

Proper Care of Photographic Archives

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Proper conservation of your Photographic archives is essential if you are to keep the collection in good condition, and today I will not only be talking about photo negatives but also prints, either colour or black and white, movie film and video tapes.

One thing you must remember is not only to preserve the Photographic History of the former tramways that operated in your cities, but also to preserve the history of your museums' operations. too many of us regard our museums as always being there, but changes do occur and they should be recorded and preserved.

Storage

Your photo archive must be stored in a dry secured area; an insulated well-ventilated room is the ideal area for this purpose. It must be dry; any moisture can be disastrous to the photo image, so keep them dry. Filing cabinets are a good way of storage as they can be locked and the negatives kept in order.

Negatives should be kept in individual plastic bags or negative holders with a slip of acid free paper inserted on the emulsion side of each negative, this paper helps absorb any moisture that may be around.

If at any stage you happen to get a drop of water onto a negative or print wash the whole negative immediately in water, don't just let it dry out, as a watermark will appear on the negative.

Movie footage should be stored in their cans, videos must be stored vertically and away from any magnetic source such as speakers and electric motors, etc.

Filing

It's all very nice having a well-stored photographic archive but it's of little use if you can't find anything. If your archive is not very large then a simple numbering system starting from one may suffice, but remember it will get larger so consider other ways of doing it.

I usually follow the KISS principle, "keep it simple stupid". In the PTC photo collection this was not done in the early days and we have a lot of different filing systems. There are H files, PR, PRC, RS, EE, M, 5, U, UC, A, CN, CNF, F, ADV, all of these negatives were filed for separate divisions. This is OK if you only wanted to look in one area but as they tended to overlap in some areas finding a certain subject was almost impossible as each group had its own book to look up and these were only in numbered order. From 1968 we have numbered the negatives as year files. eg 68/1658 or 91/592 etc this gives us an easier system as we start at number one each year.

In these times of computers it's still a good idea to keep a book record of your collection. It's a lot easier to look up a number in a book than to go through the procedure of booting up a computer. However for searching through your collection you cannot beat a computer.

Card Filing System

If your museum cannot afford a computer, or you do not understand how to work them, then a cross card index system is a good idea. A "Where" drawer and a "What" drawer are a good start. Each drawer can be divided up into sub headings such as in the "Where" drawer you could have depots, streets and suburbs. In the "What" drawer you could have the tram classes or numbers and also if its a record shot or a scenic shot. Any amount of combinations, and don't just put them in one section, spread them around in the various sections for easier retrieval at a later date.

There are many database software packages available today that are ideal for this purpose. In the PTC we use "PARADOX" and our new Pentium 100 computer can do a search through all our 500,000 negatives in just 11 seconds. Any computer with a reasonable hard drive will be ample for most museum collections and you can file other archive material on it as well. When filing into

other book, card system or a computer, try to put in as much information as possible so that when you do a search it will be much easier to find. Always keep a backup copy of your files just in case of computer failure. A computer printout of your files is a good hard copy.

Putting your photos onto CD ROM is an option but an expensive one. And the way computer technology changing, long-term usage could be a problem. If you have photographic prints only, then an attempt should be made to have copy negatives produced from them. Photographs then can be given a file number, mounted on cardboard and filed in whatever area you should choose for easy reference. These could be tram classes, locations, etc.

As the index prints have a negative number on them they can be used for reference and the negatives remain secure and only handled when a print is required. Never remove index prints from the files no matter how many promises are made about their return, they seldom are.

Copy Negatives

When copying prints try to keep the negative format as large as possible, 120 roll film in the 6cm x 7cm format is about the smallest you should use.

35mm should be avoided, as the quality of enlargements is not good. The slower the film speed the better, 125 ASA is a good benchmark.

If you are able to process the film yourself then use a fine grade developer such as Ilford Microphen and give the film a good wash when finished to allow for long archive storage.

Colour prints must be kept away from strong lights as the dyes in them fade and you will soon find your valuable prints disappearing before your eyes.

Many of us take colour slides and these are an excellent way to keep archive material, but like all colour material they will fade. Many of my 25-year-old slides have gone magenta in colour, these were Agfa CT-18 slides. However my Kodachrome 25 slides taken at the same time are still perfect. This is due to the processing that Kodachrome goes through, so use Kodachrome where possible for your archive slides.

Access

Your archive is a valuable record of your former tramway system and also your museum and should be kept secure at all times. The appointment of an archives officer is a good idea and access to the archive should be made through that officer. However a good archive is one that should be available to any researcher, it's no good locking it away from everyone so that the archive officer should be available at times for this purpose. Never let unknown people look after archive alone, no matter how many guarantees you get, a lot of your files will be irreplaceable and once lost that is it. Only let researchers look at your index prints, not the negatives. If a negative needs to be looked at only the archive officer should do this. Remember your negatives are valuable and if you have glass negatives in your collection then fragile as well.

Collection Policy

If your museum has a Collection Policy then the photograph archive should be included in this as this will give you guidelines as what to keep when offered and what to pass on to other collections.

Conclusions

Remember your collection is a valuable reminder of what it is that you are archiving and it will be around a lot longer than you or me so look after it. Keep it dry, secure, well stored and filed and very importantly keep it "alive". Keep updating it with new photos. What you take today is tomorrow's history.

Questions/Comments

John Radcliffe: Colour prints mounted on cardboard? Colour prints fade in light.

David White: Storage of negatives? Can chop between negatives

Peter Hyde: CD-Rom? Wait on better technology.

Morris Moller: Slide growth stopped or removed? Wash carefully with methylated spirits.