

# OUT OF THE ARCHIVES

## Evolving digitization criteria

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### ARTICLE

Adrienne Evans

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### PHOTOGRAPHS

Collection of the Center

UNTIL RECENTLY, THE CRP&A's digitization model has been to digitize and capture metadata for nearly all of our collections to the item level. (E.g., we digitize every image in the collection.) This model served us well for several years. However, in 2017, the number of images in our collections began increasing at a remarkable pace, and between 2019 and 2020, we accessioned approximately 176,000 new images (an institutional record!) into our archive. We attempted to keep up with this growth via expedient digitization methods (shooting with DSLR cameras instead of scanning) and adding to our staff. Yet even with our increased digitization capacity, we could not get around the fact that digitization at the item level is labor intensive and a considerable time investment. Plus, new donors continue to appear on the horizon. A large backlog of unprocessed and undigitized material seemed inevitable.

Thus, in the summer of 2020, we adopted a selective digitization model to begin using on most of our collections. Our staff members developed the model, which then received a recommendation from our Collections and Acquisitions (C&A) Committee and final approval from our full board of directors. Working within this model, our archives team members select certain series or images from our collections for digitization, rather than every image in the collection. In this edition of OTA, I will share the CRP&A's formal digitization selection criteria, and get the perspectives of contract archivist Gil Taylor and associate archivist Heather Sonntag, who have utilized selective digitization during their processing work on the Jim McClellan and Ronald C. Hill collections.

### Digitization Selection Criteria

When forming selective digitization criteria, we drew inspiration from several archives who have made their guidelines public. All of the guidelines we consulted included considerations for privacy, copyright, preservation of original objects, potential public interest or research value, and institutional capacities for digitization. Taking all of these criteria into consideration, when we permanently accession a collection into our archives, our staff members (under the supervision of the archivist and/or executive director) will consider the following factors when making decisions about digitization:

*Significance.* Our collections come from relatively unknown hobbyists and widely published photographers

The Canadian Pacific Railway barge arrives with the local freight train in Slocan City, British Columbia, Canada, on August 9, 1977. Photograph by Ronald C. Hill, Hill-21-10-47

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alike. Both types of collections offer valuable perspectives on the cultural impact of railroading, and both often contain striking images. With this in mind, we consider the following:

- The identity of the creator and his or her relationship to the railroad. Did he or she work for the railroad? Was his or her work widely published? Does he or she represent a unique or under-represented perspective on railroading?
- Does the medium on which the images are recorded have artefactual value (e.g., early photographic processes or photographers' scrapbooks)?
- Are the materials aesthetically unique?
- Do the materials depict historically significant events, locations, persons, or operations?
- Would digitizing the materials broaden the subject areas or types of mediums available in the Center's collections?

*Research Value and Outreach.* CRP&A's members and audience use our images in a variety of contexts. When evaluating the research value or outreach potential of collection materials we consider the following:

- Is there a public demand for improved access to the materials?
- Is there an active, current audience?
- If demand is low, will digitization attract enough new users to justify the cost?
- Has similar material been made publicly accessible elsewhere?
- Would the digitization of this material enhance the discovery, access, and use of other holdings?
- Would digitization co-locate materials that are physically or intellectually dispersed?
- Are the materials relevant to any current railroad-related initiatives, events, or anniversaries (both within the CRP&A and at other institutions)?

*Preservation.* Digitization efforts can ease preservation concerns associated with handling and time out of storage as digital surrogates are accessed in place of original images. When considering whether digitization may benefit the preservation of materials in CRP&A's holdings, we evaluate the following:

- Are the materials historic photographic formats such as glass plate negatives, cased objects (e.g., daguerreotype, tintype, ambrotype), or early film negatives or printing processes?
- Are the materials showing signs of deterioration (e.g., vinegar syndrome)?

- Would the original material be handled frequently if it is not digitized (e.g., materials in high demand or with high usage rates)?

*Rights and Privacy.* The materials to which the CRP&A holds the copyright will generally be prioritized for digitization over images with use or access restrictions. Most material considered for digitization will fall into one of the following categories:

- Materials for which CRP&A holds the copyright
- Materials that are in the public domain
- Materials that are Creative Commons licensed
- Materials for which we have obtained permission from the copyright holder to digitize and disseminate

Privacy concerns can also be an issue for image archives. When a collection is donated, it may contain images entailing both the public and private life of the photographer, their subjects, or a third party. Thus, we will also evaluate the following when considering digitizing or disseminating materials:

- Are there privacy issues (e.g., personal photographs, etc.) in the materials?
- Are there concerns about putting indigenous knowledge out to the public?
- Is extra care and attention required to describe the collection with sensitivity and empathy (e.g., if the collection contains potential offensive materials)?

*Availability of Resources.* Like any collecting institution, the CRP&A must partially base digitization decisions on our current (and projected future) funding and staffing levels. I work closely with Scott, who works closely with our board, to ensure we balance our collections needs and aspirations with our financial resources and capacity. Your support helps us preserve and digitize more material from our collections.

#### **An interview with**

#### **Gil Taylor (GT) and Heather Sonntag (HS)**

Let's take a look at how our selective digitization criteria works with two of our recent acquisitions.

*Adrienne Evans (AE): Describe your general approach to selecting images for digitization from the Jim McClellan and Ron Hill collections:*

**GT:** My approach to image selection throughout the digitization of the McClellan Collection centered most heavily on aesthetics, uniqueness, and general historical significance. Within this, I hoped to emphasize

A worker atop the tender of Cumbres & Toltec Scenic Railroad's 2-8-2 locomotive 488 replenishes the water supply in August of 1989. Photograph by Jim McClellan, McClellan-08-23-20

Pittsburgh & West Virginia Railway diesel-electric locomotives from Fairbanks-Morse in the summer of 1959. Photograph by Jim McClellan, McClellan-01-10-07

the evolution of railroading technologies alongside the consolidation of the railroads themselves that occurred concurrently with McClellan's career as a railroad executive from the 1960s to the early 2000s.

As a result of this approach, a larger portion of digitization centers on McClellan's earlier photographs that depict the smaller, regional railroads that began to disappear during the latter half of the twentieth century—like the Pittsburgh & West Virginia in McClellan-01-10-07. These photographs feature vanishing aspects of railroading and also present more unique, historic, or otherwise significant subjects, such as the handing off of paper train orders. However, I also sought to make selections of McClellan's later photographs that more broadly illustrate the changing face of railroading. Finally, I placed a strong emphasis on selecting images portraying workers. McClellan-08-23-20, for instance, is one of the best worker shots in the McClellan collection, depicting a quintessential American railroader, complete with cap and overalls. The contrasts between the water and coal, and the locomotive and wilderness, bring to mind the significance of the steam locomotive and its profound role in reshaping the American West. Likewise, this photograph and its date remind us of the steam locomotives' dramatic shift from a tool of industry to a relic of tourism.

Overall, I digitized an average of roughly five to eight percent of images per slide carousel. While I would have hoped for an average of closer to about ten percent of the total collection, the large amount of material that was duplicative in subject matter or location lowered my overall selection.

**HS:** My approach to selecting images from the Ron Hill Collection of color slides is both eclectic and limited. First, it is limited in number, because we initially aimed to digitize about ten percent of the collection to show a representative sample. Consisting of approximately 23,500 slides across twenty-one boxes that contain 247 slide cartons, this could amount to quite a few digital files. Having completed twelve boxes to date, these files currently total 2,186: fourteen percent of the completed boxes and nine percent of the total collection.

My approach to selecting images is also limited in experience. When I started as a contract archivist in December 2020, I was wholly unaware of the CRP&A and of railroad photography as a genre. (Mea culpa!) Yet, I feel that processing the work of







Union Pacific steam locomotive 844 simmers in Laramie, Wyoming, on November 11, 1961. Photograph by Ronald C. Hill, Hill-03-01-15

Ron Hill has served as a solid primer in seeing color rail photography of the last half century, given its range from 1958 to 2018 and its broad coverage of multiple railways across the United States and western Canada. While I admittedly lack a deep knowledge of rail photography and am still familiarizing myself with the CRP&A's entire archive, my extensive background in photographic materials informs my eclectic approach to digitization.

My background of working with iconographic collections for over twenty years at the front and back ends of archives honed my eyes to recognize images of pictorial value and today informs my choices in the selection process. For Hill's slides, I initially zeroed in on three image-making qualities that contribute to his standout compositions. These are simply color, light, and landscape. I love working with color slides because of their vivid visual punch, often representative of a particular film brand, and therefore particular photographic era, like the unique palette of aging Ektachrome in the 1960s. Light adds to a subject be it backlit, raking, and even reflective as in puffy clouds or stormy skies of Hill's countless images taken in the American West. Finally, landscape factors as a strong element, whether as an immediate backdrop or an expansive setting. I am as fond of wide-angle environ-

mental shots in remote settings that picture trains in miniature on a horizon or snaking through a desert or mountain valley as I am of the ordered chaos and patterned linearity of rail yards.

A secondary set of criteria to my approach includes railroad employees within frames to help highlight these individuals on social media as part of the CRP&A's #WorkerWednesday posts. It's been fun for me to see some of these go up—and blow up—on Facebook and Instagram with positive reactions and comments by the Center's followers. My attention to looking for people within the frame has also contributed to growing the Center's collection of underrepresented groups in the social history of railroading. I have made a point to digitize images that picture Black, LatinX, and women railroaders.

A third set of criteria encompasses one that I call "zingers." These are images of undeniable perfection in composition enhanced by color, lighting, and landscape no matter the subject for any viewer, educated about rail photography or not. Among the earliest zingers I digitized is the photo of the Union Pacific 844 taken in November 1961 at the yard in Laramie, Wyoming. This elevated perspective fills the entire frame beautifully to the corners, forcing the eye to spiral round from the pedestrian bridge in





the upper right, to the blue-black negative space of the engine's shiny smoke deflector in the lower left, then center to the white "X-844" and vertical shock of steam that stands perpendicular to the railyard's crowded horizon line. Or, maybe the optical motion is reversed, center outward. It is an exceptional picture for the patterns and contrasts that Ron captured of this "Living Legend."

My initial dive into digitization of Ron Hill's work has fed into some of the CRP&A's general guidelines. I draw on the following criteria when selecting images: aesthetically unique; historically significant in events, locations, and operations; and bear research value tied to nostalgia (like the social outings led by the NRHS, Illini Photo Club, and the Rocky Mountain Railroad Photo Club) or anniversaries such as Amtrak's fiftieth.

**AE:** *Has your selection criteria/process shifted as you've become more familiar with the collection, the photographer, particular locations, or railroading in general?*

**GT:** Throughout this process, my digitization definitely became more selective and focused more on what I would consider "outlier" images from the collection. As I began encountering more and more

repetitive images depicting the same locomotives or the same sections of track (such as the Tehachapi Loop), I hunted more for images that broke this mold, such as rail crews, engineers in the cab, more abstract compositions, or unusual locations.

McClellan-03-23-20 (see p. 59) is one of these wonderful "hidden gems" within McClellan's photography. This photograph, with its abstract shadows and highlighted locomotive controls, offers beautiful contrast in light and shape. Somewhat a rarity in McClellan's photography, we are provided this unique view of the locomotive cab and its engineer awaiting departure. This image, like the other selections chosen, depicts a steam locomotive in an era of dieselization that has left it behind.

**HS:** Yes, it's definitely shifted. As I have become more familiar with the collection and railroading in general, my selection process has become more layered and multi-faceted. That is, I see beyond the primary train subject to consider economic, social, and environmental histories that are integral to railroads and rail culture.

**AE:** *Have you encountered any series, locations, or subject matter that complicated the selection process?*

A Southern Pacific freight train wraps around the Tehachapi Loop while descending through the green hills at Walong, California, on March 17, 1978. Photograph by Ronald C. Hill, Hill-03-15-50

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**GT:** Working through McClellan's collection, the primary complicating issue that arose was a lack of contextual description and identification in general. McClellan rarely labelled or described his slides, and without having the living photographer to consult, it was a challenge at times to glean the significance of an image or the reason for a repeated subject.

A prime example of this complicating my process is the photograph of the South African engineer and fireman (McClellan-21-20-08). This shot is among roughly twenty photographs depicting this crew on and inside the locomotive as they prepared to depart from the station—nearly all of the compositions were striking and intriguing—but without any description aside from the country. I ended up selecting this image on its aesthetic merits as well as its uniqueness within the collection. This photograph provides a great contrast to the images of North American railroads that make up the bulk of McClellan's photography. Likewise, this image demonstrates McClellan's eye for composition: the contrast of the workers in the bright sun against the shadows of the cab pairs well with the small details of the well-worn locomotive and coal scattered on its roof.

**HS:** Two locations in the collection that immediately drew my attention were Walong, California (see p. 57), for its gentle topography that looks lovely in any season and Slocan City in British Columbia. Ron took several rolls of film in August 1977 of the Canadian Pacific at Slocan Lake documenting the train barge that served the lumber industry. I digitized (maybe over digitized?) this series because the compelling visual narrative of this remote timberland fascinated me as a unique and site-specific industry connected to outside economies by rail. This wonderfully abstract aerial view (see p. 52-53) that situates the barge off-center in the negative space of dark blue water above the log pond—and opposite a beach with swimmers and sunbathers—simply blew my mind. There are stories within stories pictured here that connect humans and the environment reflecting two ongoing industries that make this series research worthy.

**AE:** *How do you envision your selections being used by researchers? Would there be a usage situation that would be particularly gratifying for you as an archivist?*

**GT:** As I worked through the collection, I envisioned my selections being used in two distinct ways.

First, that many of the selections would act as representative touchstones from which the user could discover more images of the same subject, trip, or location. I hoped selecting “the best” of these representative images would immediately direct the user to highlight portions of the collection and prompt further digging around those images for a broader view should they desire to do so.

Second, I hoped that the aforementioned outlier selections would direct users to fantastic images that would otherwise be difficult to locate without sifting through thousands of slides. These were often spectacular shots that surprised me when I initially found them, and I wanted to ensure that these images would be immediately seen and not remain hidden. Accordingly, I hoped that my selections overall would provide a strong snapshot of the collection to anyone hoping to explore it, that by selecting both representative and outlier images a more complete and coherent idea of the collection could be conveyed.

Finally, one of my ultimate hopes for the collection and its use is that many of the descriptive and contextual gaps of the collection could be filled in by knowledgeable individuals and users. It would be so gratifying to see the selected images being used to provide missing metadata and other information that could identify and further develop McClellan's collection as a whole.

**HS:** My eclectic approach anticipates researchers and users that are within railfan audiences and beyond. For example, I make deliberate selections that engage Ron's re-photography across decades picturing changes in the land. Those areas once remote, are now more inhabited; and conversely, those once bustling, are now too quiet. Additionally, I pay attention to the land along the tracks as an indicator of environmental shifts, like receding glaciers in Montana as well as the Canadian Rockies. Rail photos that include large swaths of landscape I see as useful visual resources to historically track climate change over time. This was emphasized for me in July when digitizing Canadian Pacific images of the quaint mountain town of Lytton; shockingly within days, this town no longer existed, extinguished by conflagration in a fire storm and hottest temperatures on record for North America.

Other series of Ron's like those of outings with the NRHS are valuable in showing a genuine social club that drew together not just men, but entire communities for the spectacle of the train coming to town.





Left: An engineer and fireman ride in the cab of a Transnet Freight Rail steam locomotive as it departs a South African railyard in June of 2001. Photograph by Jim McClellan, McClellan-21-20-08

Below: A silhouetted engineer smokes a cigarette in the cab of Canadian Pacific Railway 4-6-2 locomotive 1238 during a Southern Railway steam excursion out of Alexandria, Virginia, in June of 1981. Photograph by Jim McClellan, McClellan-03-23-20







### Railroad Heritage Visual Archive Updates

This edition of OTA brings even more big staffing news from the Collections Department! September saw the triumphant return of the CRP&A's prodigal intern, Erin Rose. Instrumental in the processing of the Donald Furler and Robert Hadley Collections, Erin served as a CRP&A archival processing intern in 2017, but she left Madison upon her graduation from the University of Wisconsin's iSchool to pursue opportunities in Champaign, Illinois. Erin returns to the CRP&A as our Reference and Digital Projects Archivist. In this role, she will be responsible for answering image requests, processing collections, and assisting with various digital projects—including the migration of our digital files to a dedicated collection management system.

In other news, intern Abigail Guidry is progressing swiftly through the digitization of the John Gruber Collection. Abigail has made quick work of the black-and-white negatives from years 1963 to 1965 (the collection is arranged chronologically), and she is now moving on to 1966. At the end of August, we bid farewell to long-time intern Wesley Sonheim, and we have since hired Charlie Tonelli to continue Wes' excellent work on the Jim Shaughnessy Collection. Archives Associate Natalie Krecek has been showing Charlie the ropes as she works with him in tandem on the Shaughnessy Collection while also finishing up the Victor Hand Collection. At our archival storage space, Contract Archivist Gil Taylor is wrapping up processing the Jim McClellan Collection while Associate Archivist Heather Sonntag's digitization of Ron Hill's color slides is more than half complete. Volunteers Larry Sallee and John Kelly continue their respective identification work on the Wallace Abbey and John Gruber collections. Finally, Acquisitions Coordinator Elrond Lawrence's work with Center collection donors has been vital to the continued success of the collections department. •

| Collection      | Processing Status              |
|-----------------|--------------------------------|
| Jim Shaughnessy | In progress, ~27% complete     |
| John Gruber     | In progress, ~25% complete     |
| Ronald C. Hill  | In progress, ~65% complete     |
| Jim McClellan   | In progress, ~95% complete     |
| David Mainey    | In progress, ~55% complete     |
| Karl Zimmermann | Next up, estimated start: 2022 |
| John Ilman      | Estimated start: 2022~2023     |
| Stan Kistler    | Estimated start: 2022~2023     |





Opposite: Young onlookers clap their hands over their ears to muffle sounds of Burlington steam locomotive 5632 as it stops at Crawford Tower in Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin, for water. Gruber shot this image over Labor Day weekend in 1962. The engine took rail fans from Illini Railroad Club from Chicago to Minneapolis on Saturday, and back on Monday. Photograph by John Gruber, Gruber-04-46-036

Above: Union Pacific steam locomotive 8444 leads an excursion train at Cheyenne, Wyoming, on November 18, 1962, on a trip sponsored by the Intermountain Chapter of the NRHS in Golden, Colorado. Photograph by John Gruber, Gruber-04-56-249

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