

# OUT OF THE ARCHIVES

## Metadata: Its importance and how to prioritize

IF YOU HAVE A LARGE COLLECTION of photographs or other materials that currently has little or no labeling, you might be wondering, “Where should I start?” Writing detailed captions is time-consuming, and the thought of doing that for thousands of images can be daunting. But you need not feel overwhelmed. By adding just a few key pieces of information to your images, or even groups of images, you can make your collection vastly more user-friendly and accessible—not just for yourself, but for any potential repository and users in the future.

Two of the most important pieces of information—or metadata—for any image are location and date. These are rarely apparent from the image itself, but vitally important to interpreting and understanding the image. Just adding the basics of city, state, and date is relatively quick and can unlock all sorts of additional information. (Two-letter abbreviations for states and numerical formats for dates, YYYY–MM–DD or similar, are sufficient and help speed the process.)

Consider John F. Bjorklund’s photograph of two Conrail switchers pulling a freight train next to a truss bridge in Toledo, Ohio, on October 15, 1983. We know that because the photographer wrote, “Toledo, Oh.” and “10-15-83” on the cardboard slide mount. This photograph intrigued me because of the interesting trackage, but I did not recognize the exact spot. So I sent a scan to Brian Schmidt, assistant editor at *Trains* magazine and native of northwestern Ohio. Brian wrote back almost immediately to let me know that the view is from Miami Street and the train is coming off the ex-Pennsylvania Railroad and onto the former New York Central, heading toward Toledo’s downtown station. The photographer did not supply any of that information, but because he did make note of the city and state, he left me with a good starting point and fortunately I knew just the person to ask for further details. (Many thanks, Brian!)

Had this slide shown up at the Center’s office with no metadata whatsoever, based on what I know about Conrail’s territory, I would have wrongly guessed the setting was somewhere in the northeastern U.S. I may even have sent the scan to a few people who are experts on railroads in the Northeast, but they likely would not have recognized the location. Had we cast a wide enough net, we may still have pinpointed this spot in Toledo—it would have made for a fun, but laborious scavenger hunt.

We go to great lengths to find out as much as we can about any photograph we publish in print or

use in an exhibition, but with some 200,000 images in our archive, we simply cannot spend that much time on most of them. While Bjorklund did not record everything he could have about this image, he recorded enough so that we could quickly uncover the rest of the story. It serves as another reminder of the effectiveness of his approach: he wrote the railroad, city, state, and date on every single one of the 55,000 slides in his collection. He sometimes included more, like the direction of the train and its name or number, but at a minimum, he always recorded the location and date, as well as the railroad name.

Try to keep the metadata as close as possible to the original, physical image. For slides, write the location and date directly on the mounts. For prints, you can write on the back, but make sure to use a soft pencil, as inks can seep through the paper and hard pencils can leave scratches. Store negatives in envelopes or, better still, clear pages, and record basic metadata on the envelopes or along the margins of the clear pages with archival-safe labels. You can use a separate page or develop a spreadsheet to record additional metadata. For more details on how to do that, see the first installment of this column in *Railroad Heritage* issue no. 42, Fall 2015. All of the “Out of the Archives” columns are available for free on our website by going to [www.railphoto-art.org/collections](http://www.railphoto-art.org/collections) and clicking the “Out of the Archives” tab near the top of the page. You can access the first installment directly at: [www.railphoto-art.org/otal](http://www.railphoto-art.org/otal)

If you have an especially large slide collection with no metadata, you could even start by recording metadata at the “container level.” Rather than trying to write the location and date on every slide, begin by labeling groups of slides with similar metadata. If your collection is arranged chronologically or geographically, you probably have groups of slides from the same place and same day. If they’re stored in metal slide boxes or in clear pages, start by recording metadata for each bin within the box or for each page. Most metal slide boxes are divided into twenty-four or thirty bins, with a sheet of paper inside the lid for reference. Filling in the basic metadata for each bin on that sheet, like “Oregon, July 1988” is a great improvement over no metadata at all.

Brian Schmidt’s quick and detailed response to my inquiry about the image of the switchers led me to send him a few more scans of Bjorklund’s Conrail slides from Ohio. The collection includes several views at Ridgeway, where two Conrail main lines

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### STORY

Scott Lothes

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### PHOTOGRAPHS

Collection of the Center



Above: Westbound Conrail freight train near Vermillion, Ohio, on April 6, 1991. Had the photographer not recorded the location on his slide, this would have been a very difficult photograph to place. Photograph by John F. Bjorklund



Left: Westbound Conrail freight train in Toledo, Ohio, on October 15, 1983. That was all the information provided on the slide by the photographer, but with the help of Brian Schmidt, assistant editor at *Trains* magazine, we learned that the view is from Miami Street, and the train is coming off the ex-Pennsylvania Railroad and onto the former New York Central toward the downtown station. Photograph by John F. Bjorklund



Conrail freight train at Ridgeway, Ohio, on March 21, 1987, where Conrail east-west and north-south lines crossed. This train is turning from eastward to southward to head toward Columbus on the former Toledo & Ohio Central line. Photograph by John F. Bjorklund

crossed at grade. Not being familiar with the area, I was not sure about which track was which, but again, Brian quickly filled in the details. For the Ridgeway photograph shown here, he explained that the train was turning from eastward to southward to head toward Columbus on Conrail's former Toledo & Ohio Central line. He even added that the hi-cube boxcars behind the locomotives were likely carrying auto parts from Marion, Indiana, to the General Motors plant in Moraine, Ohio.

Finally, if your collection already includes the basics of location and date for every image, you may want to consider going back and adding more details, especially to your favorite images. Take it from Schmidt, who reminds us that, "Just because I may recognize a train crossing the diamond in Attica, Ohio, or passing AC tower in Marion, doesn't mean railfans of the future will."

When adding information beyond the basics of location and date, you can still save time and add value to your collection with a strategic approach. Concentrate on details that are not readily apparent from the photograph. Locomotive numbers and railroad names often appear very clearly. If that's the case, writing that information on the slide or the back of the print may not be the best use of your time. Consider instead recording such information as train numbers, names, and directions, or details that could be confused by the information in the photograph—like a train belonging to one railroad operating on tracks belonging to a different railroad. Abbreviations are okay, too, as long as you use them consistently and provide a legend.

Thanks to the information Bjorklund provided and Schmidt's extensive knowledge, we have been able to add more valuable metadata to several Conrail photographs. You can see them and many others at: [www.railphoto-art.org/collections/bjorklund](http://www.railphoto-art.org/collections/bjorklund) They are also available through our Flickr site at: [www.flickr.com/railphotoart/albums](http://www.flickr.com/railphotoart/albums)

### 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](http://www2.archivists.org/glossary)

*Caption.* A short description accompanying an illustration. Information on a folder, file guide, or drawer.

*Container.* A package or housing used to hold materials [such as photographs]; a receptacle. (Notes: Container carries the connotation that the contents can be separated, especially when the materials are in use. A slipcase for a book or a document box is a container. The shell for the tape in a videocassette may be called a housing, but it is not a container.)

*Metadata.* A characterization or description documenting the identification, management, nature, use, or location of information resources (data [such as photographs or other images]).

### Railroad Heritage Visual Archive updates

In our Madison office, Jordan Radke has completed digitizing more than four-fifths of the John F. Bjorklund Collection. Aviva Gellman and John Kelly are digitizing metadata from the collection so we can post more

of it online. Radke continues to work closely with J. Parker Lamb on the transfer of his remarkable black-and-white photography collection to the Center. We just received his fifth batch of images; selections from the first four are available on our website.

Two graduate student interns from the University of Wisconsin–Madison joined us for the summer. Elizabeth Tappy has fully processed the Robert A. Witbeck Collection, which consists of roughly 1,000 large-format, black-and-white negatives featuring steam locomotives throughout the United States in the 1940s and 1950s. Phillip Windsor added more metadata to our Perry Frank Johnson Collection and began processing a recent acquisition that we look forward to announcing next year. After being away for the summer, Maddie Shovers is rejoining us for the fall to continue working on this new collection.

At Lake Forest College, intern Colleen O’Keefe is continuing to work on metadata entry and scanning for the Wallace W. Abbey Collection, with assistance on metadata from former intern Jim Cascino.

Highlights from many of our collections can be viewed at [www.railphoto-art.org](http://www.railphoto-art.org), while selections are posted weekly to our social media accounts on Facebook, Twitter, and Flickr.

#### **About this column and our collection**

“Out of the Archives” 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. Please get in touch with Jordan Radke, [jordan@railphoto-art.org](mailto:jordan@railphoto-art.org), if there are any topics you would like us to cover in the future.

The Center’s Railroad Heritage Visual Archive includes some 200,000 photographs. The team in Madison, Wisconsin, consists of Jordan Radke, archives manager, graduate archival intern Maddie Shovers, intern Aviva Gellman, and volunteer John Kelly. Elizabeth Tappy and Phillip Windsor joined us for the summer as graduate interns. We also partner with Lake Forest College, working with Anne Thomason, archivist, along with graduate archival intern 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.

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 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, 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 share images electronically through our website and many social media outlets.

Central of Georgia Railway freight trains nos. 38 and 29 meeting at Smith’s siding, south of Opelika, Alabama, in March 1954. In his detailed metadata, the photographer noted that he walked up to train no. 38 and began a conversation with the fireman, who invited him into the cab to document the meet from start to finish. Photograph by J. Parker Lamb

