

## A pause to manage growth

WE'RE TAKING A PAUSE, and we want you to know why, and what comes next. Our Collections & Acquisitions Committee, the subset of our board and staff tasked with reviewing and recommending large (1,000 images or more) collections for permanent retention in our archive, is on a temporary hiatus. This means that our board of directors (who ultimately decide which materials enter the archive) will not render any decisions on potential acquisitions in the coming months. Fewer large photography collections will arrive at the Center during this time, and you will likely notice fewer exciting, new collection announcements making a splash in your inbox.

If this all sounds like a bit of a bummer, that is because it kind of *is*. The incredible growth of the Center's collections in recent years has been a point of pride among our staff and board. The depth of coverage of specific topics and railroads in some of our larger collections has fueled many of our best projects. For instance, we could not have made *Rio Grande Steam Finale* the success that it is without John Gruber's extensive coverage of the line. Some of our most popular online presentations have centered around inside looks at our large photographic collections like those of Fred Springer, Jim Shaughnessy, Ron Hill, Henry Posner III, and Richard Steinheimer and Shirley Burman Steinheimer. And our archivists love digging through large collections and unearthing their photographic gems.

However, processing, preserving, and providing access to collections takes a considerable amount of time and financial resources, from doing the actual work on the collections to obtaining archival supplies, maintaining our facilities, and monitoring and managing their environment. While we've been extremely fortunate to build up all aspects of the Center (and plan to continue doing so), we still have finite resources, and taking on a photographer's life's work is a considerable commitment. While evaluating our recent growth and storage capacity late last year, the Collections and Acquisitions Committee decided that, before making any more of those commitments, we needed a break to consider our next steps.

At this point, I should clarify that we do not want to stop growing. The current collecting moratorium only includes large photography collections; we continue to consider offers of fine art and small photography collections (fewer than 1,000 images). Further, this pause is temporary. During this time, we are still accepting new acquisition proposals for

the Committee to review once their pause has ended later this year. But we also want our future collections growth to be strategic and sustainable—both for the sake of the organization and for every photographer who has entrusted their work to us. We are using this time to revisit our collecting scope and consider whether any changes might help us better ensure the high level of care and access we strive to provide for all of our collections.

In this edition of OTA, I will address how we got here, how we are spending this time, and what role you can play in the future of our collecting program.

### Growth by year and number of images

Attendees of our Conversations conference and online events will likely be familiar with our growth trajectory; I report on it every year. It is worth reviewing here for a better understanding of our current situation and how we arrived at this point.

**Until 2010:** While our accession documents date all of the way back to 2003, I like to start tracking collection numbers in 2010, when the Center was considerably smaller than it is now but already had an established collecting program. Back then, we had a “mere” 48,000 images in our collections. Photographic material by Wallace Abbey, Leo King, Perry Frank Johnson, Samuel Breck, and miscellaneous small collections made up the archive. Most of our materials were housed with our then-archival partner Lake Forest College.

**2010 to 2012:** The archive more than tripled from 48,000 images in 2010 to approximately 156,000 images in 2012. This was due to the addition of two large slide collections, those of Fred M. Springer and John F. Bjorklund, both containing more than 50,000 images. They kept us busy processing for the next few years, and they were integral to our development. Working on them helped us hone our archival processes and procedures, while digitized images from these collections helped us establish a strong presence on social media and Flickr, drawing in new members and additional support. In addition, the Springer Collection came with financial support, which enabled us to hire our first full-time collections staff position.

**2013 to 2017:** Collections numbers appear to plateau somewhat between these dates, although we still accessioned approximately 20,000 new images. While our growth at this time was not as significant as the previous few years in terms of numbers, we

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#### ARTICLE

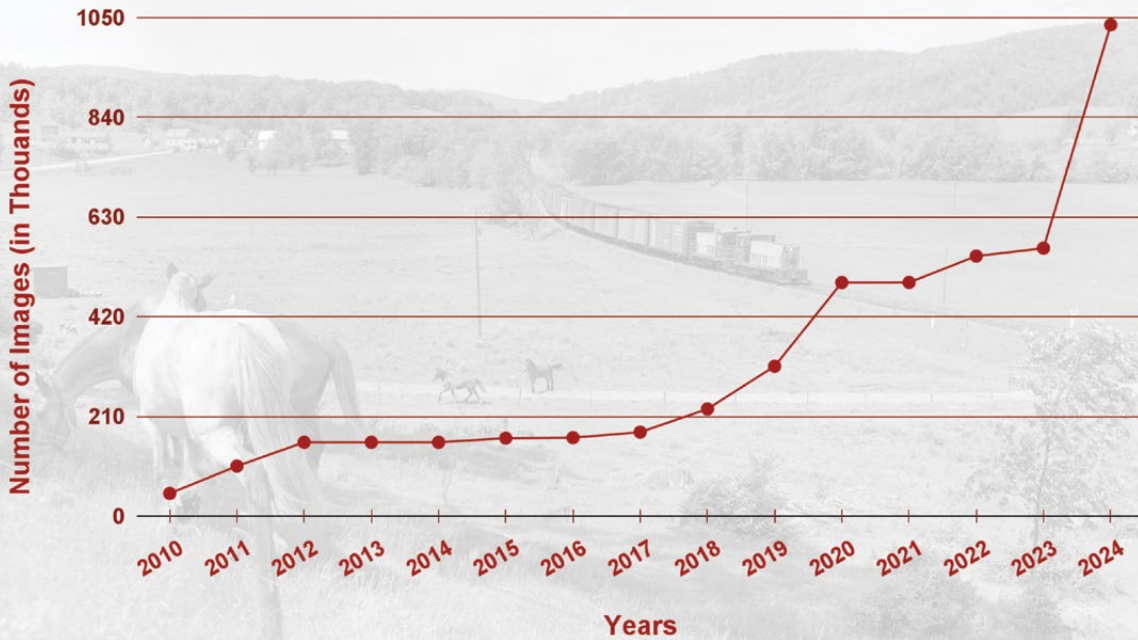
Adrienne Evans

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#### PHOTOGRAPHS

Collection of the Center  
or as noted

## Collections Growth, 2010-2024+



Left: Graph showing the growth of our collections by number of images plotted over the years; read the article for more details about the data points.

Below: The background image of the graph at left comes from our Jim Shaughnessy Collection. Preserving his tens of thousands of negatives has been a multi-year effort that includes rehousing each one in its own acid-free envelope or sleeve, labeled by hand with an archival-grade pencil (less susceptible to fading than ink). Photograph by Adrienne Evans



took in several smaller collections that would have a big impact on later Center projects. These include the J. Parker Lamb, Robert Hadley, Donald W. Furler, and Ted Rose collections. We would later publish monographs dedicated to Lamb and Furler's work, and we had already published a book and assembled a traveling exhibition featuring Ted Rose. In addition, photographs from all the aforementioned collections remain amongst our most requested images year after year. [Editor's note: 2013 to 2017 also corresponds with finishing our Chicago *Railroaders* project, a time when we were able to do very little collections work, followed by processing those two large collections that we had taken on during the 2010 to 2012 period.]

**2018 to 2020:** The next substantial increase in the size of our collection occurred from 2018 through 2020, as the number of images in the archive more than doubled from about 225,000 to 492,000. Part of this growth was strategic; we actively pursued the Jim Shaughnessy Collection and planned well in advance for its arrival while its 90,000 images took almost a year to pass through probate. Other additions were unforeseen. In 2018, we unexpectedly lost John Gruber, our principal founder. When it came time to find a home his 103,000-image collection, the Center was the only logical choice, and we officially accessioned his collection in 2020. It was also during this period that we acquired our first storage space dedicated exclusively to collections.

**2021 to 2023:** We have added 72,179 images to our archive over the last three years, but that only represents part of our growth during this time. Donor agreements—contracts that enable collection donors to defer their donations to a later date—played a large role as well. Such agreements were very popular during this time and explain why our projected growth (represented by the “2024+” data point on our graph) nearly doubles the number of images held in the archive. The materials that arrived from 2021 through 2023 made great inroads into our representation of the American West thanks to Richard Steinheimer, Shirley Burman Steinheimer, and Stan Kistler.

**2024 and beyond:** Our 2024+ category accounts for holdings that have already been accessioned in 2024 as well as all of our current commitments for collections that will be transferred sometime in the future—whether that's a few years down the road or even posthumously as a few of our future donors have elected. These include collections by photographers like William and Kate Botkin, Tom Gildersleeve,

Gordon Glattenberg, Victor Hand, and others. We project that the total number of images in the archive will be 1,034,520 once all of these collections are physically transferred to the Center.

### **Growth by linear feet**

Tracking available archival storage space is another way we monitor the growth of the collections and consider our future storage capacity. Less abstract than looking at the raw numbers, mapping out the waning available space in the archive has really highlighted the ramifications of all of our recent collecting and agreements. The map of our archival space is a bit of an eye-opener; this is one of the impetuses behind the Collections & Acquisitions Committee's decision to take a pause.

Looking at the graphic, you can see a floorplan of the three rooms that comprise our archival storage space. At 664 square feet, Room 109 is the largest of the three and contains thirty-three shelving units that equal about 130 linear feet of collections storage. For our purposes, each “linear foot” is two feet deep, and most contain five levels of shelving. These shelves currently hold around a half million images, and the room also contains wall racks for framed art pieces. Blue rectangles represent these shelving units that we have already filled with materials.

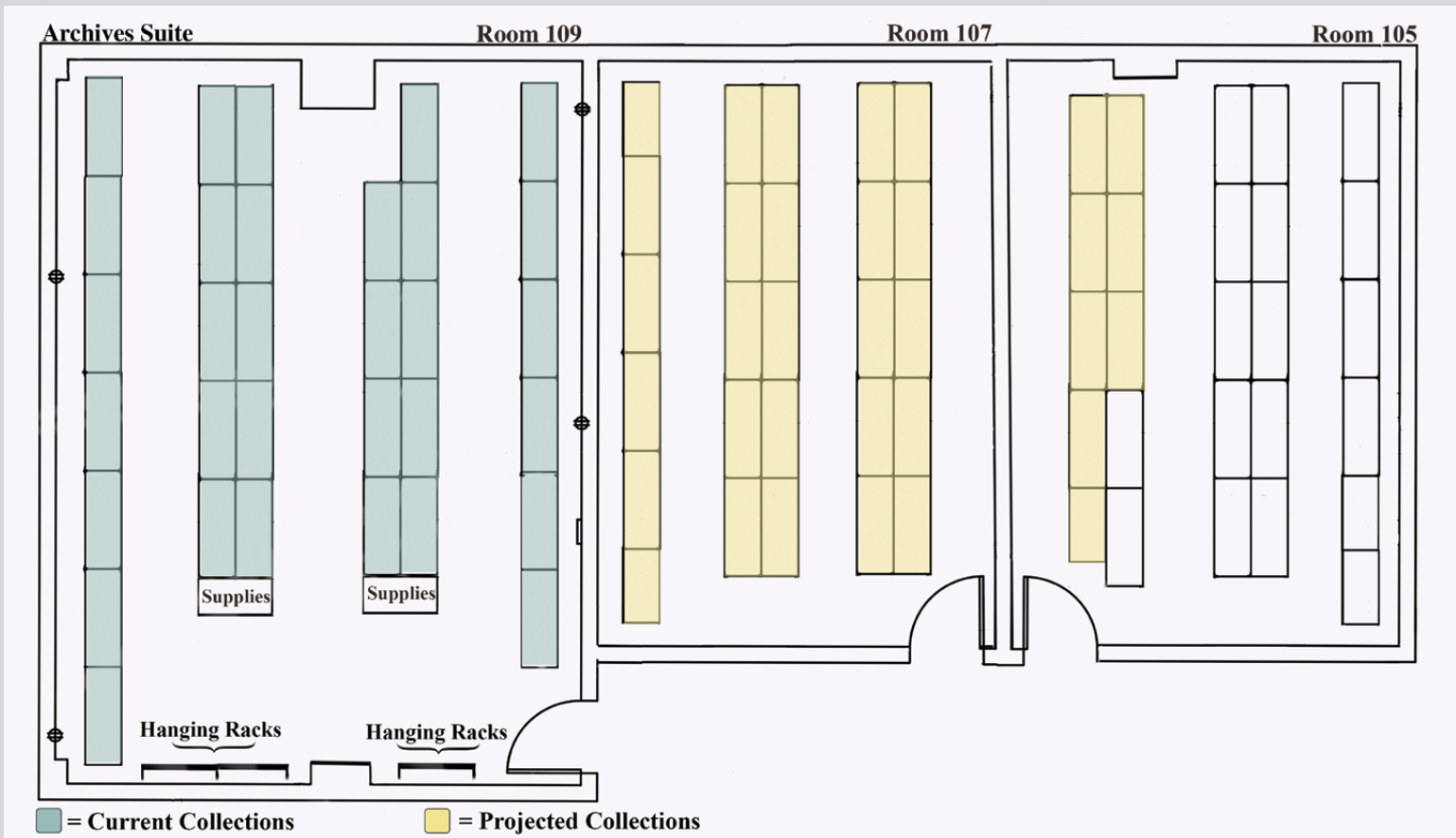
We currently use the remaining rooms, 107 and 105 (at 395 and 388 square feet respectively) as staff work spaces as well as storage for our freezer units and a variety of exhibition materials, institutional records, and supplies. For the sake of visualizing future collections growth in this graphic, I have taken for granted that we will eventually find alternative space for the people and materials and have filled in these rooms as if they are furnished with shelves similarly to Room 109. (Already we have allowed a slight overspill of collection materials into 107.)

If we assume that the roughly 500,000 images the Center has committed to taking on in the future will take up 130 linear feet of shelving units (the same amount occupied by the 500,000 images we already have), our available storage space starts to look tight. Yellow rectangles represent these projected collections in the graphic. Taking them into account, we have already committed Room 107 and about one-third of 105. That would leave just sixty-eight linear feet of shelving unoccupied (represented by the white rectangles in the graphic), which we estimate is enough for roughly 250,000 more images.



Left (three photos): Archivists Heather Sonntag and Gil Taylor placed the Mike Runey Collection of movie reels into cold storage in 2022. Freezers can greatly extend the lifespan of highly vulnerable materials like acetate-based films and negatives, but they take up more space than shelving, while having both higher upfront and long-term operating costs. Photographs by Adrienne Evans

Below: Floor layout of our 1,447-square-foot archives storage facility. The shelves shaded in blue-gray hold our current collections, while the commitments we have made for the future will fill the shelves shaded in yellow—leaving only the white shelving for additional accessions without taking on more or larger space.



### A working group and other perspectives

Now that you know more about why the Collections and Acquisitions Committee has taken a break from collection reviews, I want to share more about how we are using this time. During the pause, a small group of us from the Center's staff and board formed the Acquisitions Working Group (AWG). Comprised of seven members that meet every couple of months, the AWG is tasked with contemplating whether any updates to our current collecting scope, priorities, or practices would allow for more strategic and sustainable growth at the Center. As we explore potential changes, we weigh them carefully against the current content and quality of our existing holdings, their impact on our membership and supporters, and the Center's overall mission and identity within the railroading, archival, and fine art communities. If the AWG deems some policy shifts could be helpful, we will ultimately propose them to the board, who will have the final say and decide when the changes, if any, will go into effect. We hope to complete this process within the year.

As a first step, we reached out to other collecting institutions to learn more about their collecting practices and strategies for managing growth. Members of the AWG have spoken with collections professionals from ten different organizations thus far. They range in size and scope from smaller,

fine art-focused organizations like the Center for Creative Photography, to railroad-centric groups like the East Broad Top Railroad Archive and the Pacific Northwest Railroad Archive, to larger, long-established institutions like the Wisconsin Historical Society and Chicago History Museum. While these conversations have not directly led to a "silver bullet" solution, we have had several helpful realizations. Here are some of our biggest takeaways.

**The Center is unique.** Many collecting organizations preserve material related to a parent institution, a certain geographic region, or another organization. Their collecting scopes are naturally focused, limiting the amount of potential material they would consider for permanent retention. The Center's collecting scope, on the other hand, is broad. We seek to preserve and present representative examples of railroad imagery from all eras, geographic regions, and perspectives. Further, we do not discriminate based on genera; we collect for the sakes of both historic documentation and aesthetic appreciation. Thus, we are not easily classed as strictly an archive nor as an arts organization. This "uniqueness" has made finding other collecting institutions in similar situations somewhat difficult.

**The Center is not *that* unique.** Despite differing collecting scopes and missions, every collecting institution to whom we have spoken mentioned that their collections storage space is at a premium. For many of them, space is a hugely important factor in acquisitions decisions. (At least we know we are in good company in this struggle!) Some groups respond by trying to acquire increasing amounts of storage space while others tighten up their collecting scope and accept less material. Looking at the current state of our collections storage, it is likely that we will acquire additional space in the coming years. But it is also necessary that we have responsible collecting policies in place that will enable us to do so in a carefully considered and proactive manner, rather than a reactive one.

**Collection analysis and addressing collecting gaps is important.** During our conversations, some of the larger institutions indicated that future collections growth at their organizations would be aimed at addressing gaps in their collections and documenting underrepresented subjects and communities. The Center aspires to be a representative archive rather than a comprehensive one, and as such we already try to avoid materials duplicative of our existing

This photograph of a humble and somewhat unusual Austrian narrow-gauge diesel by Fred Springer has garnered more than 10,000 views on our Flickr stream, yet it's the kind of image that could have been overlooked in a more selective digitization model. Many of Fred's photographs of international railway equipment have found broad audiences online, standing as evidence of the value of taking on complete collections and digitizing them in their entirety. Springer-Austria-02-01





Left and below: John Gruber exposed more than 500 frames while riding a Denver & Rio Grande Western narrow-gauge freight train from Alamosa, Colorado, to Cumbres, New Mexico, on August 28, 1967, including these views of the train approaching Antonito and the crew using a journal jack to rebrass a bearing at Sublette. Having digitized most of John's negatives, we were able to reconstruct this trip and gain a better understanding of it—and of the narrow gauge in general in its final years. That was a boon to our production of *Rio Grande Steam Finale* in 2023, but the high level of digitization for such a large collection required about two years of staff time. Gruber-07-38-105 and Gruber-07-38-274



collections. We've already passed on a few collections offered to us that were strong in their own right but reasonably similar to material we already had or were promised. A more in-depth analysis of our collection and a collecting policy that accounts for underrepresented subjects could play a large role in future directions for the Center.

**Selective acquisitions are integral to many other organizations.** Our conversations reaffirmed that fine art-focused organizations typically acquire materials piece-by-piece or in tightly curated groups. Unlike the Center, they very rarely take on the complete work of a particular photographer, and that greatly limits the amount of material they permanently retain. In certain situations, larger archival institutions, like the Wisconsin Historical Society, may also decline to take on large photography collections when a representative sample will suffice. The Center has typically avoided this type of collecting so far out of concern that splitting up collections could detract from their context and present access challenges. However, our recent discussions have shown that such practices are well-precedented and can provide practical solutions to managing the high volume of potential material we see in the railroad photography community.

### **Community input**

During my time with the Center (seven years this fall), I have come to realize that my concern regarding our collections growth can sometimes come across as negativity. So I want to make one thing clear: I recognize that while challenging, overabundance is ultimately “a good problem to have” (although we've used that phrase so much lately that it's lost some of its impact). Our prodigious collections growth over the past decade as well as the ever-increasing donation offers indicate that our services are in high demand within the railroad photography community. Further, we understand that it takes a great deal of faith and confidence to entrust us with your life's work, and we feel truly honored that so many of you want to consider the Center as a potential home for your photography and art.

It is in the spirit of these good relations that the AWG looks to chart our next step. We will be seeking community input on our current collecting program as well as potential revisions. We will distribute a member survey at Conversations in June, and we will follow-up with online and mail-in surveys for

members who cannot attend the conference. Further, I welcome additional conversations via emails, letters, or phone calls (in the case of calls, an email in advance to schedule a mutually convenient time is always a big help). Your support enables everything we do, and we intend to honor your stake in our collections. Together, we can ensure a long future filled with exciting new acquisitions as well as the quality of work and imagery you have come to expect from the Center.

### **Railroad Heritage Visual Archive updates**

At our Monroe Street office in Madison, our work on the Jim Shaughnessy Collection is temporarily on hold as processing archivist Natalie Krecek recently went on maternity leave. Congratulations, Natalie! She will resume her efforts on the Shaughnessy Collection when she returns in late July. Before going on leave, Natalie was processing Shaughnessy's images of the Sydney & Louisburg Railway. Meanwhile, Martin Kaehrl, our digital projects coordinator, has been busy with new uploads to Odyssey. Expect to see new selections from John C. Illman, Fred M. Springer, and Hal Lewis on our site soon! In addition, Martin has also started an initial survey of Karl Zimmermann's black-and-white negatives, which arrived at the Center in early May.

At our archival storage space, reference and processing archivist Gil Taylor has been splitting his time between answering image requests, processing the Henry Posner III Collection, and preparing for upcoming presentations. Finished with the slide series in the Posner Collection, Gil has just uploaded approximately 900 new selections to Odyssey. Now he is focused on processing the 5,700 black-and-white negatives in the collection. In addition, Gil has also been working closely with Henry on their online presentation, “Photographer of Last Resort: Inside the Henry Posner III Collection.” Beyond that, Gil is also busy preparing to present at our upcoming Conversations conference in June.

Associate archivist Heather Sonntag continues processing the Steinheimer-Burman Collection. She's digitized 5,500 of Richard Steinheimer's color slides thus far and has processed twenty-one of the seventy-five boxes in the collection. In addition, Heather has also taken charge of rehousing the recently arrived addition to the Ron Hill Collection, which came from his estate. And like Gil, Heather is also gearing up for a presentation at this year's Conversations. We look forward to seeing many of you there! •

We extend our great thanks to members John Gordon and Michael S. Turrini for their sponsorship of pages 19 and 22 in this article.



Collection	Processing Status
Jim Shaughnessy	70% complete; on hold until late July
John Gruber	B&W complete; slides to commence later in 2024
Ronald C. Hill	Additional materials from estate being surveyed
Henry Posner III	Slides complete; intial B&W survey in progress
Richard Steinheimer / Shirley Burman Steinheimer	In progress, ~25% complete
Karl Zimmermann	Just arrived; initial survey in progress
Stan Kistler	Estimated start: late 2024
Keith Bryant	Estimated start: 2025

Above: Double-headed steam locomotives lead a Swedish State Railways charter train across a bridge between Gällivare and Östersund, Sweden in July 1982. Photographer Henry Posner III will be the first to tell you that, beautiful as many of them are, his images of photo charters are not the strength of his collection. What makes Posner's collection remarkable are his gritty, photojournalistic images that take you behind-the-scenes of railroading all over the world in remote places where he was often the only person with a camera. As we think about further collections growth, we have to acknowledge that we already have strong coverage of many steam excursions, fan trips, and charters, both domestically and abroad. Posner-23-10-04

Left: Status of our current and on-deck collections work.