

OUT OF THE ARCHIVES

Metadata revisited: best practices and prioritizing

STORY

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PHOTOGRAPHS

Collection of the Center

FOLLOWERS OF THE CENTERS'S online collections may have noticed that several of our recently posted Robert A. Hadley selections are missing key pieces of contextual and descriptive information. While he was a talented photographer, Hadley did not consistently note the dates, locations, or even subjects depicted in his images. For archivists like myself, knowing this information, or "metadata," is vital; it enables us to better preserve, catalog, share, and understand images in our care.

When image metadata is omitted or inaccurate, archivists consider various aspects of the image "unidentified" and sometimes attempt to fill in the missing information. Strategies include drawing on our own visual literacy to identify dates and locations, searching image databases and print resources for visual matches or contextual information, and consulting subject-experts. However, I, like most archivists, lack the time and resources to investigate every image. This is why, in the case of Robert A. Hadley's work, I have posted photographs with incomplete metadata to the Center's digital collections and asked online audiences to assist in identifying the images. (If you want to help, please visit and comment on images in the Hadley albums we have posted on our Flickr page: www.flickr.com/photos/railphotoart/albums)

Considering my recent challenges with the Hadley Collection, it is timely to revisit metadata in this column. (See "Out of the Archives" no. 5 in issue 2016:4 for an introduction to the topic.) Photographers can greatly reduce the number unidentified images in collections by transcribing image metadata in a coherent and consistent manner. Like a well-written newspaper cutline, good image metadata should provide clear answers to the *when, where, what, who, why, and how* of the photograph they describe. I encourage you to avoid using excessive railroad jargon and shorthand, since you never know who will be working with your images in the future. Family members or archivists may not possess the subject-expertise to decipher "jargon" metadata.

Recording metadata may seem daunting to individuals with a large backlog of unidentified images. Plus, images that depict locomotives are rife with specific details to record—such as locomotive models and numbers, train numbers and names, railroads, directions, etc. So, with these issues in mind, I've compiled the following list of suggestions on how to prioritize and record metadata.

Minimum Metadata: Location and Date

When recording metadata, prioritize date and location. Just knowing when and where an image was shot is a great starting point for identifying photographs. For example, Ted Rose's relative date and location metadata enabled the Center to find an individual who could help identify Rose's Mexico images (Figure 1). A tip for those who possess large collections of unidentified images: start with recording dates and locations at the "box" or "binder" level rather than at the "item" level. (See OTA no. 5 for more information.) Specific suggestions:

Location. *Where was this photograph taken?* Be sure to record the city, state, and country in which the image was shot. Avoid using short-hand, nicknames, and non-standard abbreviations when referring to locations—they are especially confusing for those who lack railroad expertise. For instance, the Center's junior staff members have had a particularly hard time deciphering Robert Hadley's short-hand for city names (see Figure 2). If you must use short-hand, then provide users with an explanatory key or legend. Generally, it is best to describe locations with the legally recognized names for the nearest incorporated or census-designated place and postal code abbreviations for states or provinces. Include timetable locations if known. If photographs are identified by timetable locations alone, try to include the relative location of the nearest town or city. Timetable locations alone may be confusing for archivists or future users who lack railroad expertise.

Date. *When was this photograph taken?* Record the day, month, and year the photograph was shot. Numerical formats for dates such as YYYY-MM-DD are easy for you to record and for future users to decipher later. If you cannot remember the year an image was shot, apply a circa date to the image. This approximate date will indicate to future users that the image was shot somewhere within ten years of the "circa" year given, and even that level of information can be helpful.

Additional Metadata:

Subjects, Assignments, Media, Techniques

Beyond date and location, archivists want metadata that describe not only what an image depicts, but also its context, or the circumstances surrounding the image's creation, use, and relationship to other materials. Archival processing proceeds at an expedited pace when image creators provide this information.



Figure 1. The relative dates and locations recorded on Ted Rose's negative sleeves led the Center to contact Robert Ludwig, a friend and traveling companion of Rose. Cross referencing Rose's images against his own logbooks, Ludwig was able to identify several images. This one, taken on September 9, 1961, depicts westbound National Railways of Mexico 4-6-2 locomotive no. 2530 near Toluca, Mexico. Rose-01-126-008

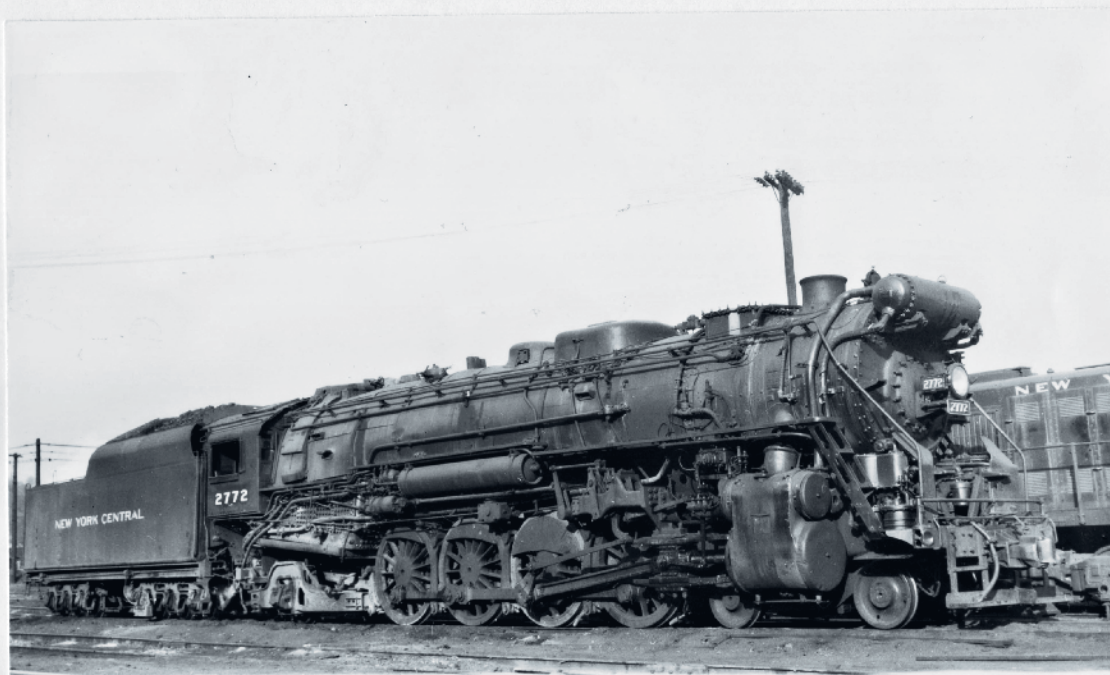
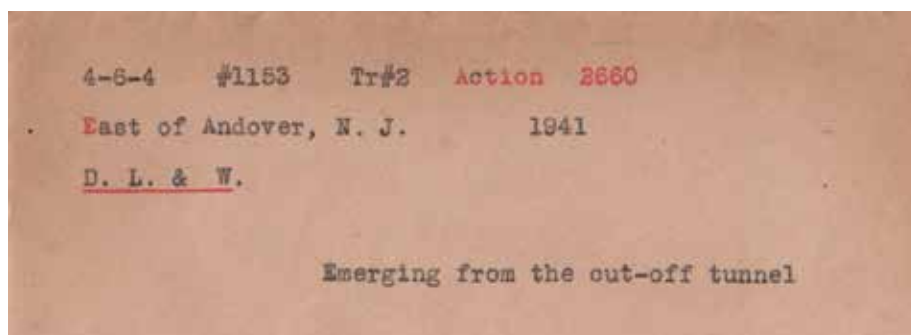


Figure 2. Robert Hadley's non-standard abbreviations for place names have been particularly challenging for staff members at the Center. Executive director Scott Lothes drew on his subject-expertise to identify the abbreviation for this location as Weehawken, New Jersey, where New York Central 4-8-2 no. 2772 posed in 1951.

NYC 2772 4-8-2 WHEWKN, NJ 1951
235-2



Figures 3 and 4. Donald W. Furler typed clear, concise image metadata on many of his negative sleeves. This particular sleeve includes a brief image description, date, relative location, railroad reporting mark, train number, and locomotive number and wheel arrangement. Furler-03-016-01

For instance, Donald W. Furler's detailed captions have allowed the Center's part-time interns to process approximately 5,000 images from the Furler Collection within the last year (see Figures 3 and 4).

In an ideal world, all photographers would record as much image metadata as Furler. However, I understand many people lack the time or resources to do so. If you're pressed for time when noting image metadata, do not worry about capturing every detail. Instead, concentrate on recording information that is not readily apparent in the image, such as:

Photographic Subjects: Objects. *What does this photograph depict?* Many rail photographers address this question by recording railroad names, reporting marks, locomotive numbers, wheel arrangements, train names, directions, and engine model numbers. While frequently helpful and of great interest to railfans, not all these details are always necessary. For instance, railroad names, wheel arrangements, reporting marks, and locomotive numbers are often readily apparent to image viewers—who can record these details as they observe them. Concentrate instead on listing less obvious details such as train numbers, names, or directions.

Photographic Subjects: People. *Who's in this photograph?* Individuals pictured in photographs are less readily identifiable than trains, but of no less importance. Knowing the names of people depicted in an image increases the informational value of the photograph as a historic document, provides clues to the photograph's purpose and function, and can even reveal details about the life or artistic process of the photographer. For instance, Wallace Abbey's photograph of friends Chic Kerrigan and Ted Cole

indicates the habits and companions of Abbey in his formative years (see Figure 5). Identify people in photographs by their full legal names. If known, include the person's title or relationship to the photographer in the identification. When identifying groups, list names from left to right.

Photo Assignment/Series. *Why was this photograph taken?* Photographs are produced as works of fine art, commissions on behalf of commercial clients, publication images, or for the photographer's own enjoyment. When recording image metadata, note whether the image is associated with a commercial job, assignment, or photographic series. These metadata further the archivist's comprehension of the image's intended function as well as the context of its creation. Knowing this information helps archivists understand how images in a collection relate to one another; e.g., whether images belong to the same fine art series or were shot during the same commercial assignment.

Media/Techniques. *How was this photograph taken?* Generally speaking, detailed notes regarding the photographic media or techniques/camera settings used to produce an image are lower priorities than other metadata. Most archivists are trained to identify various photographic materials and formats. This is a necessary part of archival education as different materials require specific storage environments to prevent (or at least slow) chemical deterioration, biological decay, and mechanical damage. While you do not necessarily need to list every photographic format in your collection, it is important to note potentially hazardous or fragile media such as nitrate and acetate films. Regarding techniques, this information is helpful to know if it exists—it enables archivists and users to better understand photographers' technical expertise and artistic process. However, identifying the aperture and shutter speed settings used in every image is rarely worth the time or effort, at least when compared to providing other metadata.

Archival terms

Like railroading, archiving has its own language. Some terms used in this column appear below, as defined by the Society of American Archivists (SAA). See a full glossary of archival and records terminology at: www2.archivists.org/glossary

Context--n. ~ The organizational, functional, and operational circumstances surrounding materials' creation, receipt, storage, or use, and its relationship to other materials.

Informational Value (also reference value and research value), n. ~ The usefulness or significance of materials based on their content, independent of any intrinsic or evidential¹ value.

Metadata--n. ~ A characterization or description documenting the identification, management, nature, use, or location of information resources (data). More commonly, "data about the data."

Visual Literacy--n. ~ The ability to decipher cultural and technological systems that express meaning using graphic images, icons, or symbols.

Railroad Heritage Visual Archive Updates

Our Madison office recently welcomed Natalie Dust as the Center's newest photography archives intern. Over the past few months, Natalie has been processing slides from the Donald W. Furler and Thomas F. McIlwraith Collections. Meanwhile, volunteer John Kelly has just finished updating metadata from Fred Springer's Austria images and is moving on to slides Springer shot in Australia. I have recently received the final batch of slides from J. Parker Lamb, and I look forward to wrapping up processing the collection. In addition, the Center anticipates the forthcoming acquisition of the Jim Shaughnessy Collection the coming months. Comprised of approximately 60,000 negatives, 30,000 color slides, and even a few glass plates, the Shaughnessy Collection will be our largest acquisition to date.

Jordan Radke, archives manager emeritus, has posted several selections from the Robert A. Hadley Collection to our website and Flickr account in the last few weeks. At Lake Forest College, associate archivist Colleen O'Keefe continues to edit and enter metadata for selections from the Fred M. Springer Collection. Keep an eye on our social media accounts and website for new selections from the Furler, Lamb, McIlwraith, Rose, and Springer collections. You can view highlights and galleries from many of our collections at www.railphoto-art.org •

Figure 5. Metadata from this Wallace W. Abbey photograph reveals that Abbey socialized and photographed with other young railfans. Shot by Abbey in the late 1940s near Chicago, Illinois, the image features friends Ted Cole and Chic Kerrigan, who may never have been identified had Abbey not recorded their names. Abbey-01-035-007

