

Out of the Archives

Processing overview and submissions guidelines

By **Jordan Radke**

This column brings to light the world of professional archiving, providing a regular forum to share selections from the Center's collections and tips for maintaining your own materials. Whether you are a photographer, collector, or avid fan, it is important to organize and preserve the materials you create or collect. In this third edition, we discuss the processing work we do at the Center and steps you can take to prepare a collection for donation. Please get in touch with Jordan Radke, jordan@railphoto-art.org, if there are any topics you would like us to cover in the future.

Who we are

The Center's collections, comprising some 200,000 photographs, form the basis of our Railroad Heritage Visual Archive. The team in Madison, Wisconsin, consists of Jordan Radke, Archives Manager, graduate archival intern Maddie Shovers, intern Aviva Gellman, and volunteer John Kelly. We also partner with Lake Forest College, working with Anne Thomason, Archivist, along with graduate archival interns Jim Cascino and Colleen O'Keefe, to process and maintain Center materials housed in the college's Archives & Special Collections in the Donnelley and Lee Library. Scott Lothes, Center president and executive director, and

the Collections & Acquisitions Committee of the board of directors provide oversight.

What we do

In keeping with the Center's mission of preserving and presenting significant images of railroading, with the Railroad Heritage Visual Archive we seek to securely house collections and make their contents accessible. We adhere to established archival principles to ensure safety and accuracy. Our work as archivists includes:

Preservation. One of the Center's main objectives is properly preserving our collections. This includes appropriately caring for and handling our materials by using archival-safe supplies, and providing a controlled environment where our collections are housed.

Processing. Processing materials is a long, sometimes tedious, and detailed endeavor. Organizing a collection appropriately sets up the rest of the processing work that includes any digitization and metadata entry. This work is essential to the long-term care and future accessibility of a collection.

Arrangement and Description. To maintain quick and easy retrieval of our materials, we organize every collection down to its individual items, if possible, given the time and resources available to us.

Accessibility. Finally, the Center will

make sure that users have access to our processed collections. We create detailed finding aids to describe each collection and its contents and frequently share images electronically through our websites and many social media outlets.

Railroad Heritage Visual Archive updates

In our Madison office, Jordan Radke has completed digitizing more than half of the John F. Bjorklund Collection while overseeing acquisition of the J. Parker Lamb Collection. Maddie Shovers has finished processing work on our small collections including the newly donated George R. Jones Collection (see p. 19). John Kelly continues work on the Glenn A. Oestreich Collection. At Lake Forest College, Colleen O'Keefe has finished processing the Ted Rose Collection and will begin working on metadata entry on the Wallace W. Abbey Collection. Photographs from these collections and more are posted weekly to our social media accounts on Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn.

Left: The original housing of the Perry Frank Johnson Collection was in aged, deteriorating, and archivally unsafe photo albums that provided no protective coverings over the prints.

Right: The Johnson Collection after Center staff fully rehoused it with protective plastic sleeves and archival safe clamshell binders.



Jim Cascino graduated from his archives program and recently accepted a professional position at a corporate archive repository. Of his time at the Center, Jim said in an email that it “has been nothing short of amazing, and I have been able to gain so much practical experience from my work.” We appreciate the hard work and dedication he showed while interning for us and we wish him the best of luck.

Archival terms

Like railroading, archiving has its own language. Some terms used in this column appear below, as defined by the Society of American Archivists (SAA). See a full glossary of archival and records terminology at: www2.archivists.org/glossary

Acquisition/Accession. Materials physically and legally transferred to a repository as a unit at a single time. As nouns, acquisition and accession are synonymous. However, the verb accession goes far beyond the sense of acquire, connoting the initial steps of processing by establishing rudimentary physical and intellectual control over the materials by entering brief information about those materials in a register, database, or other log of the repository’s holdings.

Collection Management Policy/ Acquisition Policy. An official statement issued by an archives or manuscript repository identifying the kinds of materials it accepts and the conditions or terms that affect their acquisition. It serves as a basic document for the guidance of archival staff and organizations and persons interested in donating their records or papers.

Donation. Material for which legal title is transferred from one party to another without compensation.

Deed of gift. An agreement transferring title to property without an exchange of monetary compensation. Deeds of gift may be for real, personal, or intellectual property. In archives, deeds of gift frequently take the form of a contract establishing conditions governing the transfer of title to documents and specifying any restrictions on access and use.



The Center’s processing overview

At the Railroad Heritage Visual Archive, a newly acquired collection goes through several phases: *arrangement and description, processing, metadata and finding aid*, and *accessibility*. These phases allow the staff at the Center to track and maintain multiple collections while limiting any backlog of materials. For background, see the first two installments of this column in the Fall 2015 and Winter 2016 issues. PDFs of both columns are available online at: www.railphoto-art.org/ota/

Phase 1: Arrangement and Description

This is the initial planning phase where we get acquainted with the collection and its materials. We begin to organize the collection and create an inventory along with recording any information that can be used

After helping a coal train over the Clinchfield Railroad’s loops in North Carolina, four F-unit diesel locomotives cut away from the train and caboose at Altapass on October 17, 1980. Photograph by John F. Bjorklund, who wrote the location and date on every single one of the 55,000 slides in his collection. The Center is working to digitize metadata as well as the photographs themselves. In the Center’s numbering scheme, this is Bjorklund-41-24-05.

in a finding aid, such as any background about the materials, biographical history of the photographer or artist, records of sales or publication, and relatable search terms.

Questions we address:

- What is in this collection? We want to know the types of materials as well as what railroads, dates, and geographical regions are covered in this collection.
- What is the original order of this collection? Archivists like to keep



Inside the Illinois Central depot at Tolono, Illinois, a local farm lad studies the operator's activities in December 1960. Photograph by J. Parker Lamb, ©2015, Center for Railroad Photography and Art. Lamb-01-032-01

collections preserved as closely as possible to how they receive the collection from the donor.

- What are the main groupings of this collection? Understanding how the photographer/artist organized their collection is important. For example, Fred M. Springer travelled a great deal and grouped his photographs geographically, while John F. Bjorklund grouped his photographs by railroad name, arranged alphabetically.

Keep in mind:

- Maintain the original order when possible and understand a collection's provenance or origin.
- Gain a general overview of a collection.
- Recognize the condition and extent of a collection's materials.

Phase 2: Processing

This phase can involve a lot of legwork, which can be tedious at times, but is essential in the general preservation and accessibility of the collection. Once the collection is organized we can then apply labels to binders and pages while correctly matching up the physical materials with a digital inventory that includes metadata. This is when we will scan and digitize materials, if possible, to maintain a backup digital copy and limit the use of the originals.

Questions we address:

- Are materials in archival safe housing? The Center makes sure that collection materials are in long-term, archival safe storage such as protective plastic sleeves or binders and boxes.
- Can this collection be digitized? To present collections to our audience we want to make sure we can digitize materials with hi-resolution scans suitable for printing or publishing at large sizes.

Keep in mind:

- Use archival safe supplies such as plastic sleeves, polyethylene (PE) and polypropylene (PP), and heavy duty, clamshell D-ring binders for photographic materials.
- Perform cleanup like removing rusty staples or paperclips and replacing them with archival safe fasteners.

Phase 3: Metadata and Finding Aid

Metadata, or data about data, is necessary to fully understand the materials in our collections. At the Center we record detailed metadata that we embed into digitized files. Once we have finished processing a collection, we can create a detailed and cohesive finding aid with a container list. This helps our users understand the scope and content of a collection and comprehend what materials are in it.

Questions we address:

- Is all available metadata recorded? Since we embed metadata into our digital scans of collection materials, we want to make sure that all pertinent metadata is recorded.

- Are there any unique metadata fields attributed to this collection? If there are any unique details the photographer noted, we want to make sure to record them, such as Perry Frank Johnson's meticulous notes on exposure information and weather conditions.
- Is the finding aid available online and beneficial to users? Finding aids provide a go-to summary of collections that give users a comprehensive overview of what the collection contains.

Keep in mind:

- Metadata can include information such as creator, title, description, date, location, and railroad name.
- Finding aids include collection summary, search terms, administrative information, biographical notes, scope and content, and a container list.

Phase 4: Accessibility

In the final phase, we strive to make our collections available to the public and searchable online via finding aids. Throughout the previous phases, the Center attempts to provide online previews of collections as they are processed. Samples from our collections can be found at our website, www.railphoto-art.org, along with our social media accounts on Facebook, Twitter, and Flickr.

Questions we address:

- Can users find our collections online? In order for our users to enjoy our collections, they need to be able to easily find them.
- Where can we make our collections accessible? Making our collections available on a wide variety of platforms ensures that as many people as possible can see them. Important outlets include our website, social media channels, publications, exhibitions, and conference presentations.
- Are the materials in our collections searchable? If users know exactly what they are looking for within collections we need to make sure they can find it.

Keep in mind:

- The Center's usage terms are for educational use only, please contact the Center for other usage requests.
- The Center's copyright notice is: "Photograph by [firstname] [lastname], ©[year], Center for Railroad Photography and Art, www.railphoto-art.org."

Submitting collections to the Center

Many railroad photographers are deeply concerned about finding permanent homes for their work. If you are one of them, you may wish to consider the Center for Railroad Photography & Art, which has an active and selective acquisitions program through our Railroad Heritage Visual Archive. The Center currently cares for photographs, both at our office in Madison, Wisconsin, and at the Archives and Special Collections of our archival partner in Lake Forest, Illinois. The staffs at both have strong histories of professionally archiving photographs, and also of presenting their holdings through publications, exhibitions, and conferences. Our interests span the world and the entire history of railroad photography, from the 1840s to today.

The J. Parker Lamb Collection is a good example of a recent donation to the Center. Lamb donated his collection in 2015 and the Center maintains close contact with him regarding his materials. Lamb and the Center agreed on a processing plan that involved him sending his photography in batches. He performed extensive self-editing of his work and decided to only donate the best photographs from his personal collection. Batch by batch, Lamb is sending his photographs to the Center a few hundred negatives at a time—typically grouped by dates and regions and including several railroads in envelopes along with digital files of corresponding scans that he made himself. For easy matching between the scans and original negatives, Lamb numbers his photographs and includes a caption, with important metadata, on each scan. From there, the Center re-houses the negatives into protective sleeves and archival safe binders, sets up a numbering scheme similar to what we use for other collections, and records the metadata taken from the captions into an Excel spreadsheet.

Because there are so many railroad photographs and because a great deal of specialized and costly work goes into processing photographs professionally, the Center carefully reviews all offers of photography donations before deciding which ones to accept. These tasks are handled by the Collections and Acquisitions Committee of the Center's board of directors. If you would like us to consider adding your collection to our archive, please get in touch with us by sending an email to info@railphoto-art.org. Please describe the characteristics of your collection briefly,



SAL Hamlet train ready for departure at Raleigh station in Aug. 1962.

including, at a minimum:

- Approximate total number of photographs/works of art and the amount of physical space they occupy (one archives box = one linear foot of space)
- Format of materials (slides, negatives, prints, etc.)
- Range of years depicted
- Geographic regions depicted (states, provinces, or countries)
- Railroads depicted
- Distinguishing factors (focus on rolling stock, infrastructure, people, etc.)
- Details about how your collection is currently housed, organized, and documented (if available, send an example)
- If possible, send five sample images as low resolution JPEGs

Before submitting, we recommend that you download a copy of our Collection Management Policy found on our website at www.railphoto-art.org/collections/donations/. It provides valuable, additional information on the kinds of materials we accept along with the conditions or terms that affect their acquisition. Our Collections and Acquisitions Committee reviews all offers very thoroughly. Because the committee

Seaboard Air Line train bound for Hamlet, North Carolina, preparing to depart the Raleigh station on an August night in 1962. Photograph by J. Parker Lamb, whose hi-resolution scan includes a caption line at the bottom. As received by the Center, this was scan no. 20 as well as negative no. 20 in Lamb's third batch of submitted images. For consistency with the overall numbering scheme we use for our collections, the Center has renumbered both the scan and the negative to Lamb-01-069-08, while embedding the caption as metadata.

meets only four times a year, you may not receive a decision from us for three months or so. When we decide that we are not able to accept a collection, we make every effort to suggest other institutions that you might pursue as a home for your work. Once a submission is accepted and ready for an official donation, the Center will provide the donor with a deed of gift form. This form is a legal and binding letter that the donor must read over and sign before any transfer of material is completed. It is important for the Center to lay out our professional processing overview with the public to ensure our audience understands the significance of archiving and the care we put into our collections. It is also advisable for any potential donors to familiarize themselves with archival repositories they deem potential landing spots for their collections.