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CHAPTER 19

Organizing and Indexing Photo Collections

Rose Fortier

Historical photo archives or collections can put an organization on the map and make it into a destination for patrons. Conversely, if not well organized and indexed, collections and archives can languish in obscurity and occupy valuable space and resources with no tangible return for the organization.

The Milwaukee Public Library's (MPL) Historic Photo Archives (HPA) contain around thirty thousand historic images; of those images, most are located in the Historic Photo Collection, one of the archives' 45 individual collections. The HPA has evolved over the decades. Various reference librarians have been assigned the archives, and the rotation of responsible parties has left its mark. The challenge created by having many individuals with different backgrounds, priorities, areas of interest, and time to devote to the maintenance of the collection has been mitigated by a strong collection development policy.

Collection Guidelines

The first step in organizing archives is to decide what will be organized. A policy must outline:

- scope of the collection or archives
- how archives fit the institution's stated mission
- types of archival materials that will be included

At MPL, the scope of the photo archives is mostly geographic in nature; the images included in the collections relate to Milwaukee and the immediate surrounding counties. The only exceptions to this rule are found in the smaller, discrete collections in the archives where removing non-Milwaukee images would have meant dismantling individual collections and ruining the context that the collection provides as a whole.

MPL's mission statement, as accessed in February of 2011, states that the library "provides materials, services and facilities for all citizens of Milwaukee and others in order to meet present and future informational needs and raise the level of civilization in Milwaukee." The HPA fits that statement by preserving a visual record of Milwaukee's past and present, ensuring that these images will be around to inform present and future generations of Milwaukeeans about their history. The mission statement ties in directly to the scope of the archives, and it underscores the importance of photo collections to the library and to Milwaukee's citizens.

Another important area of distinction governed by the collection development policy is in the types of materials that are included in the archives. The HPA exists for photographic and visual materials; it seems fairly straightforward that only photographic materials should be included. In practice, that seemingly simple criteria can be easily muddied; only included are original photographs and images in the archives. The types of materials that can be added to the photo archives are:

- photographs of all types: black and white, sepia-toned, rose-toned, cyanotypes, tin-types, etc.
- slides and negatives: glass, celluloid
- prints: etchings, woodcuts, lithographs

Types of materials that are not acceptable for the HPA are:

- reproductions of images that have appeared in publications
- photos from calendars
- ephemera: greeting cards, flyers, brochures, pamphlets, etc.

Even with these guidelines in place, there are still items that fall into a gray area; postcards are included in MPL's collections, though greeting cards are not. Copy prints, where a photographic reproduction has been made of another photograph or image, can be a hard call as well. MPL includes copy prints and negatives even though a compelling argument, according to MPL's own crite-

ria, for their exclusion can be made since they are not original images. In these instances the materials have been added to the archives because they speak to the other two parts of the collection development policy: the archives' scope and how the collection fits the mission statement.

Organization of Collections

After determining what should be included in the photo archives, the next step is to organize in such a way that materials are locatable and retrievable. There are two basic ways of organizing collections and MPL uses both.

The easiest way to organize a collection is by arranging the collection according to its original order. This method is most easily applied to small collections consisting of similar subject matter. This arrangement method also depends on having a collection in which it is possible to discern the original order. Photo albums are an excellent example of the application of this method. Even if the album needs to be dismantled to address preservation issues, it is easy to arrange the photos or pages in the order in which they appeared. Similarly, a box of slides that arrives from the original owner and/or photographer can be arranged to preserve the order in which it arrived at the archives even if the box is replaced. From there it is as simple as labeling the item's container with a unique identifier, often using consecutive numbering and a truncated form of the collection's name or a code.

The application of original order preserves the context that the collection's creator established in developing the collection and can bring a better understanding to the collection as a whole. Original order has its advantages, but it also has drawbacks. "Applying original order also offers a practical advantage, retaining existing filing systems and saving the archivist from having to decide upon and apply a new and artificial structure. Of course, original order can be problematic for the researcher" (Millar 2010, 101).

Another main method used by MPL applies functional order to a collection. This application involves breaking a collection down into a certain order based on specific criteria. Those criteria will typically be subject- or chronology-based. This method works best with large collections containing diverse subject matter and for collections made up from multiple sources. The Historic Photo Collection is an artificial collection that is a match for all three of those instances; it has a little more than twenty thousand images from multiple sources that cover many subject areas.

Natural vs. Artificial Collections

Archives are made up of collections that can take a couple of forms. The first is the natural collection that comes into the archives from one source and is made up of multiple archival materials related through that source. The second is an artificial collection made up of like materials that have been gathered together by the archivist over a period of time, from a variety of sources.

The Historic Photo Collection was originally organized by volunteers under direct supervision. It was decided that the collections should be arranged alphabetically by main subject. A list of 235 main subject headings was developed, and over time another 26 subjects were added. From there, all but the smallest subject areas were broken down into more specific subheadings. Larger subheadings were further split by adding additional identifying characteristics. If that sub-subheading was still fairly sizable, a date range was added. The date chosen to act as a dividing line was 1960. Thus, image headings could be listed as pre-1960, post-1960, or pre/post-1960 (if the year could not be determined). Once the photos had been arranged by subject, they were then arranged within the subject alphabetically and were filed in folders. The folders were labeled with a truncated version of the main subject heading and then were numbered consecutively.

As an example, the subject of airports contained seventeen folders labeled AIRP.1 through AIRP.6. A patron looking for an interior view of Milwaukee's Mitchell Field Airport would need to have folders AIRP.5A-AIRP.5E retrieved. The problem with the system is immediately apparent. How can seventeen folders be labeled AIRP.1 through AIRP.6? There are eleven folders missing: where are they?

The system worked well for a while, but eventually a number of flaws emerged. It became obvious that the decision to include multiple photos in each file was unwise. This placement created preservation, security, and organization issues. One preservation issue was that multiple photos on different grades and ages of paper, using different methods of development, and some with more chemical residue than others, were promoting cross-contamination of acid and chemicals in that closed environment. Larger, sturdier photographs were damaging smaller, more fragile ones by being stored together.

It was difficult for reference desk staff to track how many photos were in individual folders. Photos of varying sizes, coupled with a hectic desk environment, meant that determining how many photos came back from a patron versus how many had gone out was no easy task.

Additionally, the consecutive numbering system made it difficult to add new materials to the collection. If new materials did not fall under an already existing subheading, there were two options for adding it. The first was to change the consecutive number by adding decimals or letters to slot something between two numbered folders. Returning to the example using airports, "Curtiss-Wright Airport" was listed as AIRP.1A because it needed to fit alphabetically between "1st Milwaukee County Airport" (AIRP.1) and "Maitland Field" (AIRP.2). This solution was not ideal, as soon combinations of letters *and* decimals were being concocted and the combinations soon proved cumbersome in filing and retrieval. Eventually those types of situations became common.

The second solution was to add the new folders to the end of a run, preserving the consecutive numbering system. This solution proved less than ideal. Within the subheadings of a main subject area, the folders were arranged alphabetically. Adding new subheadings to the end of a run of consecutive numbers broke the alphabetic system of organization and negatively affected filing and retrieval. When Miller Park was added as a subheading to the Business & Industry subject, it ended up being physically filed after Mutual Drug Co.

Because of these issues it was decided that a modified system of organization and identification should be implemented. Volunteers trained by the digital projects librarian were recruited to implement the modified system.

Each item is housed in its own folder, addressing preservation and security issues. Then each folder and corresponding photo has been assigned a unique identifier. The identifier is based on the old system: in fact the bones of the original system are still evident; only the expression of that system on the individual folders has changed.

The new identifying system eliminates the consecutive numbers and it spells out the subheadings, sub-subheadings, and date ranges; so AIRP.5A-5E becomes AIRP.MITCHELL.INTERIOR.POST1960.001-024. While the new system of identifiers is visually more cumbersome, it is more flexible and allows for the addition and alphabetical collocation of new subheadings.

The process of refoldering has been time-consuming and there have been periods of downtime because of a lack of volunteers, but after four years of refoldering, the project is halfway to completion. To this point approximately ten thousand photos have been refoldered. Working on this project has allowed the standardization of some methods of organization. For example, with the new identifiers the pre- and post-1960 date ranges have been added on a regular basis. Adding the date ranges has made it easier for staff to retrieve materials for researchers by enabling them to chronologically eliminate some items. Breaking down the ranges of dates further was contemplated but discarded because of the time and additional oversight that would be required.

“Unknown” and “Miscellaneous” as Headings

Using “Unknown” or “Miscellaneous” as a designation is not a great idea. An item that is identifiable should be clearly labeled, not lumped together with like items. Similarly, unknown items should not be included in artificial collections and de-accessioning of those items should be considered in natural collections. Patrons simply do not use items labeled in those ways; there is not enough information there to inform them that the items may be useful.

This project highlights the importance of thinking through an organizational scheme and really knowing the collection, the audience, and how that audience is going to be using the collections and/or archives. The original organization of the Historic Photo Collection was necessary to make it usable for MPL’s patrons, but the lack of flexibility that was endemic in the system and prevented the addition of new materials was its downfall. Modifications were made to the original organizational scheme to allow for that flexibility, and to address the preservation and security flaws that the method of storage revealed about the scheme.

Indexing Collections

When a collection is organized, how is it possible to make sure that patrons and staff can easily find what they are looking for? The easier a collection is to search, the more likely that it will be used. Not that a collection with an opaque method of organization and/or indexing will never get used, but it scares off casual users and creates frustration in those who try to tackle it.

As with organization, some collections require more indexing than others. One advantage that an index affords is the ability to use multiple access points for the same image. While physically organizing a collection, an item can only be placed in one spot. In an index, the same item can be listed multiple times according to different situations portrayed in the photo. A street scene with a view of a streetcar could be indexed both under the name of the street and under streetcars. It would be impossible to have the image stored in both places, but it is discoverable in an index under either heading.

Often the amount of work that goes into an index is inversely proportional to the amount of work that went into the collection’s organization. If the original order of a collection is maintained, then the accompanying index should make up for the organizational deficiencies of the original order. Very small col-

lections solely related to one subject are an exception to that rule. On the other hand, the larger the collection, the more important the index becomes.

The secret to crafting great indexes is to be consistent in the application of the index to the collection, yet flexible in index design across collections. Not every collection will have the same indexing requirements; attempting to force every collection to match the same type of index is an exercise in futility and it makes the index much less practical for use.

An index is something that is created for the end user, and in the creation of the index the user's point of view must be considered. It is important to ask how patrons will use the image. Here are some approaches to an index depending on the type of collection:

- alphabetical: good for portraits, place-names
- subject: good for things, places, events
- chronological: good for events and areas that are time-sensitive (e.g., historic costume)
- geographic: good for place-names, addresses

Larger indices can include combinations of those methods. A collection of historic locomotive photographs can be indexed by the type of locomotive (subject) and broken down by the locomotive's year of manufacture (chronological).

One of MPL's collections is indexed in both alphabetical and geographic fashions. It is called the MPS (Milwaukee Public Schools) Album. The album consists of a visual inventory of each building owned by MPS in the late 1960s. Initially, the decision was made to retain the original order of the album, though the photos were removed from the acidic pages to which they had been glued. The original order was based on an internal numbering system that divided up elementary, middle, and secondary schools and was not easily useful.

An index was created with two different aspects. The first lists the schools by their names. This portion of the index makes liberal use of the USE function. USE indicates what the preferred term is in an index; for example, cars USE automobiles (preferred term). USED FOR indicates the nonpreferred terms that are listed in the index; for example, automobiles USED FOR cars, trucks. USE is more frequently used in indexing than its counterpart.

Many schools have changed names or are known colloquially by one name while the official name is somewhat different. For example, what is commonly known as King High School now has the official name Rufus King International School but was once known as Rufus King High School. The decision was made to go with names in common usage, but references to the preferred term were included so that patrons would be led to the index's preferred term.

Garfield Ave					
School Name		Date		Image Location	
<i>Elm School</i>					
2616	W Garfield Ave	53205	1968-07	Box 1. No. 9	
<i>Garfield Avenue School</i>					
414	W Garfield Ave	53212	1968-07	Box 3. No. 40	
<i>Hi-Mount Boulevard School</i>					
4921	W Garfield Ave	53208	1968-07	Box 1. No. 36	

Figure 19.1. MPS Album Index sorted by address.

The second aspect of the index is sorted by address, which adds another access point for the user, who can choose either way of searching through the index with equal effectiveness.

Unsurprisingly, portrait collections that are housed in the HPA use an alphabetical index. The Historic Portrait Collection is an artificial collection of general-interest portraits of individuals and groups. The individuals portrayed in this collection have all been identified. However, since the portraits in the collection include group portraits, the index makes liberal use of SEE and SEE ALSO indicators. These indicators lead the user to additional images of people that may be housed elsewhere in the collection. This particular index also goes one step further and lists portraits included in other collections. Thus, the index acts not only as an index to its own collection, but as a master index for other portrait-related materials in the HPA.

SEE and SEE ALSO

SEE refers index users to a different location to find the item they are looking for. SEE ALSO refers users to additional locations to find additional items that relate to the item that is being looked for.

The creation of one or more master indexes should be seriously considered; MPL uses two. One is the aforementioned Historic Portraits index; the other serves a dual purpose as the index to the Historic Photo Collection and as a reference leading to smaller collections. That index is broken down by subject and leads the user directly to image folders in the Historic Photo Collection. However, because it is indexed by subject, the other collections that use subject arrangements are listed as SEE or SEE ALSO references next to the main entry.

F

Farm Equipment				Digitized?
	Pre 1960	FARM.1		No
Federal Buildings				Digitized?
Federal Building & Post Office	Post 1960	FED.B.1	See also Post office	No
Festivals & Celebrations				Digitized?
Bastille Days	Post 1960	FEST.21		No
Brady Street Days	Post 1960	FEST.4; Also OS	See Streets - E. Brady St.	No
Carnival Week	Pre 1960	FEST.41	See also RW 227	No
Christmas Season	Pre 1960	FEST.5	See Also Historic Negatives	No
Christmas Season	Post 1960	FEST.6		No

Figure 19.2. Historic Photo Collection Index showing SEE and SEE ALSO indicators.

The use of these references allows users to check one index instead of many. One thing to remember with a master index is that careful upkeep is imperative; the index is only as accurate as its latest entry.

Technology also allows indexes to be more flexible. MPL's indexes are typically created in Microsoft Excel or Access, though other spreadsheet and database software will suffice. Using these programs allows the same index to be sorted in different ways or by different access points without having to re-enter information. Excel is used for more straightforward indexes.

More complex indexes are done in Access to provide further options in sorting.

The use of technology additionally allows wider dispersal of the index. MPL's indexes are accessible in at least one, but frequently more, of three

1	Keyword	Title	Date	Number
48	A.O. Smith	A.O. Smith made bomb casings?	7/10/1979	1626
49	Aberdeen Hotel	the Aberdeen Hotel graced Wisconsin Ave.	5/15/1968	471
50	Abner Kirby's	Wisconsin and Water was Abner Kirby's Bl	5/30/1978	1511
51	Academy	the Shubert was the Academy?	1/27/1976	1268
52	Accidents	streetcars had accidents?	9/23/1975	1232
53	Adler strike	Milwaukee's first arbitration board settled th	11/4/1967	416
54	Ads	ads marked Milwaukee's riverfront?	11/20/1985	2020
55	Ads	the phone book ran ads like these?	7/19/1991	2211
56	Advertise	children helped companies advertise?	1/16/1973	954
57	Advertised	little charmers advertised Atlas flour?	1/4/1966	329
58	Advertisements	advertisements came printed with song on	2/14/1978	1481
59	African elephant	the African elephant greeted visitors in the	10/30/1982	1876
60	Aggies	the Hilltoppers beat the Aggies?	10/13/1979	1653
61	Air conditioned	streetcars were 'air conditioned'?	7/30/1966	284
62	Air conditioning	air conditioning was blanket in the shade?	6/26/1985	2001

Figure 19.3. Remember When Index created using Excel, sorted by keyword.

formats. The first format is in print; all the indexes are printed out and accessible at the desk that services the HPA. Printing out the indexes allows patrons to peruse them in person. The majority of the print indexes are also available to reference librarians through MPL's network, which allows librarians to use the indexes no matter where they are working or whether the index is already being used. Having access to the index through the network also means that it can be searched with simple keyword searching using the FIND (Ctrl-F) function.

Last, an increasing number of indexes (for various special collections materials, not just photos) are being made available for public use through MPL's website. This format allows users to access certain indexes remotely so they are better prepared when they come in to use the materials. When indexes are available on the Internet, the chances that they and their accompanying collections will be found and used are increased. Most search engines can locate these indexes on the Internet.

Conclusion

Organizing and indexing are two ways of serving a similar purpose: to make archives and collections easily accessible to patrons. All collections and archives shall require some degree of organization and indexing. In order to be successful at both, the needs of the user must be assessed and met. Each collection is different, so organization and/or indexing must be handled differently so that the end user will have the most successful time using the collection.

References

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