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11,000,000 Words:
An Avalanche of Academic Archive Photos at K-State at Salina

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Abstract

Institutional archives have always provided a sense of history and unity for most universities. This is especially emphasized for the K-State at Salina photographic collection. The school has gone through four different name changes in the last fifty years and the library has amassed an overwhelming assortment of photographs documenting various events on campus, from groundbreaking ceremonies to student social occasions. With an estimated total of over 11,000 unlabeled photographs, the K-State at Salina librarians have worked hard to begin the process of providing the university community with a useful resource for historical research in the future. Using a variety of methods, both digital and face-to-face, to identify the photos’ events and participants, the librarians have sorted a small portion of the photographs thus far and plan to create a finding aid in the future. Come learn about this unique project if your own archives project has been on the back burner and you’re looking for some tips on how (and how not!) to get started.

Introduction

An old Chinese proverb states “a picture is worth 1,000 words”. If that is true, then the pictorial collection in the K-State at Salina archives touts approximately 11,000,000 words. The photographic collection of nearly 11,000 items documents the rich history of the institution. However, most of the photographs are not labeled with names, dates, or locations; rendering the collection impossible to catalog or use. This paper details the processes and procedures developed in order to organize and classify the photographs for patron use.

Literature Review

Pictorial archive collections in libraries and museums exist to fill a need in the society for which they serve. Mildred Simpson of the Los Angeles Times Editorial Library suggests libraries faced with organizing a photograph collection must start by first considering “the use to which your
collection will be put” (Berinstein). “Intelligent analysis” should be employed to ensure items are not incorporated into the collection simply because they exist, but rather because they add value to the collection (Baxter). Schmidle acknowledges limited resources coupled with competing interests often create difficulty with value assessments. He states, “Librarians, archivists, and conservators must weigh economic, societal, cultural, and technological values to determine what is to be preserved, displayed or consigned to the depths of the vault” (15).

There are four basic components in the collection management of archive collections: inventory, appraisal, cataloging, and proper housing and storage (“Care, Handling, and Storage of Photographs”). Inventory and appraisal have been defined above as the determination of which objects are retained in the collection as evidenced by the institution’s mission. While no standardized approach to cataloging photographs exists, experts recommend providing the acquisition source, date (of acquisition and event depicted), subject and an accession number (Berinstein; “Care, Handling, and Storage of Photographs”). Baggett suggests the proper housing and storage of photographs involves storing “the files or envelopes vertically in an archival box or metal filing cabinet” as well as packing “the files or envelopes tightly so they are supported and stand upright” (5). Significant damage can be caused to photographs from improper handling. The Library of Congress states, “When handling photographs and negatives, be sure that hands are freshly washed, wear clean lint-free cotton gloves...and avoid touching the photograph surface” (“Care, Handling, and Storage of Photographs”).

The technological revolution has many libraries scrambling to digitize their photographic collections. Schmidle recommends libraries adequately reflect on their motives for digitization. Digitizing photographs is beneficial in capturing an image before deterioration occurs. It also increases access to resources. However, “digitizing for preservation does not result automatically in increased access” (Schmidle 16). Digitization should only be considered when an institution is firmly committed to providing the resources (time, equipment and funding) required to maintain a digital collection.

The Collection

K-State at Salina has a rich and varied history. Over the past 40 years, the college has transformed from the Schilling Air Force Base (1957), Schilling Institute (1965), Kansas Technical Institute (1969), Kansas College of Technology (1988), to its current orientation as Kansas State University’s College of Technology and Aviation (1991). Items in the collection are the product of various student organizations and retiring faculty’s donations over the years. The photographers for both the Kansas College of Technology and Shilling Institute yearbooks also donated a sizeable amount of the proofs previously used in yearbook layouts. The collection currently consists of nine green photo boxes containing about 11,000 photos and forty-one photocopy boxes full of various scrapbooks and college memorabilia.

Getting Started

K-State at Salina librarians conducted research on possible options for preserving the photos, with a specific emphasis on best-practice methods regarding the handling and displaying of the artifacts. Information was gathered via the use of books, the Internet, attendance at the 2008
Kansas Library Conference, personal interviews with local archivists, and a Preservation Workshop at the Dwight D. Eisenhower Library that focused specifically on photo preservation.

Fireproof file cabinets were purchased as a way to save and store the collection. Additional cabinets will be ordered over the next several years until storage is adequate for the collection. Filing cabinets will also store university paperwork, course descriptions, faculty files, information about college mergers and name changes, college handbooks, flight records, and other miscellaneous papers. A collection of yearbooks was discovered in the archives and excess copies sent to the local public library and the Smoky Hills Genealogical Museum to fill holes in each collection. Should a natural disaster or fire occur on campus, there will be copies located in different facilities around the county so the history of the college would not be completely lost.

**Gathering Supplies**

The library first purchased print sleeves in two different sizes, 3x5 inches (100) and 8x10 inches (25), to keep fingerprints off the photographs. Next, acid-free marking pens were ordered so names, dates, places, and topics can be written on the back of the photo as the photo’s subjects are identified. For example, if the picture contained a lecturer and an audience, the speaker’s name, the occasion he/she was speaking at, the place and the date would be recorded. Twelve pairs of white cotton gloves were ordered as well to protect the integrity of the materials during the sorting until they found a permanent home in the cabinets, as well as for handling the materials while displays are being created. Finally, a flash drive was purchased so photos could be digitized as they are scanned.

In addition to supplies for handling the artifacts, reading materials were sought to learn about specific preservation techniques for photographs. The library applied for and was awarded a book grant, *Connecting to Collections Bookshelf*, by the Institute of Museum and Library Services. Twenty-three books, which cover a range of preservation topics, will serve as reference tools and manuals on how to build and preserve the collection. The archival budget has also become a permanent subdivision of the library’s general budget because the library hopes to maintain the organization of this collection in the coming years. The K-State at Salina Library feels the archival budget is an expense that must be preserved to provide this service to alumni, students, and staff.

**Off and Running**

Although several boxes were opened to determine the supplies that might be required, the first box of photos was not “officially” opened until late June 2008. Sorting through the photos and finding identifying marks was the first step taken in organizing the collection. These identifiers turned up in various forms, such as hand-written names, dates and/or locations, typed labels adhered to the back and sometimes, through a stroke of luck, even the film development date stamped across the Kodak paper. Eras and locations were also estimated by studying the subjects of the photos and focusing on hairstyles, cars and clothing worn in the picture. Now and then even the background was recognized as “before the renovations” to a certain building so a year could be estimated as well. Bundles of photographs of the same event were tied and placed back into photo boxes.
The second step in the process was to have student employees compare photos in the boxes to photos in the yearbook collection. Because of storage space restrictions, the librarians decided if a photo could be matched to photos printed in the yearbook, it would not be kept. Multiple copies of photos that do not appear in the yearbooks were also discarded, and the best copy kept on file. By June 2009, nearly 400 photos had been matched to photos in the yearbooks and the duplicate photos discarded. One unpredicted outcome of having student workers sift through photos is that faculty interest in the project has increased. As student employees work on this task at the circulation desk, faculty members walking by have stopped to help identify photos. In addition to using yearbooks, student newspaper publications from the 1970s have also been used to identify some events taking place in the photos.

As a result of this tedious work, the K-State at Salina Library wrote a new policy to avoid these dilemmas with future incoming donations. All new items donated to the archives by outside contributors must include names for the subjects in the photo, as well as the date, location, and event type documented. The accepted materials must be associated with K-State at Salina campus activities and/or previous activities occurring on the campus under the aforementioned K-State identities. To date, approximately one hundred new hardcopy photos have been added to the archives documenting commencement ceremonies from the last three years. Sixty photos in electronic format have been added from various activities on campus from the previous school year, including Casino Night, softball tournaments, the Awards Banquet, and Campus Open House.

**Trying Something New**

Following the task of sorting photos by era and activity, the librarians decided to seek outside help for this endeavor. Utilizing 21st century technology to reach back to earlier times, staff selected and scanned five to ten pictures, and posted them onto the library’s blog, with the hopes that faculty, staff, or students would recognize someone or something in the photos and could give the library information for the photo. These pictures were posted every month beginning in November 2008 to garner new interest and to keep expanding the online collection. The photos were to stay up for a twelve-month period before being taken down to allow room for new photos. The physical copies of photos posted on the blog were put in a separate filing system so when a person came forward to identify a photo, it could easily be pulled out and labeled with the new information. The photos selected for this process were predominantly “solo” photos that did not belong to a larger group of photos documenting a certain occasion, making them harder to identify. As of July 2009, using this method, the campus community has identified thirty of the photos that were posted online.

The online posting of photographs has proven to be successful means for identification. To increase the visibility of items, the K-State at Salina Library has partnered with the Public Relations and Alumni Coordinator as means to expand the web audience. In July 2009, one of the librarians received a mailing from her alma mater with a similar project asking alumni to identify people in a single photograph published in the newsletter. Following this example, the K-State at Salina Alumni Coordinator agreed to put one photo to be identified in the annual...
newsletter followed by a link to twenty more photos on the Alumni web page, asking all alumni to contact the university if they had information on any of the photos.

**Looking Beyond**

By scanning in the photos, the library has attacked three projects at once; labeling, digitizing, and generating publicity. First, with countless past and present university faculty receiving the online alumni newsletter, the odds increase that someone can provide the library with valuable information on the subjects in the pictures. Displaying the photos on the alumni website helps the college body recognize these resources are available for their use. Presently, hardly any people on campus are even aware the library possesses this superb collection, and it could prove to be extremely helpful for historians doing research about Kansas State University at Salina, the surrounding community, or the state of Kansas. Next, digitizing a few photos at a time for the newsletter has paved the way to someday digitizing every photo in the collection to create an online searchable database for patron use. This digital collection would be useful to the alumni and students who live across the country and would not have easy access to the physical copies stored in the archives room. However, the library does not want to focus too heavily on digitizing the collection until the photos have been labeled as there would be no way to identify the electronic files. Finally, the library will work with the Alumni Relations Office in an attempt to find former students willing to donate some time to look through old photos, as well as retired faculty living in the area who could also help to identify certain events.

As the library plans for the future, it must also focus on the smaller projects it can complete in the next three to five years. The prevalent goal for the library is to have the photos sorted and labeled as soon as possible, with a timeline of four boxes a year in order to complete the project in less than ten years. Single pictures will go into smaller photograph boxes and larger topic boxes will contain photos as well as souvenirs that have been collected from the occasion, such as posters, invitations, and schedules. A finding aid will be created using Microsoft Excel software which includes the person’s name and will cross-reference with the year and topic. This finding aid will be available in hardcopy form in a binder so patrons working in the archives can easily use it.

Although the collection may never be fully cataloged and labeled, the library feels it has a duty to share these artifacts with the community. The first public display was in December of 2008 during the library’s Open House, where photos were displayed in hopes that visitors would recognize the people and event in the photos. With the eager help of long-time faculty and staff members, roughly eighty photos were identified in three hours. Two retired staff members who attended the Library’s Open House even volunteered to work on identifying the photos the next day. They spent three hours in the library sifting through boxes of photos and identified almost one hundred photos while the archive staff member labeled each photo as quickly as it was identified. The next public display will be in the new Student Life Center, which houses the campus recreation complex. At the Student Life Center dedication in the fall of 2009, the library will display sporting event photos for people to identify, such as intramural basketball games, ping pong tournaments and previous University Olympic Games. It is the library’s hope that once the photos are identified, copies of the photos will be made and enlarged for visitors to enjoy through the recreation center. Third, photos will be placed in the library’s large display
case near the entryway so that during the spring campus-wide Open House visitors can view a sampling of the collection as they walk through the doors.

Conclusion

Kansas State University at Salina has made a commendable attempt to start their archives project, despite budget and storage restraints. Starting from scratch, they have jumped in with both feet to protect these important historical campus documents and to provide a significant service to prospective historians and university community members. In a time when budgets are tightening and the latest online resources are touted at conferences across the country, it is heartening to see librarians sacrificing time and money to meet the archival needs of their library and its patrons in a truly selfless fashion.

Works Cited


