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Heidi Blackburn
University of Nebraska at Omaha, hblackbu@gmail.com

Pam Bower

Alysia Starkey

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Photo Identity Crisis: Creating a Classification and Organization Method for Unidentified Photographic Archives

By Heidi Blackburn, Pam Bower, and Alysia Starkey

Abstract

Institutional archives have always provided a sense of history and unity for most universities. This is especially emphasized for the Kansas State University 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.

Information & Media Literacy

Introduction

The focus of this paper is the pictorial collection of nearly 11,000 items in the Kansas State University (K-State) at Salina archives. Candid photographs make up the greater part of the collection and document momentous historical events throughout the life of the college. However, the majority of the collection was never labeled with names, dates, and location information, which has rendered the collection virtually impossible to catalog or use. The collection plays a central role in preserving the diverse history of K-State at Salina. It should also be noted the materials contained in this collection do not include activities which took place on the main campus of Kansas State University. The Hale Library Special Collections department, located in Manhattan, Kansas, is in charge of preserving those artifacts in the University Archives and Manuscripts collection. K-State Salina library staff have recently begun taking comprehensive measures to maintain the integrity of this unique collection.

The storage of photographs, documents and other historical material is not a new concept. It could be considered an innate human need to leave a legacy; to prove “I was here and this is what I accomplished.” Archival documents are the tapestry that provides future generations meaning into how things came to be.

Would the telling of history be as powerful without photographs of Anne Frank’s attic or those of Martin Luther King Jr.’s March on Washington in which to associate these events?

The K-State at Salina Library’s photographic archival collection serves as the medium for which future students, faculty and administrators will connect with the past. Literature was reviewed prior to the project inception to ensure best practices were applied during the selection and organization of materials. This section provides a brief overview of these findings.

Archival collections in libraries and museums exist to fill a need in the society for which they serve. An archival collection is an important component to an institution. It provides a comprehensive record and measure of the institution’s “importance to the public and their influence on society” (Ostby, 2006). More specifically, photographs play a critical role in documenting a library or museum’s value and bearing on society.

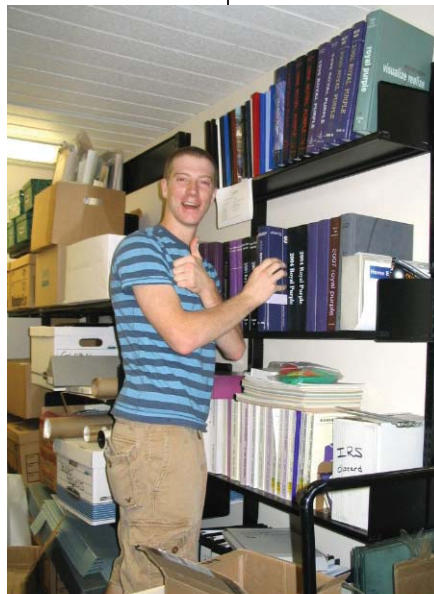
The Impact of Photographic Archival Collections

Most photographic archival collections are acquired through in-house production. Berinstein (1998) states, “In-house personnel may generate the pictures the library collects, either by creating them, donating them, or both.”



Pam Bower reviewing photographs from the fireproof cabinets

Photograph collections tend to be expansive, due in part to the fact that “photographs are prized in our culture because they are inexpensive, easy to acquire, and serve as accurate, detailed records of our environment and activities” (Schmidle, 1996). In fact, Ritzenthaler et al. [n.d.] argue that photojournalism has had “more influence on public thinking and opinion than any other today.” They continue to suggest that the function of photographs is to “provide evidence that something existed or that a particular event happened” (in Baxter, 2003). Baxter (2003) also points out the more interpersonal aspects of photography: “a photograph can provide a strong emotional reaction, it can capture a moment, it can convey a truth, maybe even ‘paint a thousand words’.” However, the context and purpose of a photograph does not often translate to individuals who were not present at the time of the event being captured. Thus, without an accurate record of the names, dates and events depicted, a photograph holds little historical value. “Stripped of its original context, an old photograph is reduced to mere curiosity” (Schmidle, 1996).



One of the dedicated student volunteers working in the library

Berinstein (1998) suggests libraries faced with organizing a photograph collection must start by first considering “the use to which your collection will be put.” Berinstein continues to state the use should “fit in with the mission of the organization” (1998). “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, 2003). Schmidle (1996) acknowledges limited resources coupled with competing interests often create difficulty with assessing the value of any particular photograph. 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” (1996).

Components to Collection Management

The Library of Congress states there are four basic components in the collection management of archive collections: inventory, appraisal, cataloging, and proper housing and storage (2002). 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 there is no standardized approach to cataloging photographs, experts recommend providing the acquisition source, date (of acquisition and event depicted), subject and an accession number (Berinstein, 1998; Library of Congress, 2002). Baggett (2004) 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.” 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” (2002).

The technological revolution has also had many libraries scrambling to digitize their photographic collections. Schmidle (1996) 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, 1996). Digitization should only be considered when an institution is firmly committed to provide the resources (time, equipment and funding) required to maintain a digital collection.

What's in a Name? K-State University at Salina

To understand the importance of committing so much effort



to the preservation of this collection, It's important to be aware of the transformations the campus has seen in the last forty years. Since its inception, the institution now known as Kansas State University at Salina has been committed to advancing technological innovation within the state of Kansas. In 1965, the Kansas Legislature transformed the Schilling Air Force Base into the Schilling Institute. The change was brought about with the distinct goal of capitalizing on the technical education movement which swept the nation during the early 1960s. The Schilling Institute offered two-year degree programs in science and engineering technology. In 1969, the institution became Kansas Technical Institute as a way to further align the institution with serving this distinct student population. In an attempt to establish itself as a superior institution of higher education, the institution's name was once again changed in April 1988 to the Kansas College of Technology. On May 2, 1991, a legislative bill merged the Kansas College of Technology with Kansas State University, creating the only remote campus for the University and establishing the ninth college in the K-State System: the College of Technology and Aviation. K-State at Salina currently offers associate and bachelor degrees in engineering technology, aviation, and business. The North Central Association, the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology, the Council on Aviation Accreditation, and the Federal Aviation Administration have all accredited the K-State at Salina programs.

The K-State at Salina Library services a diverse population of users, including 1,000 students and 200 faculty and staff members of the college itself, as well as a steady stream of institutional alumni and a variety of community patrons. Exceeding expectations from a diverse population drives the library's mission:

The mission of the K-State at Salina Library is to support the college in its mission of teaching, scholarship, and service, and to support resource sharing in the community and state. In striving to fulfill these goals, the philosophy of the library is changing. The Library is no longer a warehouse of materials; it is a facilitator of information exchange. Successful implementation of these goals is influenced by a tradition of providing print and non-print resource materials, the promise of new technologies, and well-trained library staff who facilitate information access.

Development of an infrastructure to support the organization of historical documents would enhance the K-State at Salina Library's capability to improve seamless information exchange to its neighboring population, as well as citizens of the entire state of Kansas.

A Mountain of Dusty Boxes

In 2007, the archives were handed down from the retiring library director to the new library director. The archives had been patiently waiting for a librarian or two brave enough to tackle the mountain of dusty boxes that seemed to multiply on their own. Various disbanded student organizations, retiring faculty, and the college's Dean's office had donated a great percentage of the photo materials over the years, which had piled up in a back room from a lack of other storage options. 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, making the entire collection rather eclectic. As in other countless libraries, the staff had to get by with what little space they had and converted an old storage room into an adequate location for



the archives as they began to pile up. The present location for the K-State at Salina Library Archives collection consists of a room behind the library offices measuring approximately 19 ft by 16 ft. The collection room is walled off by one office filled with filing cabinets, with a 6 ft wide hallway which leads out into a library staff lounge. It 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

Before re-organizing the archives, the 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. They soon realized that the Internet and a few books would not provide sufficient information, and sent one librarian to attend the 2008 Kansas Library Conference for further guidance on preservation. She also visited the Salina Public Library to discuss preservation techniques with the resident archivist. Since education is a continuous process, she will also be attending the 2008 Midwest Archives Conference Fall Symposium to learn about digital preservation.

After attending the conferences and brainstorming with other librarians, the archive librarian was confident in the staff's ability to organize the archives into a useable collection and a portion of the library's general budget was set aside for archival supplies by the director. Fireproof file cabinets and acid-free boxes were deemed crucial

to save and store the collection and will be ordered at regular intervals over several consecutive years. In addition to the photographs, the filing cabinets will be home to university paperwork, course descriptions, faculty files, information about college mergers and name changes, college handbooks, flight records, and other miscellaneous papers. A sizeable collection of yearbooks was also discovered in some older filing cabinets in the archives. Extra copies were 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 and damage the collection on

campus, there will be copies located in different facilities around the county so the history of the college would not be completely lost.

Stripped of its original context, an old photograph is reduced to mere curiosity

Gathering supplies

Having secured new homes for the photos in acid-free boxes and fire-proof file cabinets, the next step was to purchase supplies for handling the collection. The first box revealed the presence of multiple sizes of photos in the inventory. Print sleeves were purchased in two different sizes, 3x5 inches (100) and 8x10 inches (25), to prevent fingerprints from damaging the photographs. Next, acid-free marking pens were used 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 or she was speaking at, the place and the date would be recorded. Multiple 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



**Who-dat? Help us label our archive pictures!
Oh MY – it looks like they're play Pong!
Remember that? Who's playing?**

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. In addition, the archival budget has 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. As box after box of photos were opened and sifted through, it became overwhelming apparent how difficult sorting, much less inventorying, the entire group of boxes would be for the staff. Not a single box had a date or department name on it and a good number of the photos had been shoved in the boxes upside-down, backwards and in other ways in appropriate for storage.

Sorting through the photos and finding identifying marks was the first step to 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 labeled, tied and placed back into photo boxes.

Developing a Protocol

The second step in the process was to have student workers compare photos in the boxes to photos in the yearbook collection. Because of storage space restrictions, it was decided that 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. The library simply does not have the space to accommodate the extra photos and with the advances in technology, high-quality reproduction photos can now be created by scanning the photos printed in the yearbook.

As looking through yearbooks to label photos proved an immensely time-consuming project, the librarians developed a new policy to avoid these dilemmas with future incoming donations. All new items that are 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.



**Who-dat? Help us label our archive pictures!
Anybody recognize the year or cars in this
picture with the tornado?**

Utilizing Technology and “Who Dat?” to Identify Photographs

Following the task of sorting photos by era and activity, the library staff agreed their collective knowledge of campus history had been tapped. The staff have been working on campus less than a decade, and therefore have limited experience with activities occurring before the campus merger. At this point, 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 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. Under the category “Who dat?” pictures are posted along with a short description, if applicable. Six pictures will be posted every month to garner new interest and to keep expanding the online collection. The photos will stay up for a twelve-month period before being taken down to allow room for new photos. The physical copies of photos being posted to the blog will be put in a separate filing system so when a person comes forward to identify a photo, it can easily be pulled out and labeled with the new information. The photos that are selected for this process are predominantly “solo” photos that do not belong to a larger group of photos documenting a certain occasion, making them harder to identify. As of August, 2008, three of the fifteen photos that have been posted have been identified and the library staff hopes that this trend will persist as a new school year begins and blog activity increases.

An Online Digital Database of Photographs

By scanning in the photos, the library has attacked three projects at once; labeling, digitizing, and generating publicity. First, attempts have been increased to identify and label the

photos by putting the photos on the Internet. With countless past and present university faculty using the Internet, the odds increase someone out there can provide the library with valuable information on the subjects in the pictures. Next, digitizing a few photos at a time 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 extremely 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.

In further efforts to have different parts of the collection identified, the library will contact with school alumni through the Alumni Relations Office in an attempt to find former students who will be willing to donate some time to look through old photos. On that same note, e-mails will be sent to retired faculty living in the area who could also help to identify certain events. Alumni and retired faculty will also receive information about the collection through the campus newsletter, where selected pictures will be printed for identification, as well as the blog website address so the pictures posted on *Who Dat?* can also be browsed and identified. Finally, displaying the photos on the blog helps the college body recognize these resources are available for

their use. Presently, few 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.



**Who-dat? Help us label our archive pictures!
1987 Concrete Canoe Event
Who are the guys smoothing concrete over the frame?**

Immediate and Long Term Goals

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. Although the library had an original goal of completing one box per year, this has since changed to a more realistic timeline of four boxes a year in order to complete the project in under 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 it can easily be used by patrons working in the archives.

Once the overall task of inventorying the collection has been completed, the library will take the next step in displaying the photos in various locations. 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 location will be in the library's large display case near the entryway so that during the library's Open House visitors can view a sampling of the collection as they walk through the doors. Genealogists and local patrons will also have the option of learning about the collection while they use the Campbell Room for local archival records by viewing the display case located directly in front of the collection at the Salina Public Library. The Smoky Hills Museum would provide a similar opportunity if the library chose to display a sample of the collection so visitors could learn about the metamorphosis the school has gone through in the last fifty years and how it has influenced the region.



Who-dat? Help us label our archive pictures!
What year was this put up on campus?
Who are the guys next to it?

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.

Visit the Blog at K-State at Salina's Library

<http://ksuslib.typepad.com/blog/>

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Heidi Blackburn is the Reference and Instruction Librarian for Kansas State University at Salina in Salina, Kansas. She has been working in libraries for approximately five

years but this is her first year teaching information literacy and reference skills at K-State at Salina. Jumping into the academic library world at a young age, she worked for three years at the Circulation Desk at Truman State University before choosing librarianship as a career. She recently finished her Master's of Library Science at Emporia State University in Emporia, Kansas, where she worked for two years in the Emporia High School library. SLA and the Education Division help combine two of her favorite topics; libraries and teaching people information literacy skills. Reading *Education Libraries* is critical for informing her of the challenges that other librarians in the field are facing and how they are overcoming these obstacles. Each issue brings to her attention emerging concerns for the overall profession and helps her become conscious of what is happening in the field across the country and around the world. Special areas of professional interest for Heidi include advocating for patron rights concerning freedom from library censorship and implementing new technology to meet patron needs. She also carries a hidden passion for reading fiction thrillers centering on church conspiracies.

Heidi Blackburn
 Reference and Instruction Librarian
 K-State at Salina Library
 2310 Centennial Road
 Salina, Kansas 67401
 785-826-2637
hblackbu@k-state.edu
<http://www.salina.k-state.edu/library/>



Pam Bower is a library assistant at the Kansas State University at Salina Library in Salina Kansas. She joined the staff in January 2008 bringing with her 10 years of library experience, including two years at the rival university – Kansas University's Spahr Engineering Library in Lawrence, Kansas. Her work currently includes archives, mainly in the form of creating finding aids for the archive items stored at the Salina campus library. SLA has resources that will help her find information about working with an archival collection. A special interest to her is developing creative ways to distribute copies of photos and artifacts to solicit help with identifying the items. Outside of work, she enjoys suspenseful mystery novels and spending time cooking with her family – her husband, three children, and a collie.



Alysia Starkey is the Director of Libraries at K-State at Salina in Salina, Kansas. Prior to this appointment, she served as the Technical Services/Automation Coordinator for the K-State at Salina campus. Ms. Starkey received her Master's of Library Science degree from the University of North Texas in 2002 and is currently working on a Ph.D. in Educational Computing, Design, and Online Learning at Kansas State University. Alysia's professional interest lies in the areas of information literacy and online learning. Ms. Starkey actively collaborates with school librarians and 6 – 12 English instructors on designing and incorporating information literacy instruction into curricula.