

The Minneapolis Photo Collection

(Part of the James K. Hosmer Special Collections at Hennepin County Library)

We spoke to Ted Hathaway, Manager of Special Collection, Preservation and Digitization. Hughes has been in this position for a little under two years, though he has been with the library in other capacities since 2009.

Description of the Library and its Photographic Collection

The Hennepin County Library launched in 1922 in Minnetonka, Minnesota. In 2008, the library merged with the Minneapolis Library system, creating a premier 41-library system to serve both the city at large and suburban Hennepin County. The library is home to the Minneapolis Photo Collection, which according to the library's website "contains thousands of historic photographs of the city dating from the 1840s to the present. The photo collection is particularly strong in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and contains images of buildings, people, places and events." In addition to the Minneapolis Photo Collection, the Special Collections at the library houses the Kittleson World War II Collection, the Hoag Mark Twain Collection, and the Dodge Autograph Collection, among others.

"The photo collection is related to our Minnesota history collection," Hathaway says. "Part of that collection's main purpose is to provide historical imagery of the city's past in all aspects: buildings, organizations, individuals, street scenes, events, incidents. Anything related to the city's past in the shape of imagery."

A large part of the collection is derived from various city newspapers from the early to mid-twentieth century, including the *Minnesota Tribune*, the *Minnesota Democrat*, the *Minnesota Journal*, the *Minnesota Republican*, and the *Minnesota Athenaeum*. "We also have a very large collection of slides from city planning departments," Hathaway says. "Both of these are very large in volume. In total, I would say we have upwards of 100,000 total images."

One particular collection that Hathaway says has always been of particular interest are hundreds of original photos from Edward Bromley. Bromley was one of America's earliest photojournalists. He moved to Minnesota from New York in 1867, when he was nineteen years old. He made it his mission to cull together a comprehensive photographic history of Minneapolis. Beginning in the late 1870s, Bromley began collecting daguerreotypes and photographs depicting the city, and he quickly grew his collection by purchasing the glass-negative collections from pioneer Minnesota photographers. "We have his original glass plate negatives," Hathaway says, "several hundred from the late 19th century, dating back to the earliest days of the city."

Hathaway says that the images collected from the Minnesota newspapers are also always generally very popular with the general public. "There is not necessarily a specific type of photograph that makes [the collection] valuable," he says, "but it's the sheer volume and scope."

Another popular collection is the city planning commissions from the mid-late 1950s to the 1990s, which are mostly composed of slides. Hathaway says, "these are of particular interest because they are in color, which adds a new feature to the collection."

Condition of the Collections

When asked about the general conditions of the holdings in the photographic collections, Hathaway said it varied greatly, partly due to the different materials and partly due to the ways in which the collections were originally stored. "The early ones are in generally good shape, because they were managed well from very early on," Hathaway says. "Very few of our glass plates, for example, were damaged. The newspaper photos, however, are not in the best of shape because of the way they were stored initially. They were stored in old acidic envelopes with old acidic news clippings." However, Hathaway says that the sheer scope of their holdings makes it difficult to systematically go in and preserve the entire collection. "But when we do process images, we store them in acid-free conditions with

buffer paper. But before that they just were not the best. Many have been folded and creased with the edges rubbed off.”

The photographic collections are kept in a separate room in the stack area, primarily in vertical filing cabinets or slide storage boxes. “We have special vertical files cabinets for glass plate negatives,” Hathaway says. “All of these are in the storage room to which the public does not have access. It is not climate-controlled.”

Access to the Public

The general public does not have direct access to the general non-digitized holdings and must go through staff to access the collections. However, the digital content they can access directly online. “Most of our inquiries come from remote contact,” Hathaway says, “through phone or email or are otherwise passed on. It is usually out of that process that we find images for people. For example, recently someone was looking for items relating to the Ancel Keys starvation experiments in the 1940s, which we knew we had. It took a while to find them piecemeal in the collection, but once we’ve done that, if it’s a remote patron, then it is very easy to scan and send the images directly to the patron.” Hathaway says they like to do the scanning themselves, but they also have the equipment available for the patrons to scan the images if they so desire. The library does not provide prints or reproductions, but it provides these digital images at no cost to the patron.

Staffing

There are no employees dedicated specifically to the photographic collections. “There are only two fulltime staffers in the department,” Hathaway says. “We cover and manage all of it, not just a principal part.”

Funding

The photographic collections receive no general funding outside the library, but they have used grant funds for other preservation efforts or endowments outside of the photo collections. “But none were directed at the photo collection, except during the early digitization efforts which were funded through grant monies and from a private

foundation,” Hathaway say. “The only funds used for the photography collection are generally for preservation.”

Acquisitions

The library does not actively seek acquisitions for its photography collection. “But if the opportunity presents itself, we go for it,” Hathaway says. “Recently we were contacted by somebody from the city’s Community Planning and Economic Development Committee. They had a number of historic items and photos that they were de-accessioning and wanted to know if we wanted them.”

Another example Hathaway gave of a recent acquisition involved a former ballet dancer who used to live and work in New York City. He had many photos of himself, mostly negatives, from the 1950s and 1960s. “We didn’t necessarily see and go after these images to solicit, but, when we learned about them through the individuals coming to us, we were interested,” Hathaway says. “And we were interested partly because of the photographic content.”

Hathaway says that the library occasionally stumbles upon what he calls “internal acquisitions.” “The city library is very old and has passed through different management many times,” Hathaway explains. “So there is a certain element of ‘grandma’s attic,’ where we run across things that we frankly didn’t know we had. For example, we [found] a box the other day of several rolls of negatives from the Minneapolis Aquatennial in the 1940s.” Hathaway says this box was found in the back of a drawer and, “oddly enough, it had glass plate negatives. The box was labelled rubber bands.”

While the holdings in the photography collection initially came primarily from newspapers and a few private collections, the library is increasingly obtaining materials from government sources. “We are building a stronger relationship with the city,” Hathaway says. “For example, we received slides from a now defunct library in City Hall, which closed ten years ago. Most of the materials came to us, among them thousands of slides.”