

# OUT OF THE ARCHIVES

## An interview with Adrienne Evans

SINCE ITS INCEPTION IN THE Fall 2015 issue, “Out of the Archives” has been the exclusive domain of our archivists as a place to share not only the contents of our collections, but also some of the behind-the-scenes work and thought that goes into preserving and sharing them. Since joining our staff in November 2017, Adrienne Evans has prepared each installment, sharing her insights and interviewing other members of our archives team. Just this once, though, I am exercising editorial privilege to turn the tables and interview her.

When Adrienne first joined us, she was what the archives profession calls a “lone arranger”—the only archives professional on staff. She now leads a team of six. Any time she shares the graph plotting the growth of our collections themselves, I like to mention how the inflection point in that graph coincides precisely with her arrival here. As our collections and collections staff have grown, her role and responsibilities have grown immeasurably. She now has a new title that more accurately reflects her role: director of archives and collections.

We recently sat down over lunch in our conference room to talk about her background, her time with the Center, and what she sees for our future. She will return to her normal role of preparing this column in the next issue; in the meantime, we both hope you enjoy this chance to hear more about her experiences.

**SL:** *How did you first become interested in historic photography and the archives profession?*

**AE:** In my undergraduate years at the University of South Dakota (USD), I took several photography courses though the art department, and I enjoyed it so much that it eventually became an unplanned minor. (Much to the chagrin of my parents!) During one of these classes, our professor encouraged us to explore different camera types, so I went to the local thrift store and scooped up an Argus Seventy-Five among the several vintage cameras that had been thoughtlessly (in my analog-loving opinion) abandoned there. I brought it to class, and my professor was excited to discover that it was still loaded with a nearly finished roll of film.

“There could be anything on there!” He exclaimed, “For all we know, there could photos of Elvis or Madonna, or even revelations from the Grassy Knoll.”

I was really excited about the potential of historic discovery. I prepared something pretty pretentious to

say here, “Only the discoverer of the lost bones of Richard III could understand the excitement I felt as we developed the film.” It looked good in print, but then I said it out loud... Anyway, as we unfurled the roll for drying, it turned out to be blank. Try as we might, we couldn’t make out any subjects of historical import within its frames.

Although I was disappointed, that initial excitement of historical discovery stayed with me, and when a photo archive internship opened up in the USD University Archives a short while later, I jumped at the opportunity to recapture that feeling. I ended up working there the next two years, and then I made the decision to further my career prospects in archives by going to grad school at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and the rest is history.

**SL:** *What was something you learned in one of your previous archives experiences that has been especially useful at the Center?*

**AE:** Two experiences come to mind.

First, my first position as an intern in the archives at USD was really formative for me. It was unique among the places I’ve worked, because their digitization and photo preservation programs were really young when I was there. Developing professional standards and practices were top of mind for my supervisor, and I really benefitted from that environment and watching her work through the implementation of those programs.

Next, my first professional position as an archivist was at History Colorado in Denver, and much to my astonishment, social media outreach was a required part of the job. I had been working in or studying archives for about seven years at that point, and while I had written blog posts here and there, that was really the first time I was called upon to engage the public using archival materials. It ended up being a great opportunity for me to be creative and have fun with images I was encountering in the archive every day. They also had a dedicated social media team on staff, and it was enlightening to work with and learn from people who had backgrounds in communications and public relations. From them, I learned how to select attention-grabbing images, what types of posts are the most likely to encourage engagement, how to leverage social media holidays to draw in a wider audience, and most importantly, how to use a hashtag!

Plus, it was really meaningful to see, in real time, the public reaction to my efforts. One of the posts of

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### ARTICLE

Scott Lothes

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### PHOTOGRAPHS

Collection of the Center

Young onlookers clamp their hands over their ears as Pickering Lumber Company Heisler steam locomotive 5 thunders by in October of 1957. Richard Steinheimer likely shot this image somewhere between Jamestown and Standard, California, as he was in the area to shoot Central Valley Railroad Club’s excursion on the Sierra Railway. Steinheimer-Burman-P-Temp-09







which I am most proud is a portrait that we shared of William Cobbs, a Black soldier with the 24<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment in the 1890s. It was one of our most popular posts of the time period, and it was even re-shared by the National Historical Publications and Records Commission. It felt great to be helping publicize the collection—archives are meant to be seen, used, and learned from—and get some good publicity going for History Colorado. The last I heard, that image was being used as part of Black History Trail, an augmented reality app that enables users to explore Black peoples' contributions to history in the American West.

My work there gave me an appreciation for the role of public outreach in archival work and at least a bit of a knowledge base to draw from when I started helping out with the Center's social media channels. There probably wouldn't be any #WorkerWednesday or #NationalWedgeDay (or #NationalLlamaDay!) posts without my experiences there. That said, social media is still not my main area of expertise, and I've definitely posted a few clunkers now and again. I am grateful to have Elrond Lawrence's guidance now and have seen a lot of growth in the Center's social media channels in the past year. Plus, now, I mostly just get to post when I want to, which is way more fun.

Upon discovering that we had a photograph of a train passing llamas in our Fred Springer Collection, Adrienne looked up the date for National Llama Day and put it on our calendar—nine months in advance—so we'd be ready to share this post.



**SL:** *When you joined the Center in 2017, we were beginning a time of expansive growth. What about that has been the most challenging and the most rewarding for you?*

**AE:** The Center's collections growth has presented us with capacity challenges—both in terms of physical space and personnel. This probably goes without saying, but we need an ample amount of appropriate preservation storage to maintain the collections, and also enough people on staff to care for the materials and ensure they're accessible to the public. In 2019, we moved the archives to a much larger location, and since 2020, we've expanded our collections team from two employees and occasional interns to six full-time staff members. That's all been super helpful, but as the community's need for our services is ever-present, and likely increasing as people age, our capacity issues will likely be on-going. That's one of the reasons I'm grateful for the continued support of our members, donors, and institutional partners.

The most rewarding aspect of our growth has been the increasing diversity of media types that are represented in the archive. Last year, we took in an unprecedented number of sound recordings, moving image films, paintings, and fine art prints. While our collecting scope will remain focused on still photography images, it's been enriching to explore the research value and outreach potential of other media types, too. I am particularly excited to get H.D. "Mike" Runey's moving image collection online, which we've already had fully digitized. As somebody who grew up well after the age of steam, it's one thing to see a stationary representation of a locomotive in a still photograph, but it's something else to actually see its motion playing out on film.

**SL:** *How would you compare railroad photography and its community to other genres or subgenres of photography you've worked with?*

**AE:** What I think is similar between all photographic archives is that they're both historic records and can also be appreciated as aesthetic objects and even art. In many ways, I've been trained to treat them just as historic records. Working here, at the Center for Railroad Photography & Art, that's a blurry line, and it's stretched how I interpret and present photographs. We're also similar to other communities in that many of the same conventions apply to making a good photograph and a good rail photograph, but

also breaking with those conventions in any genre can create something interesting and worthwhile, too.

What's unique about railroad photography is the language, the culture, and the community that surrounds it. As a layperson coming in and trying to describe a rail photograph, it's so intimidating! That's especially because our community is so active, and lots of our collection donors are alive and engaged, while with other archives, the creators are usually long deceased.

I've dealt with other genres of photography, and I know there are other communities and aficionados around them, but I don't know that I've ever encountered one where they are as numerous and as present as they are here. There are lots of photographic history buffs, but I don't see them in online spaces to any degree like they are in the rail community.

**SL:** *In terms of feeling intimidated about writing descriptions of rail photographs, what has helped make that more accessible or more approachable to you over the past five years?*

**AE:** First, just being trained (pun intended!) on what all the numbers and titles mean has been really helpful, and also the fact that we standardize our descriptions. It's important to know at least one correct way to arrange all of that information. When you get more comfortable with it, then you can start flipping around the order of things like wheel arrangement, model of the engine, stuff like that. But just coming in, I think people are—or at least I was—pretty intimidated by that.

When you're working with general photos, you can really keep your description pretty simple, or just describe what you see, but that's not always possible with railroad equipment, or trackage rights, or even the correct name of the train and things like railroad-specific place names. While those are well-documented within the community, there's not always a single, authoritative source to turn to when you're just breaking into it—at least not one that wouldn't be argued over!

**SL:** *In terms of what we already have, and I'm putting you on the spot here, what are some of your favorites?*

**AE:** I mean, Steinheimer, obviously! I feel pretty personally invested in that collection, having gone out to Sacramento to help fetch it, and also, he's just a creative master. I've already been blown away by what Heather has pulled out of his slides so far.



Utagawa Hiroshige III  
1842–1894  
*Famous Places of Modern  
Tokyo Shinbashi Station*  
A circa 1870 Japanese  
woodblock print from our  
Print Acquisition Program





A compelling portrait of a young Illinois Central passenger shot by John Gruber on June 17, 1973. Gruber-08-41-001

Gruber is also a favorite for his photojournalistic eye and emphasis on people, railfans included, which I think is particularly unique to his collection. And it's interesting, too, because I got to know him a little bit. He was very quiet, and I'm always surprised by the human insights that are on display in his collection. I wish I had gotten to know him better.

Abbey has always been a favorite. Shaughnessy is great. I've really enjoyed the views from the Posner Collection, too. We have other collections that include international locations, but he seems to be more focused on the cultures around railroads and their places in these communities. I think a lot of people will be blown away by what they can find in that collection, and there's something about it that's just very candid—and funny! There's a lot of humor.

**SL:** *How would you—personally—most like to see our archive and collections grow in the coming years?*

**AE:** I think there's a lot of room for growth in our fine-art collecting. It's been fun to see the efforts of Peter Mosse and the Print Acquisition Program, especially being on some of the email chains when he's just discovered a great piece at an auction and is trying to decide whether to bid on it. I don't know as much about the fine art world and railroads, so seeing what he and Besty [Fahlman] find of value is really educational for me. I'd love to see more representations

of railroading in different media types, and in more abstract ways of appearance, too.

Another thing that I think would be great is more of a diversity of perspectives in the archives. As more people hear about us and as our reputation grows, we may attract more different types of people to make donations. And that's not to say we don't have some diversity now, but I would love to hear from more creators who are railroad workers and who are from minority groups. Taking all those perspectives into the archive will create a more diverse historical record around railroading—which is what we're trying to do, create a representative archive.

### Railroad Heritage Visual Archive Updates

At our Monroe Street office in Madison, archives and administrative assistant Abigail Guidry is processing the last box of John Gruber's negatives. Over the past two years, our team has digitized Gruber's negatives from 1948 through 2005, and now Abigail is dealing with the undated negatives at the end of the series. Processing archivist Natalie Krecek continues her work on the Jim Shaughnessy Collection. She just wrapped up his National Railways of Mexico series and is about to start on the New York, New Haven & Hartford Railroad. Reference and digital projects archivist Erin Rose finished rehousing and cataloging the David Mainey and John C. Illman collections in recent months and now turns her attention to working with Odyssey, our new collections management system. Over the next few months, we plan to migrate our existing digital collections to Odyssey and begin populating it with new material.

At our archival storage space, processing archivist Gil Taylor is currently working through the Henry Posner III Collection. He recently finished slides from Posner's travels in Japan and is moving on to Jordan. Associate archivist Heather Sonntag is kicking off the processing of the Steinheimer-Burman Collection by refileing some of Steinheimer's slides he had pulled and stashed in a "refile" box. Once she's finished this task, she'll begin selecting slides for digitization from each consecutive box. Between pulling images for presentations and other image requests, she's digitized some 500 slides from the collection thus far. Finally, Adrienne is also working on the Steinheimer-Burman Collection, processing the 4,200 prints and 2,700 negatives that accompanied the slides to the Center. She is currently devising the final arrangement of the print boxes. Next up is rehousing and digitization. •



Collection	Processing Status
Jim Shaughnessy	In progress, ~40% complete
John Gruber	In progress, ~45% complete
Ronald C. Hill	Images on-site complete
Henry Posner III	In progress, ~50% complete for images on-site
Richard Steinheimer / Shirley Burman Steinheimer	In progress, ~5% complete
John C. Illman	Images on-site complete
Stan Kistler	Estimated start: 2023
Karl Zimmermann	Estimated start: 2023

Henry Posner III captured this view from the tender of Indian Railways 754, a class NH/3 steam locomotive, as it approached a station outside of Gwalior, India, on October 1, 1984. Posner-13-16-06