

POLICY REVISIONS

OUR ACQUISITION MORATORIUM of large photography collections is over. In December of 2024, our board of directors voted to restart acquisitions with some revisions to our collecting policy. This was the result of a nearly year-long investigation by a subset of our board and staff called the Acquisitions Working Group, which included reviewing the policies and practices of fourteen other archives from both railroad organizations and broader historical institutions.

Scott Lothes and I introduced our policy revisions and shared some context regarding their development via December's members-exclusive online presentation, *Behind the Scenes: CRPA's Collections Update*. If you were unable to attend or want to see it again, it's available on YouTube (youtu.be/YJY1X_ifX-Y). You also can reach out to us at our general email account, info@railphoto-art.org, and we'll make sure you get the link.

From feedback we received after the presentation, the policy revisions were generally well-received. Attendees seem to appreciate that the revisions have granted us a little more flexibility regarding the volume of images we take in without changing most of our fundamental practices. That said, even small changes can take some time and consideration to comprehend fully. Further, I know that not everybody was able to attend our Zoom program, so I'm using this edition of OTA to provide an explanation of the policy revisions and how we're planning to put them into action going forward.

Collecting policy and revisions summary

To introduce the updates to the policy, we should first review what our procedures were up until the collecting pause. In the past, it was our policy to accept photography collections on two different levels. Most typically, we've accepted collections on the *Complete Works* level, which includes every image that a photographer has ever created and preserved. These collections typically number in the tens of thousands of images. Taking a collection at this level is a big commitment for us in terms of labor and space, and it's also a serious decision for a photographer to entrust us with their life's work.

Since this is a weighty pledge for both parties, accepting a collection on the *Complete Works* level required a review by the Center's Collections & Acquisitions (C&A) Committee followed by final approval from of our full board. Then, we also had an acceptance level for smaller holdings of less than 1,000 images called the *Small Collections* level. To streamline

the process for reviewing and taking on these submissions, Scott and I have had the authority to approve submissions on this level of acquisition ourselves.

The primary revision that we're making to the policy is to add an acceptance level between *Complete Works* and *Small Collections*, which we're calling *Curated Works*. This level is for submissions in which roughly between 1,000 and 10,000 images are ultimately accepted into the Center's archive. Acceptance at this level will require a review and recommendation by the C&A Committee with final approval from Scott and me.

From a technical standpoint, that's the only modification we're making to policy. However, for the sake of placing an upper limit on the bulk of material accessioned into the archive, we're also changing the thinking and intent behind the acceptance levels. Going forward, we intend to accept submissions on the *Complete Works* level on a pretty limited basis and usually only in special cases. We really want to encourage photographers to self-curate their work down to a number lower than 10,000 images. Putting the revised collecting policy into practice, we intend for most of acquisitions of photographic collections to take place at the *Curated Works* and *Small Collections* levels. Having covered the broad strokes of the policy changes, a more detailed description of each level of acceptance follows.

Complete works

Complete Works are typically large collections comprised of a single creator's full working archive (e.g. all the images they've created and preserved). We anticipate that accepting collections at this level will usually require us to accession 10,000 or more images into the Center's archive. Acceptance at this level will require the recommendation of the C&A Committee as well as the approval of the BOD.

We plan to accept *Complete Works* collections less frequently than we have in the past. To guide these decisions, we adopted a list of criteria; collections must meet the majority of them to be accepted at this level. When reviewing collections at the *Complete Works* level, the C&A Committee and BOD will consider the following:

Significance of the collection's creator. In terming a creator "significant," we mean that they have had a transformative impact on railroad photography or have exhibited through their work, a rare or highly underrepresented point of view that provides fresh insight into the culture, history, and/or visual language

ARTICLE

Adrienne Evans

PHOTOGRAPHS

CRP&A Collection



of railroading. In either case, the work, and/or the creator themselves should be worthy of long-term study.

Significance of the overall body of work. We'll also consider the qualities of the work itself including its technical proficiency, artfulness, historic value, and the importance of the subject matter depicted.

Potential to fill archival gaps. Another factor is whether a significant portion of the proposed collection fills representational gaps in our current collections or can expand the overall scope of our coverage and storytelling opportunities. Tools like Odyssey, our collections management system, have helped us analyze the Center's archive, enabling us to see which railroads, geographic regions, time periods, and events appear the most frequently. Going forward, we'll prioritize material that depicts subject matter that is not well-represented in the archive, avoiding duplicative images.

Copyright status and restrictions. The collection on offer should be free of legal encumbrances with a clear copyright that can be transferred to the Center at the time of donation. This is an essential deciding factor for most collection submissions. We need to own copyright to the images in the collections in order to display, publish, reproduce, and permit others to use them.

Preservation status. We must have the ability to safely preserve the collection on offer. In considering the acquisition of large photograph collections, we need to make sure that they have a relatively low incidence

of chemical and biological deterioration. We typically will not take on collections that have deteriorated beyond our ability to preserve them; conservation efforts are not always successful and are usually prohibitively expensive. Further, preservation issues such as mold or vinegar syndrome have an insidious effect not only on the materials in which they're present, but on adjacent collections in the archive and on the health and safety of our staff.

Organization and description. We'll prioritize accepting collections that are well-captioned and organized; they require much less time and resources to process and make available to the public.

Funding. Collections of this size should come with sufficient funding (generally through a bequest) to cover some of the costs of their long-term preservation. Alternatively, the BOD can commit to take on the additional fundraising necessary to take in the collection.

Collections that don't meet most of these criteria may still be considered for acceptance at the *Curated Works* or *Small Collections* levels.

Curated works

We intend for collections accepted at this level to be the partial and representative work of a single photographer that numbers between (roughly) 1,000 and 10,000 images accepted into the archive. Senior

Southern Pacific Railroad E2A diesel locomotive 6011, delivered in 1937 as part of the City of San Francisco train set, sits in the engine terminal at Ogden, Utah, next a 4-8-2 steam locomotive, in August 1949. As railroads have had to adapt their operations, so does the Center. Photograph by Stan Kistler, Kistler-01-15-08



Above: The Santa Fe yard tower at Barstow, California, stands in silhouette at sunset on March 12, 1989. Photograph by Stan Kistler, Kistler-01-44-09

Above right: Santa Fe track workers near Getz, Arizona, on April 13, 1994. Photograph by Stan Kistler, Kistler-02-16-18

Opposite: Larry Blanke looks out from the rear platform of a Delaware & Hudson Railway caboose at Mohawk, in September 1968. Photograph by Jim Shaughnessy, Shaughnessy-N-DH-4463



staff members (typically the executive director and/or director of archives and collections) may accept work at this level following the review and recommendation of the C&A Committee. A vote of the BOD is not required for acceptance of *Curated Works*.

We encourage photographers to curate their work down to between 1,000 to 10,000 images before submitting it for review by the C&A Committee. After all, no one is better suited than the creator to take on this curatorial work, and it will streamline the process for our staff and allow us to take in more material. If the original creator is unavailable, the C&A Committee, with the cooperation of the prospective donor, will attempt to identify an appropriate party to curate the collection down to a smaller number of images. Criteria for acceptance on the *Curated Works* level is less rigorous than *Complete Works*; when making acquisition decisions, we'll still consider the following aspects:

- Significance of the creator
- Significance of the work
- Complementary to the rest of the collection
- Copyright status and restrictions
- Preservation status
- Organization and description

Small collections

Collections accepted on this level should include only the best work from a single creator, ideally as selected by that creator. As this is somewhat of a "greatest hits" category, we'll accept 1,000 images or less into the archive at this level. Just like the *Curated Works* level, we'll seek out an appropriate person to curate the collection to a smaller number if the original creator is unavailable. Senior staff (again, the president and executive director and/or the director of archives and collections) are authorized to accept collections on this level without the involvement of the C&A Committee. We'll consider the following when making *Small Collections* decisions:

- Significance of the work
- Complementary to the rest of the collection
- Copyright status and restrictions
- Preservation status
- Organization and description

Desired outcomes

It's our hope that these revisions will have the following outcomes. First, preserving the Center's storage and processing capacity in the face of rapid collections growth was a main catalyst behind pausing our acquisitions and evaluating our collecting strategy last year. Under the revised policy, we'll take on very large collections on a more limited basis, slowing our rate of intake while providing more time to plan for long-term storage in the archives.

In addition, we're aiming to expand the representation of different locations, railroads, topics, perspectives, and identities in the archive. The revisions task our staff and board members to consider directly how potential acquisitions will (or won't) help us achieve this goal. Further, by taking in fewer large collections from a single creator, we have more capacity to represent a wider range of creators.

We anticipate that the policy revisions will engender a faster turnaround between a collection intake and public accessibility. Working with smaller, creator-curated collections will enable our archivists to process materials more quickly and to focus our efforts on the strongest and most significant photography. Further, each level of acceptance criteria includes a consideration for a collection's organization and description. Organized collections with well-written metadata require much less background research and description on the part of the archivist, dramatically reducing processing times (and potential for mistakes that we'll need to correct later).

We also intend this new policy to be scalable for born-digital collections. We do not currently accept born-digital images into the archive, as we're still improving our digital preservation procedures. We plan to begin soon, though, and the revised policy will help prepare the way. Born-digital collections contain fewer physical items than analog collections but potentially multitudes more images to catalog, track, and preserve. Photographers: just think of how many edited files you create. Without your curation help as specified in the new policy, we could be swimming in ten different iterations of the same image when we start taking born-digital collections!

Finally, we anticipate better relationships with potential donors under the new policy revisions. The revisions have codified streamlined acceptance procedures, with only *Complete Works* requiring the approval of our full board of directors. That will enable our staff to give potential donors more timely responses.

Railroad heritage visual archive updates

At our Monroe Street office in Madison, processing archivist Natalie Krecek continues her work on Jim Shaughnessy’s negatives. She’s processed about 24,500 thus far and just has a few miscellaneous boxes left. Along the way, she has been posting newly digitized images to our online collections portal; 900 images from the Shaughnessy Collection are available for viewing at: <https://railphoto.historyit.com/>

Reference and processing archivist Gil Taylor has made great progress with the Stan Kistler Collection in the last few months. He estimates that he’s processed approximately twenty percent of Kistler’s 35mm slides. Gil is finding that while Stan’s images are masterful, his metadata can be a little sparse. Luckily, we have Elrond Lawrence (our marketing and acquisitions coordinator as well as resident Californian) to help fill in the gaps. When Gil’s not working with the Kistler Collection, he continues to answer the Center’s image requests—he’s already received seventeen in the first couple weeks of 2025!

Associate archivist Heather Sonntag has recently been adding entries from the Ron Hill Collection to Odyssey. She’s uploaded 218 new images in the last few months; look for them to go live soon! With that accomplished, she’s turning her full attention back to processing the Richard Steinheimer and Shirley Burman Steinheimer Collection. She’ll be starting with Box G, which features Stein’s slides of central and southern California.

Digital projects archivist Jordan Craig has been hard at work updating the Center’s digital infrastructure over the past few months. She’s instituted a RAID system for our digital surrogates and a server for the rest of our shared office files. She’s currently in the process of migrating the entirety of our collection files to the server. In addition, Jordan has helped process the Kalmbach Art Collection, digitizing several of the smaller pieces via flatbed scanner. Moving into February and March, Jordan will pick up the processing of the Karl Zimmerman Collection, which has been on hiatus since the departure of Martin Kaehrle, her predecessor, last fall. •



| Collection | Processing Status |
|----------------------|--|
| Jim Shaughnessy | Negatives 95% complete; slides TBD |
| John Gruber | Negatives complete; slides to commence in 2025 |
| Henry Posner III | Odyssey posting in progress |
| Steinheimer / Burman | In progress, ~40% complete |
| Ronald C. Hill | Odyssey posting in progress |
| Karl Zimmermann | Paused; 20% of images onsite complete |
| Stan Kistler | In progress, ~20% complete |
| Keith Bryant | Estimated start: 2025 |