January 1983

Short Subjects: Self-Indexing Contemporary Photograph Collections

Bill Sumners

Dargan-Carver Library

SELF-INDEXING CONTEMPORARY
PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTIONS

A review of current library and archival literature on the cataloging of photographs illustrates the diverse methods of arranging and describing visual records. Photographic collections range in size from a handful of old pictures to collections housing hundreds of thousands of photographs and negatives. As varied as the size of photograph collections, there also seems to be as many different cataloging and arrangement schemes. While most cataloging methods have unique features, they usually can be categorized in three types of retrieval systems: (1) card catalog, (2) image-bearing cards, and (3) self-indexed collections. This is an explanation of the Auburn University Archives' (Alabama) efforts to cope with the sudden influx of a sizable collection of contemporary photographs.

At Auburn the approach to cataloging photographic images follows the pattern of other manuscript repositories and university archives. When the archives was established in 1964, material from the university library and several administrative offices was transferred to the new department. Included with these files and manuscript collections were photographs. Little is known about the handling of photographs in those early years. More than likely, they were stored in a filing cabinet and arranged by source. By 1968, the photographic holdings had reached a significant size (about one thousand images) and dictated a more sophisticated finding aid system.

The archives staff developed a card catalog system. The photographs or negatives were given a number which denoted size, format, and location. For example, an 8 x 10 print could have a number IV B 312. The Roman numeral IV denoted print, the letter B denoted size, and 312 was the number in that format, size division. Major subject categories were created to file the catalog

cards. The cards described the photograph and listed the location number. The catalog system had two major divisions, university-related and non-university-related photographs. The subjects for the Auburn University photographs covered broad areas such as Buildings, Athletics, Students, Faculty and Staff. The non-university, or general photographs, included subject headings such as: Auburn, City of; Alabama dignitaries; Alabama Cities; Military; and a few other general subject areas. Apparently, this system worked satisfactorily for several years and no major changes seemed necessary.

Then, in 1977, the archives acquired four major photograph collections. Two local newspapers, the student newspaper, and the college yearbook turned over their old photograph files to the archives. The majority of the images were prints with some negatives. In total, the archives acquired about one hundred thousand images in a matter of months.

The initial decision was to rearrange the system to accomodate the influx of new photographs. A Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) employee worked six months cataloging some three thousand prints. New subject categories and subdivisions within current categories were added to the card catalog. It became increasingly apparent that this system was not adequate to hold another ninety thousand images.

When the CETA employee was hired on a full-time basis by another university department, cataloging came to a halt. An analysis of the backlog of uncataloged photographs and the cataloging procedures indicated that with student labor the current holdings would not be completely cataloged for ten years. This estimate did not allow for further photographic acquisitions. With the addition of this many cards to an already cumbersome scheme, the staff expected the system to become inefficient. A change had to be made.

After discussion on the merits and handicaps of the card catalog system, the archives staff agreed that the only sensible means for making uncataloged photographs available for use was to establish a self-indexing system. The old system was left intact with future acquisitions

to be added to the self-indexing arrangement. The self-indexing system bypasses the catalog card. Instead of the card being filed in a subject category, now the print or negative is filed by subject. The system allows for the grouping of similar types of photographs where the old system did not; if researchers are looking for photographs of Auburn mascots, they can be located in a matter of seconds by pulling one or two folders.

The self-indexing photograph collection now includes three main series: Auburn University-related photographs, non-university photographs, and an individual file. Photographs and negatives are categorized within one of these three divisions. Most categories are then subdivided into subcategories when applicable and possibly slotted chronologically within these subcategories. Example: AU ATHLETICS - Football - Game Action - Alabama, 1982.

The subject categories are established by the archives staff and are based on common sense and knowledge of the local area. An authority list is maintained on major subject categories created for the system. The list is also used to assist researchers in identifying the appropriate location of needed photographs.

All prints and negatives (negatives are placed in acid free envelopes) are annotated to show category, brief description or identification, date and source. The marking of category on the print or negative envelope is essential for refiling purposes. The date (if known) and source name is helpful if the researcher wishes to consult a newspaper account relating to the photograph or to obtain a more complete description.

The archives staff, making use of trusted work-study students, began the self-index cataloging in late 1981. As of April, 1983, 90 percent of the backlog has been added to the archives photograph collection. The system has been tested by researchers and has proved very workable and much preferred to the old card cataloging scheme.

The main area of concern had been the problem of preservation. The self-indexing system is based on the photographs as the indexing unit and must be handled by the researcher. The archives staff felt that the

benefits of the self-index cataloging scheme outweighed the possible preservation problem. The system has allowed the archives to quickly catalog thousands of prints and negatives and make them available to researchers, all with very little cost in staff time or money. The self-indexing procedure also helped to preserve more photographs. Weeded out of the collection were totally useless photographs (dogs, fireplugs, trees, etc.), severely damaged prints, and unidentified photographs. If the card system had been used for cataloging, the appraisal standards would have been extremely rigid, forcing the staff to make a difficult decision on which images to preserve. Probably only 20 percent could have been retained under the card catalog system.

In summary, the decision to adopt a self-indexing system for photographs was based on several factors. First, the archives was faced with the problem of cataloging one hundred thousand images. The former card system would have delayed for years the accessibility of thousands of photographs. Second, the photographs accessioned were basically contemporary; almost all were post-1950 with the majority dated from 1960 to 1980. Some prints were produced by a fast, cheap process which created images that probably will last only ten to twenty years. Extensive cataloging techniques would not be worth the effort. Third, the archives photographic cataloging schemes would not allow for the influx of some one hundred thousand new images. The system that had problems with fifteen thousand prints and negatives would have been unworkable with a sixfold increase. Another factor involved the lack of identification on many of the prints. The self-indexing system allows the grouping of photographs without specific and complete identifications. The card system was not as flexible in this respect.

As with all photographic cataloging schemes, it is important that archival personnel understand the system and are able to locate requested items. This is extremely important to self-indexed collections, and specific procedures and guidelines should be developed. All

staff members with reference duties should understand the system and know how photographs have been categorized. Recognition of the faults of the self-indexing is crucial to its success and implementation.

The self-indexing approach may not be the solution to all problems with a large contemporary photograph collection. At Auburn University, it has proved successful in speeding the cataloging process and in making these images available to researchers.

Bill Sumners