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Resurrecting Images from the Morgue: A Case Study of the London Free Press Collection of Photographic Negatives

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Abstract:

This paper is a case study of the ongoing transformation of the London Free Press Collection of Photographic Negatives from a physical archive to a digital one. This Collection is a typical medium-sized newspaper photographic negative morgue dating between 1938 and 1992. These morgues possess enormous value as visual evidence of the development of communities, and society in general. The London Free Press serves a market of around a million people in Southwestern Ontario, Canada. The Collection's current custodian, the University of Western Ontario Archives and Special Collections, is in the process of transforming it from a purely physical entity to a digital resource of great research potential.

To place the case study in a broader context, the author reviews some of the recent literature on the topic of newspaper photograph morgues. He then delves into a detailed description of the custodial history of the Collection as well as details about current collection management issues, including metadata and digitization. The author concludes that the digitized body of tens of thousands of unique images will be more than enough to satisfy many visual researchers and could form part of a North American digital photojournalism archive of immense historical value.

The *London Free Press* is a medium-sized newspaper (and media property) serving the city and region of London, Ontario, Canada. The University of Western Ontario (currently branded as "Western University" or hereafter "Western", and located in London) maintains a regional archive of impressive breadth and depth. One of its signature collections is the London Free Press Collection of Photographic Negatives (hereafter LFP Collection). One could also refer to this enormous archive as a photograph morgue, a term that might imply the contents are dead and useless. Laura McCann, in her 2017 article "The Whole Story: News Agency Photographs in Newspaper Photo Morgue Collections" points out that the term morgue is "…an extension of the concept of 'dead news'. Once a particular news cycle ends, the photographs are archived, or in the parlance of newspapers, sent to the morgue"[1]. Despite their apparent mortality, newspaper

photograph morgues are rich sources of visual content for both amateur and academic history. McCann explains that these morgues "are rich troves of cultural and historical information…prized by a wide range of communities, from academic research library users to local history enthusiasts and genealogists"[2]. The author goes on to caution that such large and complex collections come with significant challenges, including the presence of news agency photographs that are problematic particularly with respect to format and copyright as they were not created by photographers employed by the newspaper[3].

Hain Teper's earlier 2004 article "Newspaper photo morgues – a survey of institutional holdings and practices" in the journal *Library Collections, Acquisitions, and Technical Services* serves as the broadest study of a topic not covered in depth elsewhere in the collecting literature[4]. Hain Teper's paper provides results of a survey that her institution, the University of Kentucky's Audio-Visual Archives, conducted to determine how other collecting organizations handled photographic morgues. Some of the results are unsurprising: these collections are very large, rich and resource intensive; on the other hand, it is surprising that so many institutions are unaware of best practices and cost models relating to their management.[5]

McCann and Hain Teper's articles also make clear that negatives are not the only component of a typical newspaper photo morgue. Others often include print photographs, clippings of published pictures, and indexes[6]. Confusingly, some definitions of newspaper morgue do not even include photographs. For instance, Richard L. Saunders' 2015 article "Too Late Now: Libraries' Intertwined Challenges of Newspaper Morgues, Microfilm, and Digitization" in *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural History* describes the significant difficulties that libraries face in managing the archived content of published

newspaper issues themselves. However, Saunders does not delve into the equally challenging world of newspaper photograph content, most of which was never published.[7]

This article is concerned with the broad definition of newspaper morgue, which focuses on photographic content. What follows is a case study that describes how Western is resurrecting the contents of a significant morgue through extensive digitization and metadata clean-up. The case of the LFP Collection fits well within the framework laid out in these articles, except that it consists only of negatives. However, negatives are the core of these pre-digital morgues. Otherwise, like most photograph morgues that the authors describe, or allude to, the LFP Collection is sizable, popular, and demands extensive resources for even basic upkeep and use. This case study will enhance the available literature on practices associated with the improvement of access to these collections.

Western is in the process of transforming the LFP Collection from the purely physical to the increasingly digital, and from the relatively inaccessible to the more broadly accessible. Through systematic digitization and compilation of metadata, Western is gradually converting it from a body of images and information accessed mainly piecemeal in its native form to a visual data mine. This data mine has the potential to support academic research in several areas; the case study will deal with this possibility.

Overview of the Newspaper and its Coverage

The *London Free Press* is a medium-sized newspaper that began in the small, but growing, town of London, Canada West in 1849[8]. One hundred years later, in 1949, it celebrated

its 100th anniversary as a regional powerhouse, covering an area of about 15,000 square miles with a population of a million. At the zenith of the newspaper era, and the dawn of the television era, the *Free Press* covered both mundane and extraordinary events through a network of local bureaus. Each bureau had a photographer on staff. During the peak of this era, between 1950 and 1980, the photographers covered around 5000 to 7000 stories, and accumulated an average of 20,000 negatives, each year.

For almost 150 years until 1997, the newspaper was owned by the prominent Blackburn family. Beginning in the middle of the twentieth century, the family expanded into the radio and television business and so had a monopoly on local and regional media. Since 1997, several large media conglomerates (most recently Postmedia Network, Inc.) have successively owned the *London Free Press* along with virtually every daily newspaper in Canada, let alone Southwestern Ontario[9].

Where and what is Southwestern Ontario? This region lies between Western New York and the Michigan thumb. It is Canada's most southerly region among the Great Lakes with a climate that is consequently moderate. This area is somewhat culturally and economically distinct from the Toronto megalopolis to its east; at the same time, it has strong economic ties to the U.S. Midwest, especially the automotive industry of southeastern Michigan.

Pre-Donation Photographic Practices at the *London Free Press*

Staff photographers of the *Free Press* created and accumulated these negatives as they undertook their duties. They worked out of London as well as several regional offices in

Chatham, St. Thomas, Sarnia, and Stratford, among other smaller communities. As a result, their work depicts events in both the city of London, and many nearby towns, villages, and rural places. Occasionally, the photographers travelled beyond Southwestern Ontario to places such as Toronto, Ottawa, Montreal, or beyond, to document national or international stories of local interest. For instance, the *Free Press* sent a photographer to cover the August 1967 Detroit riots. The newspaper had enough resources to make this happen once or twice a year.

Staff filed the negatives chronologically in envelopes in a central repository or morgue, essentially the same type as the ones described by McCann and Hain Teper. The morgue also included prints, index cards, and clipping files. The newspaper published only about 20% of the images, so the negatives represented the most complete, and hence most historically valuable, part of the morgue.

Typically, each negative envelope contained a brief description of the job and the contents. These descriptions did not always correspond to the captions used for published items. The nature of the jobs varied over time. In the early years including World War 2, there tended to be fewer jobs but more documentation of each job. Whereas in 1942, only about 450 jobs were undertaken, by 1950 there were over 3500. Unsurprisingly, the war home front dominated the work of the World War 2 era photographers. By contrast, in the 1950s, the coverage shifted to focus more on commercial and promotional jobs, wedding photos (of post-war baby boomers!), documentation of “society” meetings, conferences, clubs, and so on. The coverage for this period reflected the general industrial, commercial, and social prosperity of the time, which very much included Southwestern Ontario.

Over the decades, staff used several different negative formats, but most were in the 2 to 4-inch category. They filed chronological negatives in envelopes that corresponded to different

events, both planned and unplanned, over the course of a given year. One envelope might have contained two or three negatives; another dozens, depending on how much work the photographer did. For instance, each year's coverage of the region's annual Western Fair in September resulted in the accumulation of dozens of envelopes and hundreds of negatives with no detailed description of the contents.

In a regional community such as the *London Free Press* coverage area, the focus was to some extent on unplanned "hard" news such as car accidents, break-ins, and storms, but more so on the planned community events and society meetings that dominated the era. This was especially true of the small-town bureaus, where life was quieter. Overall, the collection documents people above everything; this is crucial for assessing its potential value for academic research. However, one should be aware that the coverage of the photographers and the newspaper in general, even up to the 1960s, reflected the prevailing middle class and White Anglo-Saxon Protestant preferences of the time.

Donation to Western University

For as long as half a century, the collection was stored in suboptimal conditions in the newspaper's own vaults until the first donation to Western in 1984. The first Blackburn donation covered forty years' worth of this accumulation of negatives from about 1939 to 1979. The agreement at the time transferred copyright along with the negatives. Canadian copyright law at the time gave no rights to staff photographers of corporations, so it was straightforward for the Blackburn family to transfer its intellectual property along with the negatives. Nevertheless, the *London Free Press* staff retained generous rights of physical access to the collection for their occasional use. Subsequent transfers of negatives up to the mid-1990s increased the span of the collection to its current 1939-1992.

Western made cold storage available to preserve the negatives in 2004. Much of the impetus for this was the presence of thousands of cellulose acetate negatives suffering from, or vulnerable to, rapid deterioration in the absence of cold storage. We have begun a systematic effort to identify, remove, and scan those negatives suffering from this “vinegar syndrome”, where the deterioration results in acidic off gassing and image damage. , These negatives are confined to the years 1956 to 1959. See [Figure 1 near here] for an example of a cellulose acetate negative from 1958 that is in an advanced stage of deterioration from vinegar syndrome. The emulsion layer has begun to exhibit severe channeling as it is released from the film base. Preservation related concerns such as this require the injection of significant resources to deal with them.

In 2019, the *London Free Press* transferred to another local library job indexes, prints, and clipping files from the film photography era, which are the other typical components of a typical newspaper morgue. At one time, Western Archives and Special Collections hoped to acquire these in order to round out the collection and assist with providing access to it However, Western does expect to receive additional negatives from the 1993-2004 period.

The *Free Press* is not in immediate danger of ceasing publication; moreover, the company has begun to recognize the value of their portion of the morgue (especially prints). The newspaper has begun to re-publish items on a weekly basis, so this may decrease their owner’s desire to part with soon.

Description of the Collection

Given that Western Archives does not, and will not, possess job indexes (although some photocopies of these were provided by the newspaper over the years), our main source of

information about the collection contents are chronological listings of negative envelopes that available for each year between 1936 and 1992. Some of these listings were created by staff of the newspaper during that period. However, since the collection was acquired in batches by Western University between the mid-1980s and mid-1990s, staff and students have created or transcribed many new listings, often based on the short descriptions found on the envelopes. Therefore, Western Libraries has expended significant staff and financial resources over the decades on providing access to this signature collection. These listings are available in our public Reading Room, via our online holdings database, and the Archives' website.

Until very recently, the only means of physical access to the collection was through on-site examination of the negatives. As the negatives are in cold storage, time is required to acclimatize them before patrons can view them with the use of gloves, magnifying glass, and light table. Up until 5 years ago, patrons could request a print or scan; now, we offer scans that they are free to reformat as they wish. Western owns copyright in the collection and places no restrictions on research or non-profit use of the negatives but does apply a fee to commercial use. Like most of the collections that Hain Teper describes, the LFP Collection is in daily use, most by offsite patrons. For instance, in 2019, there were 52 onsite visits to view the collection; however, our reference inquiry software recorded 335 separate inquiries about the collection during the same period.

Digitization

Western has been digitizing parts of the collection on demand for a fee of between $5 and $7 since scanning equipment became available around 2003. Prior to this date, we provided copy negatives or prints. The vast majority of current access to the collection results in a request for a

scanned copy of one or multiple negatives. These efforts have not produced a representative sample of the collection as patrons have been interested in various time periods and topics.

In 2013, we began an ongoing effort to scan selected years of the collection to improve access by allowing us to post and exhibit online digital surrogates for purposes of community engagement. Some donor funding was available to work with an off-site scanning vendor. We also reasoned that scanning would also enhance preservation by minimizing the repeated handling of negatives. Since then, our off-site vendor has scanned at least one negative from each envelope for about half the years between 1941 and 1969. To date, we have spent close to $200,000 from a preservation fund within our library acquisition budget to scan approximately 80,000 negatives. This fund can be used to enhance preservation of, and improve access to, library collections. Additional, externally funded, projects have resulted in the digitization of several thousand more negatives for those years not covered by our main project. We hope to continue this project into the 1970s and 1980s parts of the collection assuming that our preservation fund will continue to be available.

In scanning selected years of the collection, we have tried to avoid being subjective (beyond those already mentioned that are inherent to the collection) about the significance of an assignment or envelope. We would prefer that the scanning be as representative as possible, and so have scanned at least one negative from even the most mundane of assignments. In most cases, this is the aesthetically most pleasing image of the handful that were created. Nevertheless, we have made additional scans from envelopes with either many negatives (e.g. the Western Fair envelopes noted above) or obvious historical significance. For example, we digitized several dozen images in multiple envelopes of the extraordinary visit of a *Free Press* photographer, George Blumson, to the Selma, Alabama march in early 1965. The photographers

accompanied several London area ministers and priests on their visit to provide financial support to Martin Luther King, Jr. [See figure 2 near here]

What follows is a more typical example of how we are digitizing the collection, as funds become available. See [Figure 3 near here], a sample envelope with metadata, as well as the contents, 6 2-inch negatives relating to the same topic: “National Ballet of Canada Arrive at CPR”, photographer: B. Smith. This example reveals the often minimal and sometimes cryptic quality to the metadata. “CPR” refers to the Canadian Pacific Railway’s London station. As the negatives were originally intended to be re-used by newspaper staff, identifying information was not always the most fulsome. Additionally, one of these images was published in the January 30, 1956 issue. The accompanying published caption provides much more information about the nature of this visit and enriches the existing barebones metadata.

Two of the six images were digitized, the selection being made based on which were most representative of the event. Images like this may be of interest not just to researchers who are interested in the event being documented, but to those who might be interested in, for example, women’s fashions, given the elegant nature of their garb. However, the metadata is not rich enough as it is to make that clear in the absence of the image, but there may be a future for crowdsourced tagging or even photo analysis tools to automate this.

It is very typical for archives staff and users of this collection to look at images in a careful, qualitative, one-at-a-time manner. For example, when posting items on our social media channels, we tend to pick a few images and attempt to analyze them one a time for their visual interest. It might entail tagging the images with additional metadata; in other cases, we do additional research to locate contextual information (beyond the basic metadata) that might be of interest, most often geographic information. Sometimes, this entails looking at a published and

captioned image; in other cases, it might entail consulting other sources such as municipal directories or Google Maps. We are placing the metadata listings that are not already in our database online. However, we are not yet able to offer online the entire body of digitized content (60,000 images and climbing), except for specific projects.

Canada 150 Project

Western's Canada 150 project was a unique example where we uploaded thousands of images with only the existing minimal metadata[10]. Canada 150 was a national initiative to celebrate the 150th anniversary of Canada's creation as a country (Confederation). We decided to scan a year's worth of representative LFP images and post as many as possible as a form of outreach to the community. We picked the year 1967 because it was Canada's centennial year. These 2600 online images (out of a total of 6600 taken for the year) now constitute a macro-record of one year (1967) in one Canadian region, where national and international coverage such as the Canadian centennial and hippie culture would occasionally intermingle with the day to day imagery of the community.

Through our systematic digitization program, we are slowly reformatting this collection from a purely physical body of negative images into a digital archive of positive images. Therefore, in a sense, as it posts and exhibits items online, Western is publishing a collection of primarily unpublished items. What are the implications of this? There is a difference between publishing in the original newspaper and on an archives website, or social media page. It is true that we are reformatting and preparing a body of images that is historical and no longer a by-product of the newspaper business. We are reformatting and publishing these images as part of

an effort to increase community awareness of a visual record of potential interest. Beyond this goal, what are the possible uses of a large digital historical archive?

The LFP Collection and its developing digital surrogate focus on people. Photographs of people, of the respectable middle classes, dominate the contents. Scenes without people exist but they are in the minority. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, much of the use of this collection to date has been related to personal interest as individuals seek higher quality versions of published photographs of themselves or relatives. There is nothing wrong with this, but what about the academic use of the collection? One example of a recent academic teaching project was a film studies class, where students used the images to support the creation of film documentaries about various aspects of London's visual history. The instructor required his students to research and pick images (using the collection as a physical resource to be mined one at a time). What about the digital resource of 60,000+ images? Can these images be mined for information about the visual history of this region and culture in general? The research could be done topically within the dominant chronological framework. For example, how did clothing or hair styles change through the decades? The metadata itself could be mined using textual analysis software of greater sophistication such as NVivo. Tools like this can index large volumes of text to ascribe it greater meaning for research purposes. Even simple methods such as crowdsourced tagging could be used to enhance the metadata with more information about image contents.

Conclusion

What is the future of newspaper photograph archives? Keith Greenwood's 2011 article "Digital Photo Archives Lose Value as Record of Community History" describes how modern newspaper practices have changed what is retained and accessible to researchers and other users[11]. Unlike negative archives such as that of the *London Free Press*, few if any unpublished

photographs are retained in digital newspaper photograph archives. Greenwood asserts that "an archive built to serve internal interests from the perspective of photographers and editors will not be the same as one constructed to preserve an ongoing history of an organization or community"[12].

More disturbingly, Kathleen A. Hansen and Nora Paul's 2015 article "Newspaper archives reveal major gaps in digital age" in *Newspaper Research Journal* goes into much detail about how the several decades worth of digital photograph archives are inaccessible in most of the ten institutions under included in the study. With respect to legacy pre-digital formats such as negatives and prints, collections are often broken up and have varying levels of public accessibility.[13]

Moreover, in the case of the *London Free Press*, its current practice is for photographers to maintain their own digital photographs and copyright to them. Furthermore, since the 2012 changes to copyright legislation, Canadian photographers own copyright in their work, unless negotiated away. For all practical purposes, therefore, there is no future for Western, or perhaps any archives or library, in this kind of digital newspaper photograph archiving. It would be too difficult to obtain all the necessary individual archives and associated permissions. Even if a university archives does acquire such a newspaper digital photograph archive, it will not be as complete and representative as its predecessor film negative archives. Future digital photograph archives may well be retained by the large media conglomerates if they can negotiate copyright away from photographers. Beyond this point, as is apparent, there is no guarantee that the *London Free Press*, and other medium-sized newspapers like it will survive, as local media remains very much under threat.

Regardless of these probable future limitations, the *London Free Press* newspaper negative archive of 1.6 million images, constitutes an immensely valuable record of two thirds of the 20th century. Even if Western digitizes only 10% of this material, which is an achievable goal, it will have created a digital archive of 150,000 or so images of life in a medium-sized North American city. While these numbers pale in comparison to the daily output of smartphones (probably about 1 million a day in London, Ontario alone), they contain enough material to satisfy many visual researchers. When added to the output of newspaper morgues across North America, the value is multiplied many times and an archive of local or regional significance becomes part of a resource of national and international significance.

This paper was originally presented at the Photohistory/Photofuture Conference in Rochester, New York, on April 21, 2018.

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[1] Laura McCann, "The Whole Story: News Agency Photographs in Newspaper Photo Morgue Collections", *The American Archivist* 80, no. 1: 185.
[2] Ibid., 164.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Jennifer Hain Teper, "Newspaper photo morgues – a survey of institutional holdings and practices", *Library Collections, Acquisitions, and Technical Services* 28 (2004): 106-125.
[5] Ibid., 121.
[6] Ibid., 107.
[7] Richard L. Saunders, "Too Late Now: Libraries' Intertwined Challenges of Newspaper Morgues, Microfilm, and Digitization", *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural History* 16, no. 2 (2015): 127-140.
[8] Canada West became Ontario upon Canadian Confederation in 1867.
[9] Laura McCann describes how the same sort of consolidation has taken place in the American newspaper business in her article "The Whole Story" cited above.
[10]
[11] Keith Greenwood, "Digital Photo Archives Lose Value As Record of Community History", *Newspaper Research Journal* 32, no. 3 (2011): 82-96.
[12] Ibid., 93.
[13] Kathleen A. Hansen and Nora Paul, "Newspaper archives reveal major gaps in digital age", *Newspaper Research Journal* 36, no. 3 (2015): 290-298.