



How to Begin a Digital Photo Collection

By Holly Hensley

DIGITIZING LOCAL HISTORY PHOTOS
CAN RESULT IN A GREAT ASSET FOR
THE LIBRARY STAFFERS AND PATRONS.

I work in the local history/genealogy department at a medium-sized public library in New Albany, Ind. The department received an LSTA (Library Science and Technology Act) Grant in 2013 to begin digitizing our collection of more than 7,000 historical photographs. To start, department staffers selected the most historically significant photos to be digitized first (i.e., natural disasters and local businesses, etc.). Later, we sent these photos to a vendor in Indianapolis in batches of 700. There are just slightly more than 3,000 left to be digitized and cataloged, which is being done by Indiana Room staffers. Of course, our main goal is always to increase the access and use of resources that otherwise would not be available to patrons. Since this was a new venture for us, we had to start from scratch. Based on our experience in figuring out the process, here is a list of basic steps for any local history/genealogy department to take in launching its own digital photo project. ▶

Picturing the Past

Our photo collection consists of pictures dating back to the 1860s. Since we have so many early photographs, a lot of the questions we get are related to genealogy research. The majority of our patrons visit us or use our online newspaper index to look for these types of photographs. Many patrons call or email us to find out if we have a photo of one of their ancestors, and having our collection online has really helped some of our long-distance patrons. Using an accurate and a specific-as-possible description of the photos is really essential. Here are a couple of examples of photos from our collection.



The Loughmiller Brothers hardware store, located at 316 State Street. Silas Loughmiller is third from left, and William Loughmiller is fifth from left. Taken ca. 1890s.



This is Pearl Street and Spring Street in New Albany, during the 1937 flood. The Elsby Building, American Bank, and Western Union signs can be seen. The gentlemen in the boat are New Albany residents.

**A LOT
OF PATRONS
USE THE SITE
AS A
GENEALOGY
RESOURCE.**

TEN BASIC STEPS TO BEGIN A DIGITAL PHOTO COLLECTION

1. Establish funding. Get a grant.

If possible, get someone in the department to write it, so it can be tailored specifically to the needs of the project. We got an LSTA Grant. The Indiana Room budget is not as large as that of the other departments in the library. This is because we do not order books on a regular basis, and our programs do not require us to spend a lot of money. Getting the grant was a high priority for our archivist. We wanted to be able to hire an outside vendor to complete the majority of the project. Receiving the grant allowed us to modernize the accessibility of our collection.

2. Catalog the collection. Get a vendor to help out.

We used a vendor to catalog our most historically significant photos first. It was paid for out of our LSTA Grant money. If a photo collection is very large, then it will greatly cut down the time and number of staff members needed to complete the project. Being able to get a grant allowed us to complete the project on a much larger scale than we otherwise could have done. If the funding is there, it is worth it to have professionals help get the project off the ground.

3. Partner with other interested parties. Find a local historical society, museum, or academic library.

Partnering with community organizations can help secure funding that otherwise may not be available. We partnered with the Floyd County Historical Society, and some of its members also scanned photos. This allowed some of the society's photo collection to be digitized as well, expanding

the collection as a whole. Also, teaming up can broaden your audience for the finished product. If local colleges or universities are aware of the library's collection, their students and faculty members can then use it. We frequently get inquiries from faculty at two local universities asking to use photos from our collection in their published works. We also have classes from universities come and visit the department for instruction on how to use our website, as well as to discover what we have to offer. Museums and historical societies can help promote the collection and may have some photos to donate.

4. Get the proper equipment.

If your library staffers will be doing any in-house cataloging or scanning, make sure you have the proper equipment and cataloging software. We have an Epson Expression 11000XL flatbed scanner, which will scan up to 11"x17" photos or documents. To catalog the photos, we use PastPerfect Museum Software. It offers free updates as well. The images are scanned at 600dpi for the best possible resolution.

5. Digitize historically significant photos first.

As previously mentioned, the department staff members decided to digitize the most historically important photos first. Obviously, those photos are the ones patrons will ask about most often. We have had some historic natural disasters in this area (such as the 1937 flooding of the Ohio River, which left New Albany underwater, and the 1974 outbreak of tornadoes across the Midwest), which are popular topics of interest.

6. Use social media.

Our library has a Facebook page, which every department can use. The Indiana Room also has a Flickr account, and we post unidentified photos on it in the hopes that a user might be able to help us. We often post photos of people or places to see if anyone remembers them. We have Mustache Mondays—when we post photos of men with mustaches—and Find Me Fridays—when we post photos of former businesses in the area. Users can post their guesses as to the person or place, and at the end of the day we post who or what it is.

7. Who, what, when, and where.

When cataloging photos, it is really important to include as much information as possible in the description of the picture. For example, "Two people standing in a field" is not much of a description and doesn't make me want to look at the photo more closely. But "Two farmers in a large field of crops located in Floyds Knobs on St. Joe Hill Road" is more interesting and may give someone a clue as to who the two farmers may be. Every photo tells a story, and sometimes, it is up to us to fill in the blanks.

8. Market the collection to local schools and colleges/universities.

Visit the local schools to advertise the photo collection, and let teachers know how they can use it in a lesson plan. Also, if there are any colleges or universities in the area, faculty members may have interest, and students might too, for use in a thesis or term paper. As mentioned in step three, we have had some history classes come to the department for instructional sessions on what we have to offer.

9. Train department staffers to scan and catalog. Training department staff members to finish cataloging and/or scanning the rest of the collection was a must for the Indiana Room. As more photos are donated, they can be scanned and cataloged as department staffers have the time to do so.

10. Avoid using library jargon on your website. Make your site user-friendly. Most people do not like to see jargon online; it's intimidating. Even if we all know the terms and what we are talking about, the patrons do not. Using library lingo is a surefire way to get someone to leave your site. The majority of our users are either retired, older than 65, out of state, or all of the above. It is very important to use standard terms such as "keyword search" and "advanced search." Otherwise, a patron will not know what we are talking about. Also, since the majority of these users may not have internet access at home, they will likely come to you in person for help or call for assistance over the phone, while having a relative assist them in person.

To make searching the Indiana Room photo collection as easy as possible, we featured Keyword Search, Click and Search (patrons click on a letter of the alphabet to see a list of possible search terms), and Advanced Search as possible search options. There is also a Random Images search in which patrons can just browse through the photo collection. When cataloging the individual photos, it was important that the descriptions be as specific as possible, because a lot of patrons use the site as a genealogy resource. Also, patrons can click on an image and print it out.

AND YOU SHOULD ALSO
TRACK YOUR RESULTS.

Indiana Room
WEBSITE STATISTICS, 2013–2015

SEARCH TYPE	AVERAGE NUMBER OF SEARCHES	AVERAGE NUMBER OF RECORDS RETURNED
PHOTO SEARCH	25	6,522
OBJECT SEARCH	11	0
ARCHIVE SEARCH	18	9
MAIN SEARCH	3	1,638
ADVANCED SEARCH	2	330

And you should also track your results. We began keeping stats to track the number of hits on our website in February 2013, and above is a chart showing the general statistics for the site since we started. It has received approximately 8,000 views so far. We hope this leads to patrons exploring other parts of our library's website as well.

No matter the size of your library's photo collection or the amount of your budget, digitizing local history photos can result in a great asset for the library staffers and patrons. As long as we are giving better access to our resources, making history come to life for young students, or helping

someone identify a long-lost ancestor, any size project is worth it. 

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(hhensley@nafclibrary.org) is the Indiana Room librarian at the New Albany-Floyd County (Ind.) Public Library. As such, she is responsible for cataloging and digitizing the historic photo collection. Hensley holds an M.L.S. from IUPUI (Indiana University-Purdue University-Indianapolis) and has been working at the New Albany library for more than 8 years. A real history buff, working in archives is her dream job.

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