEST
SEEGMILLER
PHOTOGRAPH
COLLECTION,
CA 1942
P 124 END


HELEN CARTER
WARR
PHOTOGRAPH
COLLECTION.
P 125




FD ITEM
1 1




FD ITEM
1 2




FD ITEM
1 3




FD ITEM
1 4




FD ITEM
1 5




FD ITEM
1 6




FD ITEM
1 7




FD ITEM
1 8



FD ITEM
1 9



FD ITEM
1 10



FD ITEM
1 11

HELEN CARTER
WARR
PHOTOGRAPH
COLLECTION.
P 125 END

Several small collections can be seen in this visual shelf list from the Church Archives.

INVENTORY:

- 1 "When shall We Three meet again", two burros.
- 2 Point of the mountain, Jordan narrows, Utah.
- 3 Photo of a cartoon.
- 4 John Taylor
- 5 Needle Rocks, Utah, looking south.
- 6 Grasshoppers, 1868.
- 7 Indian.
- 8 "The Religious Vanity Fair." Photo of an anti-Mormon cartoon.

A portion of a page from the inventory of the Carter Collection, reflecting the items in the visual shelf list.

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The numbers in this index to the Carter Collection refer to items in both the shelf list and the inventory.