

## Visual Materials Session Review 2007

Session #: 208

### Session title: When Good Photo Collections Go Bad: Critical Concepts for Understanding and Managing Photo Collections

Number of VM Reporters contributing comments: 4

#### Reporter 1's VM experience level:

Archives Profession: 0-2 years

VM Specialization: Generalist w/ significant VM

#### Reporters 2's VM experience level:

Archives Profession: 10+ years

VM Specialization: Major VM focus

#### Reporters 3's VM experience level:

Archives Profession: 10+ years

VM Specialization: Generalist w/ significant VM

#### Reporters 4's VM experience level:

Archives Profession: 10+ years

VM Specialization: Major VM focus

#### Speakers:

Marcy Flynn, Chair, Silver Image Management

Nicolette Bromberg, University of Washington Libraries - "Preventing Chaos: Concepts Critical to Understanding the Photographic Medium and Managing Collections"

Gina Rappaport, University of Washington Libraries - "When Photo Collections Go Bad: Real-World Examples of Chaos in Collections"

Cari Kreshak, Lassen Volcanic National Park - "Bad Collections Made Good: Providing Reference Before and After the Chaos"

#### Description from program:

The speakers introduce several key concepts about the nature of photographs that facilitate their proper care and management. Panelists discuss special considerations in interpreting and processing photographs, application of these ideas in real-world examples from the Lassen Volcanic National Park processing project, and a user's perspective on issues of access.

#### Summary of session:

Session chair Marcy Flynn opened by making an analogy between work with photo collections in archives and doing the laundry, in that photo archivists are engaged in the process of sorting for preservation concerns, then resorting and reorganizing photos according to either type or provenance.

Nicolette Bromberg similarly introduced the work of photo archivists as consisting of digging, sifting, and comparing. However, she took issue with the often-adopted approach of arranging series in photo collections by format. Arranging by format can be at odds with providing intellectual access to visual materials, and we don't necessarily take this approach with other materials (ie organizing correspondence by the type of stationary, or books by their size). She emphasized the role of photographs as a means of communication, and put responsibility on the archivist for both uncovering and recovering how photos

might communicate, though acknowledged that archivists don't always consider photographs for both their aesthetic and iconic meanings. Bromberg briefly touched on the notion of "photo codes" – identifying patterns in and describing the content of photographic imagery using agreed upon terms (ie the "grip and grin" posed shot with an award or plaque). She also noted the role that the technology used in creating a photograph could play in influencing how we read a photograph ("how you [the photographer] use the machine translates what you [the viewer] get to see").

Identifying and understanding photographs as both object and image was a theme that wove through Bromberg's as well as each of the other presentations, and she spent some time discussing the photograph as artifact: specifically, that photographs have social lives as objects and that their physical condition can offer evidence of the process/technique used to create the image, how the photo circulated or was distributed, its original context, and the histories it has accumulated since.

The role of gestalt in understanding the context of an image was also discussed, with Bromberg emphasizing that photos cannot be understood in decontextualized isolation. Researchers make meaning from photographs by understanding their role in a greater context, whether it is in an album or the order in which the photographs were taken on the roll. In citing Beth Yakel's discussion of the dangers of applying an "idealized version of original order," Gina Rappaport acknowledged the need for accurately describing these contexts in finding aids so that researchers are best able to understand or make sense of the gestalt of a collection of images.

This session challenged archivists to appraise photo collections from the perspective of understanding photos as artifacts and to identify when and how different iterations of the same image may be worth preserving. An object can have just one image, though an image can be carried on many objects – do we really need to hold onto each of these objects, especially when they might perpetuate inferior or corrupted visual information? Rappaport provided the a case study wherein a photo collection at the Lassen Volcanic National Park had been gathered over the years with an "unchecked propagation" of copy images, confusing both park interpretive staff and end users as to the authenticity, usefulness, and context of individual images. As part of the overall processing plan, Rappaport developed an "object genealogy" that would identify and trace the many format iterations of a given image, serving as a guide to appraisal decisions and ensuring accurate descriptions of the photographs.

Cari Kreshak presented from the perspective of NPS interpretive staff, which rarely includes archivists, and admitted to the limitations of her initial goals for the project. As a non-archivist, she had hoped that the processing would result in "fancy photo albums," but is now much more impressed with the accessibility of the searchable and useful collections.

It is important to understand photos – physical vs intellectual. The object is the physical carrier, the image is unique.

Bromberg suggests you sort by subject to facilitate research, not by physicality (for ex. Don't have a series of oversized photos, more important to sort by historical data. Understand the photo as an artifact. Ex. Dags 1840s-50s, negative [edge markings &] notch code for safety or nitrate negs.

Group by date. If the collection has numbers, group by the numbers.

There are some things that can be weeded out. For example, in a large politician's collection, get rid of insignificant the "grin and grabs". ["grip and grin"? : )]

A caption is not a title. Titles aren't written on an item.

Multiple copies can perpetuate inaccurate information. An image could be copied and re-captioned. Important to identify the original – example of Billy the Kid appearing to be left-handed but the image was a tintype which is like a negative, so opposite.

Gestalt – context is important.

3 uses of photos:

1. simple description
2. illustration – costume in 19th C
3. to reveal complex composition

Putting these concepts in practice:

it can be a waste of time and resources to process multiple copies, and example of context: a bunch of snapshots of an area turned out to be a panorama, have photo albums and the negs to those images donated years later.

Making Bad Collections Good – Reference before and after chaos

Easy to underestimate how long it will take and the amount of planning.

Depends on the collection as to the approach you take.

Need to do an assessment and articulate what is needed. Documentation is essential. It's practical good information. Makes a useless collection into an important resourced with improved access.

The session offered several insights in managing photographic collections. The archivist must understand the intellectual content in order to provide the best service to the use of the photographs. It is important to understand the social and economic contexts of the photographs. The archivist should also recover the various levels of meaning within the photograph. The archivist should avoid solely describing the physical form of the photograph or photographs; intellectual component is crucial.

Arranging by physical format has no intellectual value. "Large framed photograph" as part of the description contributes nothing to the user's understanding of the photograph. The term "daguerreotype" does offer more than mere format, as it establishes a date range, a process, and frequently, the use. While the photographer's caption carries important information, it is frequently confusing as the title as the photographer may be intending his/her caption for a specific project or exhibit. Likewise using the photographer's numbering system may easily distort "original order." S/he may have established the numbering late in her/his career for a particular project; the numbering system may therefore be important for understanding that project, but totally misleading as to the "original order" of the entire collection.

The archivist's confusing object and image, the physical item and the intellectual content, often results from forgetting to locate the genuine original and placing too much importance on copies.

### **Session strengths:**

The panelists progressed from theories and approaches to photo collections in archives, to practical experience appraising and managing a chaotic photo collection, to the access perspectives of end-users. Format-wise, this was quite effective, giving attendees the opportunity to follow theoretical threads through to the nitty-gritty of providing access. By including a range of presenters (an academic, a recent graduate, and a non-archivist NPS interpretative staff member), this also gave attendees the chance to think through how decisions made by archivists can better support research and inquiry using photographic collections.

Excellent, easy to follow presentation. I don't get to come to all the SAA annual meetings but I find it very helpful to have these photographic collection/arrangement/assessment sessions. Highly knowledgeable presenters.

The progression from foundations and principals of archival photographs to real-world application in a case study was very strong. Bromberg provided the foundation, with discussion of photography in general and historic photographs as physical objects that provide clues to their origins, uses, and meanings. Her illustrations and slides were also very effective.

**How effectively did the session address the topic as proposed in the program?**

This session more than delivered on the expectations set out by the brief program description. If anything, the description was perhaps too broad, given that there was so much continuity in the presentations, and the several significant themes were addressed consistently – these could have been made more clear in the program description. The progressive nature of the format (from theory to practice to use) was especially helpful in providing attendees with a useful framework from which to understand and evaluate the practical approaches and implications for use.

Very well – first by telling the concept, then show it in practice and how important it is to access. I did think that some things mentioned were not so “black and white.” For instance, an original caption, while not a title, can be used as one and in fact often are. Also arranging like things together is good for preservation. It could be that I misunderstood their meaning though.

**Toward what experience-level was session geared?**

Again, given the format of the presentations, this session appealed to generalists while giving archivists who work primarily with photographic collections enough to chew on. The start to finish case study description of managing a chaotic collection provided practical advice for those confronting similar disorganization in their own collections. The issues raised throughout the presentations, especially the discussions of photographs as both objects and images, provided opportunities for generalists and specialists alike to evaluate their own perspectives on how to provide enhanced access to their photographic holdings.

It could be good for any level. For the beginner, they can learn how to begin and see the importance of planning. To someone with more experience it can strengthen principles you are already familiar with and possibly direct you toward a better approach to your work.

It provided a good foundation for photo novices, but also provided strong real-world examples and illustrations of interest to more experienced audience members.

**What topics (broached or implied) merit further development in future sessions or articles?**

How to build and support context for photographic collections - by routinely arranging photographs by format, archivists may be impeding intellectual access to their content. We could also use further discussion of successful access systems that give users a sense of context for photo collections, including complex collections that may need to be represented as functioning in multiple contexts, and how to take this approach to providing context in addressing photos that are organized as part of a broader, multi-format collection.

A session or article debating approaches to access that integrate item-level with collection- or series-level access points: case studies could include approaches to item-level access in databases, in finding aids, and strategies for providing multi-tiered access to photos in context.

The case study for this session briefly touched on their source research and negotiations with both donors and other repositories in their quest for original photographs, of which they had copy prints or negatives. The issues brought up by assigning source information, copyright, and obtaining both physical and intellectual control over photographic collections could be fleshed out into a future session.

A session or article exploring the potential evidentiary value of copy prints/copy negs – what could these tell researchers about distribution/circulation of images? How, when, and why would retention, organization, and description of copy images be useful?

After seeing this, I wanted to take a class from Nicolette Bromberg. She had very good points to make about assessment that I would appreciate exploring further.