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The Lane Brothers Photographic Archive: Its Provenance, Scope, and Arrangement

Robert C. Dinwiddie

In August of 1985 the Special Collections Department of the William R. Pullen Library at Georgia State University (GSU) acquired a collection of photographic negatives estimated to number 150,000 images from Margaret P. Lane. Mrs. Lane's late husband, Dan Lane, had been the last operator of an Atlanta commercial photography studio begun by his father in 1939. Subsequent events have shown that the acquisition of this collection was a simple matter when compared to the difficulties of arranging, describing, and providing access to such a large body of images in negative form. This article will discuss the changing role of visual images in the study of the past, give a brief history of the firm that created the images in the Lane collection, describe the scope and condition of the collection, and explain the arrangement scheme for the collection.

Since photography is a young artistic medium when compared to painting, it has had a definite recognition problem. Art museums have been slow to acquire and display photographs as works of art. The same situation has largely been repeated in the field of history. Warren I. Susman has written that

historians have yet to confront fully the implications of America's becoming a "hieroglyphic" civilization. We have been living in a new world of visual images since the nineteenth century, with a range of consequences at least analogous to what occurred when civilization based on oral communication was transformed by the introduction of writing and, ultimately, printing.¹

As this century ends, however, and as photography celebrates a century and a half of popularity, visual documentation is becoming more of a standard tool for researching historical eras as well as for reporting current affairs.

Historians are making increased use of visual images as both primary and secondary sources. The variety of ways in which historians are using photographs can be seen in the recent publications of Pete Daniel, Jack Temple Kirby, and Michael Lesy. Daniel's *Breaking The Land* and Kirby's *Rural World Lost* are traditional historical accounts which use photographs and other types of illustrative material to support the written text. Daniel, for instance, includes forty-one photographs and four maps in *Breaking The Land*.² Kirby's *Rural World Lost* contains twenty-nine photographs, fifteen charts, twelve maps, and three tables.³ Daniel's *Deep'n As It Come*, an otherwise traditional historical

¹ Michael Lesy, *Bearing Witness: A Photographic Chronicle of American Life, 1860-1945* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), vii.

² Pete Daniel, *Breaking The Land: The Transformation of Cotton, Tobacco, and Rice Culture Since 1880* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985).

³ Jack Temple Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost: The American South, 1920-1960* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987).

treatment of the great Mississippi River flood of 1927, uses text and photographs almost equally.⁴

Michael Lesy, on the other hand, approaches history primarily through visual image sources. Indeed, his books are history as gleaned solely from pictorial artifacts. Lesy's *Real Life* has a small amount of text accompanying 152 photographs.⁵ His most recent book, *Bearing Witness*, is comprised of several hundred photographs and no text at all except for a brief preface and an introduction.⁶ Lesy, more than any other American historian, has accepted Susman's challenge to "confront fully" the implications of studying the history of a society that has become more and more visually--not print--oriented.

Lesy has also raised one of the more fundamental questions about the use of collections of visual images as authentic historical sources. "If photographs constitute a form of historical data," he queries himself and others, "then what in fact do they reveal?"⁷ At least one person, Robert A. Sobieszek, director of the Photographic Collections at the International Museum of Photography, has tried to come to grips with this intriguing question. Sobieszek has stated that the chief virtue of a photographic archive rests in its dual abilities both to respond to specific questions about historical events and to suggest questions not yet asked.⁸ Visual images are also inherently dynamic: to view a photographic

⁴ Pete Daniel, *Deep'n As It Come: The 1927 Mississippi River Flood* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

⁵ Michael Lesy, *Real Life: Louisville In The Twenties* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976).

⁶ Lesy, *Bearing Witness*.

⁷ *Ibid.*, xvii.

⁸ International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House, *Acquisitions, 1973-1980* (Rochester: Rochester Lithographics, 1981), 2.

archive is to be confronted with the way history looks. Recognizing this characteristic of visual images, Sobieszek has called photographic collections "active sets of artifacts reflecting the past and addressing the present."⁹

Although each image in a photographic archive captures only one instant in time, the cumulative body of these instants provides clear information about the values, attitudes, designs, and styles of a society.¹⁰ But a photographic archive, particularly one numbering in the thousands of images, is more than the sum of its parts. All the images are certainly not of equal value, and many of them will be duplicates or near-duplicates of others in the collection. Researchers examining scores of boxes of images, however, will acquire a critical mass of visual data comparable to the wealth of written data that they accumulate on thousands of note cards when using traditional printed sources. After the primary subject matter of an image has perhaps answered the researcher's principal question, secondary and even tertiary subject matter contained in the image can pose many additional questions about the person, place, or event, creating a virtual dialogue between image and researchers.¹¹ In the end, of course, as with information obtained from written sources, the researcher must make a personal interpretation of the visual data based on his or her appraisal of its validity as a source.

In stark contrast to historians, middle-class Americans in the nineteenth century rushed to embrace the new photographic medium. In 1850 there were fewer than a thousand photographers in the United States. By 1860, however, an album of family photographs was commonplace in American homes. This album served as a visual extension of the genealogy recorded in the

⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁰ Marsha Peters and Bernard Mergen, "Doing The Rest: The Uses of Photographs in American Studies," *American Quarterly* 29 (Summer 1977): 280.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 289.

family Bible. Many of these albums were greatly expanded during the Civil War when Americans eagerly purchased thousands of individual photographs and packaged sets of photographs of battle scenes. By 1890 the number of commercial photography firms had increased to twenty thousand.¹² This rapid increase in the number of photography studios suggests a special role for photography in everyday American life. The era of the photograph, in fact, coincided with America's change to a thoroughgoing consumer society. The photograph became one of the first--and most valued--items of this new mass consumption.¹³

The rapid growth of photographers in Atlanta came a little later than in the rest of the country. This rebuilding city, home to three professional photographers in 1870,¹⁴ had five photographers in 1880,¹⁵ seven in 1890,¹⁶ and twenty-two by 1900. By this time the city also boasted of three retail establishments specializing in photographic supplies.¹⁷ When the Lane brothers opened their studio in 1939, they joined forty-four other photographers in seeking to earn a living from the public's desire for

¹² Lesy, *Bearing Witness*, viii.

¹³ *Ibid.*, vii-viii.

¹⁴ *Hanleiter's Atlanta City Directory* (Atlanta: William R. Hanleiter, 1870), 13.

¹⁵ *Sholes' Directory of The City of Atlanta* (Atlanta: A.E. Sholes, 1880), 430.

¹⁶ *Atlanta City Directory* (Atlanta: R.L. Polk and Company, 1890), 1247.

¹⁷ *Atlanta City Directory* (Foote & Davies Company, 1900), 1875.

pictorial documentation of every aspect of day-to-day life in Atlanta.¹⁸

J. Hubert Lane had begun his photography career in 1914 with the *Atlanta News*. A short time later, the newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst bought the *News* and changed the name to the *Atlanta Georgian*. J.H.'s brother W.C. joined the *Georgian* staff in 1916. From 1916 until the demise of the *Georgian* in 1939, the two Lanes photographed extensively in Atlanta and in other areas of Georgia for the newspaper and also accepted free-lance work and assignments from wire services. It was the failure of the *Georgian* that catapulted the two brothers into business for themselves. In the early 1940s, the two Lanes were joined in the business by their sons Dan and W.C., Jr. (An advertising slogan used by the firm at the time declared them to be "A 4 Lane Highway to Finer Photographs.") Dan Lane continued the family business for several years after his brother's death, but Lane Brothers Photography, Inc., closed its doors permanently in 1976, a year after Dan's death.

Following her husband's death and the subsequent closing of the family business, Mrs. Lane moved the entire stock of exposed negatives to her home. Most of the cardboard boxes containing the negatives were placed on shelving or stacked on the floor inside a closed section of a carport. Other boxes were stacked outside on a concrete floor where they were vulnerable to all the dangers from the environment except direct rainfall.

Staff members of the GSU Special Collections Department first examined the collection of negatives nine years later in the spring of 1985. It took only a few minutes to grasp the size and comprehensiveness of the collection. Proceeding from box to box, the archivists found example after example of the two characteristics about which they were most concerned: clear, sharp images mostly in good condition and subject matter of certain historical value. The initial survey of the containers revealed images of Franklin D. Roosevelt on his way to Warm Springs, Margaret

¹⁸ *Atlanta City Directory* (Atlanta: Atlanta City Directory Company, Inc., 1939), 2044-45.



Figure 1. Detail from original photograph, "Second grade classroom with reading circle, Atlanta, Georgia, 1942." Lane Brothers Collection, Special Collections Department, William R. Pullen Library, Georgia State University.

Mitchell speaking at Rich's seventy-fifth anniversary celebration in 1942, an Armistice Day Parade in 1941, a parade of Civil War veterans, an Atlanta second grade reading circle in 1942 (See Figure 1), Grantland Rice hunting with Robert Woodruff on the Woodruff plantation, World War II Civilian Defense guards checking the papers of motorists at a bridge in Fulton County, the Reverend Billy Graham preaching in the Peachtree Arcade in 1964, golfing legend Bobby Jones at the Augusta National, a little girl

playing checkers with GI's in a black USO club in 1944 (see Figure 2), Captain Eddie Rickenbacker talking with Atlanta Mayor William Hartsfield, a young polio victim in an iron lung, Jack Dempsey fighting in Atlanta's Ponce de Leon Park, black Atlantans



Figure 2. Detail from original photograph, "Little girl playing checkers with GI's at an Atlanta USO club, 1944." Lane Brothers Collection, Special Collections Department, William R. Pullen Library, Georgia State University.

lining up to register to vote at the Fulton County courthouse in 1946, the signing of the document officially integrating the Atlanta public schools in 1961, a Ku Klux Klan rally atop Stone Mountain in 1939, and one of the most memorable events in Atlanta and

Georgia history: The 1939 premier of *Gone With The Wind* at Atlanta's Loew's Grand Theater.

Three problems, however, were equally in evidence. The first was that some of the negatives had suffered moderate to severe cracking or buckling of the emulsion, probably caused by extreme fluctuations in heat and humidity levels. The second problem was created by the photographers' particular storage method. The negatives were mostly in the 4" x 5" format, on Kodak Safety Film, and stored in paper envelopes only slightly larger than the negative.¹⁹ Some envelopes contained only one negative, but most contained more than one, and some contained a large number. In many of the envelopes containing large numbers of negatives the pressure created by overcrowding had caused all the negatives to curl on both long sides. This curling would later present handling and storage difficulties for processors, but does not present any major obstacles to obtaining good prints of the images. The third problem was the lack of order in the collection. As noted earlier, the Lane brothers stored their negatives in paper envelopes designed to hold 4" x 5" negatives. The entire collection consisted of about fifty linear feet of boxes stuffed with packets of these paper envelopes rubber-banded together. Some packets contained a small section of an alphabetical file, for example, "Fa-Fi." Some other packets contained a chronological grouping, for example, "Nov. 1947." Each envelope generally had notes written on it indicating who had ordered the photograph, the date, and sometimes some specific printing instructions. In addition, many envelopes were not organized in any way. Even worse, many negatives were completely loose. Some of the loose negatives, however, had some identifying remarks written directly onto the border of the negative. A thorough examination of the collection led to the conclusion that whatever organizing system or systems the Lanes may have used over the years was no longer identifiable.

¹⁹ Negatives in 8" x 10", 5" x 7", 35mm, and other sizes, and glass plates in 4" x 5" and 5" x 7" sizes made up about ten percent of the total number of images.

These problems of condition and organization were more than compensated for by the unexpected scope of the images comprising the collection. Many of the glass plates, for instance, were exposed in the 1920s. The Lanes also did a brisk business in re-photographing old photographs, thus creating new negatives of scenes originally captured on film in the last third of the nineteenth century. In addition to this surprising cache of older images, the collection covered a wider geographical area than originally believed. The Lanes' coverage of political campaigns, for instance, took them all over the state of Georgia, as did their coverage of important personalities in all walks of life, significant events, and natural disasters.

While it is true, therefore, that the bulk of the 150,000 images were made in Atlanta during the period 1939-1975, a substantial number were made either during an earlier time period or in some other part of Georgia. The number of negatives dated prior to 1939 is evidence of the extensive free-lance work the Lanes did while officially employed by the *Georgian*.

The processing of the Lane negatives began in June 1986, when the department hired three students to work twenty hours a week during the summer academic quarter. An archivist had already decided to strive for two goals simultaneously: the placement of each negative in its individual protective sleeve and the separation of the negatives into series arranged by subject matter. Using only the identifying notes written by the photographers on the paper envelopes, the students sorted the envelopes into distinct subject matter series:

1. Corporate Bodies
2. Portraits
3. Events
4. Geographical Places
5. Animals, Plants, and Things

All the staff members involved in the project reviewed the literature on arrangement and description techniques for large collections of visual images. While several were somewhat useful,

Renata Shaw's two articles published in 1972 in *Special Libraries* addressed the situation most directly.²⁰

In her articles Shaw set forth three methods of achieving practical cataloging solutions to the physical arrangement of universal pictorial collections. She recommended individual cataloging for valuable items such as artists' drawings, fine prints, fine (that is, art) photography, and original cartoons.²¹ For less valuable images with a common theme, such as five thousand train photographs, she recommended group cataloging.²²

Shaw's third method seemed most nearly to fit the universality of the Lane Brothers collection. For just such large and varied collections, she proposed a self-indexing scheme that would include four distinct subject series: Portraits; Geographical Places; Events; and a rather miscellaneous series titled Things, Plants, and Animals.²³

The students began their initial sort using Shaw's four subject series. It soon became clear, however, that an institutional equivalent of Portraits would have to be created. Corporate Bodies was made the fifth and last subject series. The sequence of the five subject series reflects the respective sizes of the series following the first sort. Probably because the paper envelopes contained information mainly identifying the clients, the large majority of images fell into the first two series.

In addition to resleeving those negatives identified and housed in paper envelopes, the students had to contend with the large number of loose negatives. They did so by separating all loose negatives into two categories, identified and unidentified. Since the

²⁰ Renata V. Shaw, "Picture Organization: Practices and Procedures, Part 2," *Special Libraries* 63 (1972): 448-56, 502-06.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 502

²² *Ibid.*, 505.

²³ Renata V. Shaw, "Picture Organization: Practices and Procedures, Part 2," *Special Libraries* 63 (October 1972): 449.

photographers sometimes wrote caption material directly onto the negative, these were sleeved and assigned to the most appropriate series based on the information provided by the photographer. All the unidentified loose negatives were sleeved and placed in a holding box for further attention at a later stage of the processing cycle.

After making the first general sort into the five series, the next step was to alphabetize all the negatives in each series. Beginning with the Geographical Places series, the staff expected the lessons learned from working on one of the smaller series would pay off later when arranging the larger ones. The alphabetizing process consisted of completing four steps for the contents of each paper envelope:

- I. Remove all negatives from the paper envelope
- II. Place each negative in its own polypropylene sleeve
- III. Examine each negative for internal evidence to determine the most accurate description of its subject matter
- IV. Assign the negative to new envelopes according to the following criteria
 - A. If the internal evidence matched the original notes supplied by the photographer, the negative was returned to the envelope. If the now individually sleeved negatives would no longer fit in the original envelope, a new envelope would be made, transferring a verbatim copy of the original notes to new envelope. In some instances the old envelope would also be included in the new envelope.
 - B. If the negative's internal evidence did not match the original notes, the students prepared a new envelope that contained the new description in a primary position as well as the original information in a secondary position on the face of the envelope.
 - C. If the internal evidence revealed that a negative did not belong in Geographical Places, it was assigned to the transfer box to await later placement in the most appropriate series.

- D. Negatives that were so severely damaged that they could not be sleeved were placed in envelopes with descriptions derived from internal evidence.
- E. Each envelope containing sleeved negatives and accurate descriptions was placed alphabetically into one of the following subseries of Geographical Places
 1. Apartments, hotels, and motels
 2. Named buildings, shopping centers, and other privately owned buildings
 3. Government buildings, parks, other public facilities
 4. Hospitals
 5. Schools, colleges, and universities
 6. Named streets
 7. Numbered streets
 8. Aerial views and skyline views of Atlanta
 9. Copies of old photographs
 10. Places in Georgia outside Atlanta
 11. Places outside Georgia

Subseries one through seven were derived from categories established for metropolitan areas in the zip code directory. The addition of subseries eight through eleven was made necessary by the wide variety of images in the series. In nine of the subseries of Geographical Places, the arrangement is a straightforward alphabetical plan. The arrangement within both Named and Numbered streets, however, is by street number, for example, 124 Jones Street is followed by 126 Jones Street, 130 Jones Street, and so on.

The students employed these same four steps when they began the task of alphabetizing the other four series of negatives: Corporate Bodies; Events; Portraits; and Plants, Things, and Animals. As each series was processed, the students placed more negatives in the transfer box for eventual reassignment to appropriate series.

For each of these subsequent series, transfers from all other series as well as newly identified loose negatives were integrated into the existing body of negatives. Two series, Corporate Bodies and Portraits, comprised only a single alphabetical arrangement. Plants, Things, and Animals, however, naturally subdivided itself into three subseries. The last series, Events, like Geographical Places, was more conveniently divided into several subseries based on the diversity of the subject matter included in the series. The five subseries created within Events were Corporate Bodies, Personal Names, Movie Premiers, Disasters, and Miscellaneous.

In summary, what can be said about a huge aggregation of photographic images such as the Lane Brothers Collection? Earlier in this article it was stated that historians continued to distrust the visual image long after it had been embraced by the vast American middle class as a common method of recording trivial, as well as important, family events. To some extent this distrust was well founded, since it is certainly true that not every visually recorded image of an historical event, place, or person has interpretative value, and it is also true that images are of vastly unequal value as interpreters of past events. Historians gradually, however, came to understand that photographs have a power that seems unique to the visual document. Lesy has tried to explain this power by stating that "photographs intellectually and emotionally engage you to search for clarification either from . . . written sources . . . or from . . . other images."²⁴ Another investigator of the power of photography, Roland Barthes, has written similarly that the "photograph possesses an evidential force, and its testimony bears not on the object but on time In the photograph, the power of authentication exceeds the power of representation."²⁵ Because a collection of photographic images is in a constant state of revision due to new historical approaches with fresh questions about the past, its potential for revelation

²⁴ Michael Lesy, *Bearing Witness*, xx.

²⁵ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1981), 88-89.

transcends even its magnitude or comprehensiveness. Robert A. Sobieszek sums it up nicely by stating that "the value of a collection like this rests in its resiliency in responding to questions of immediate import and its fluidity in suggesting questions not yet asked."²⁶

The Lane Brothers images have attracted intense interest on the part of researchers, who have been gratified to find that the collection is available for research with no restrictions on access or reproduction. This demonstrated capacity of the images to fulfill the researchers' demands has already confirmed that this collection meets both of Sobieszek's criteria.

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²⁶ International Museum of Photography, *Acquisitions*, 2.