Field notes from SoCal

ARTICLE

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PHOTOGRAPHS

Collection of the CRP&A and by the author

FOR FIVE DAYS LAST AUGUST, Hilton Anaheim—a breezy, palm-tree-lined hotel located just ten minutes from California's Disneyland Park—took on a more subdued atmosphere than normal. The musk of stale coffee overpowered the usual perfume of coconutty sunscreen mingled with daytime cocktails. The din of tourists and annual passholders gave way to the incessant clack of laptop keys and hushed, jargon-heavy conversations, as too many introverts with Type A personalities filled the suites and meeting rooms. Sensible haircuts and various shades of office-friendly griege even became the trending fashions, edging out the vibrant colors and Mickey Mouse ears favored by the regular crowd of Disneybounders.

Frequent guests might have wondered at the sudden change: *Is there a convention for the lamentably bookish and chronically online going on or something?* And no, I'm not even describing a railroad history symposium. Thus went the week that Anaheim played host to the Annual Conference of the Society of American Archivists (SAA), the only event that could have dragged me and the so many other basement dwellers out from our beloved stacks and dark server rooms to socialize (*shudder*) in the California sun.

Okay, so, that was a bit of self-deprecating hyperbole for fun. Archivists aren't *this* stereotypical. We come in a spectrum of personality types, and many seem to enjoy bright colors, social gatherings, and sunshine. You'll have to forgive the humor—I wanted to open with a unique slant, since I've written about an archivists' gathering before. Longtime readers may remember that Natalie Krecek and I covered the annual meeting of the Midwest Archives Conference way back in 2019 (see *Railroad Heritage* 2019:3, p. 56-59). SAA is a similar event but on a much grander scale: 1,300 archivists and collection workers attended in-person, while another 300 participated online. Through meetups and panel discussions, I met archivists from as far afield as Ireland, China, and even my home state of South Dakota. So while I've addressed an archives conference before, SAA's size and scope (not to mention the ever-changing landscape of archival practice and technology) make it worthy of its own write-up here.

Fullerton experiences

Plus, I wasn't just in the area for SAA, but also for some CRP&A-related activities. Before the conference, I joined Elrond Lawrence, our acquisitions & marketing coordinator, for a meetup we hosted in Fullerton (see p. 12-13). In case you couldn't tell from my opening paragraphs, I'm a bit introverted, so I wasn't sure what to expect when I walked into the Old Spaghetti Factory for lunch with twenty-nine attendees—many of whom I'd never even met before. Any nerves quickly eased, as everyone was warm and welcoming, and the conversation flowed easily. Plates of pasta and the clinking of glasses provided a backdrop to some great yarns about train chasing and more than a little gentle ribbing to go around. I was particularly glad to see collection donors Tom Gildersleeve and Gordon Glattenberg—West Coast legends whose collections are being transferred to the Center as I write this. We're looking forward to getting to work on them soon. I also had meaningful conversations with members of the Southern Pacific Historical Society and the Los Angeles Railroad Heritage Foundation about challenges facing railroad historical societies today. By the end of lunch, I felt connected with friends old and new, reminded of the community that keeps these histories alive.

I'm also deeply indebted to the meetup attendees who are LA locals and generously shared their opinions about what was and wasn't worth my time in Anaheim and Los Angeles. Their guidance made the trip far more rewarding. The Getty, they insisted, was absolutely worth the heinously long Lyft ride from Anaheim—I ended up taking a repository tour there as part of SAA and even got to go on a fascinating behind-the-scenes tour of their research institute. Another recommendation, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, also lived up to the hype; I saw the coolest transportation-themed piece of art I've ever seen there! And, as a practical bonus, attendees let me in on the secret to getting a cab ride at Disneyland—though that one I'll have to keep redacted.

After lunch, I followed Elrond and other meet-up attendees for what I thought would be a relaxing hour hanging out at the Fullerton Transportation Center, nursing a beer and watching the trains go by. What actually ensued was a five-hour hangout/rail photography frenzy that ran late into the night. (Well, more like 8:00 P.M., but I was jetlagged.) Also, let me tell you, it was hot. And not the "dry heat" that El had promised when we started talking about this meetup a year ago. Rather, the event was marked by the moisture-laden heat of monsoon weather blown up from the Pacific and Gulf of California. That day, my t-shirt fused to my skin, I sweated pink from my recently dyed hair, and despite a liberal application

Left: Big Thunder Mountain Railroad at Disneyland in Anaheim, California, in September 1963. Photograph by Jim Shaughnessy, Shaughnessy-S-TEMP-001-19-10

Below: Disneyland-Alweg Monorail System in Anaheim, California, in September 1963. Photograph by Jim Shaughnessy, Shaughnessy-S-TEMP-001-19-09

of sunscreen, my sensitive, *indoor kid* skin freckled and burned under the relentless sun. And…I had a great time! It was the type of experience that puts railroad photography into the perspective of: *Wow! I really get why people are so into this!* But more on that later.

Trending topics at SAA

Getting back to business, at the conference, panel topics spanned an array of issues at the intersection of stewardship, outreach, and institutional sustainability. On the preservation front, participants grappled with challenges such as mold remediation in collections, environmental controls, and risk management strategies. In parallel, other sessions explored social media strategies for archives, specially focusing on how short-form video media (e.g. TikTok, reels, micro-documentaries) can be leveraged to reach wider audiences and younger user groups. Finally, panels also emphasized donor relations and philanthropic strategies: how to cultivate stronger ties to key supporters while also maintaining professional boundaries and practices.

I've attended SAA several times, and the aforementioned are all important topics, but they're pretty standard fare for the conference. I'd be remiss in my summary of the proceedings if I didn't at least mention this year's particular elephant in the room: the specter of a profession in dramatic flux. Conversations about cuts and alterations to federal granting agencies like the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), and the Institute of Library and Museum Studies (IMLS) permeated nearly every panel, meetup, and poster session. I lost count of the number of times presenters said, "This project and/or its staff were formerly funded by the NEH." Further, recent ideologically driven shifts in the missions, pedagogical strategies, and hiring policies of large, precedent-setting cultural heritage institutions like the Smithsonian as well as public schools and university systems were at the center of much speculation amongst attendees. No matter where one stands on the political spectrum, it's beyond debatable that these changes will impact which histories are preserved, how they are told, and who gets to do the telling for years to come.

Also, I should note that our work at the Center has not been directly affected by any of this—we aren't currently funded by federal grants nor are we tied to any state or federal agencies. That said, it's important for us to stay informed. We're not only a railroading organization, but also an arts non-profit and preserver of cultural heritage. Plus, through our traveling exhibitions and other programs, we frequently work with museums and other institution that are directly affected by many of these changes.

Archival work and AI

The other dominant topic was the role of generative artificial intelligence (AI) in archival work. Five out of the eight panels I attended either focused on AI or covered it at length during the question-and-answer session. At previous conferences, AI had come up mostly as an experimental technology: interesting, deeply flawed, and not yet ready for wide adoption. This year, however, AI was presented as a practical tool as well as a catalyst for test cases and experiments.

The panel that shed the most light on AI as a practical tool was "Accounting for AI: Surveying the Archival Adoption of Artificial Intelligence for Access." Those panelists detailed their efforts to ascertain the adoption rate of AI tools amongst archivists via a survey. Results included 385 archivists currently working in the field, a little more than half of whom reported that they utilize AI on a daily basis. Results also indicated the most common ways in which archivists currently utilize AI. Tools such as Otter and Whisper excel at transcribing audiovisual materials, oral histories, and historical documents, making previously inaccessible content searchable and usable. Archivists also use tools such as ChatGPT and Bard to assist with coding and scripting, streamlining workflows and automating repetitive processes. In addition, AI tools are also great at summarizing large collections of documents, helping archivists identify key themes and connections across vast datasets. AI also aids in remediating legacy descriptions and finding aids, updating outdated or inconsistent metadata to improve access. Finally, AI-powered translation tools make foreign-language materials more approachable for archivists, opening doors to resources previously limited by language barriers.

In addition to practical applications, SAA panels showcased more experimental uses of AI. At one called "Crowdsourcing, Custom GPT, and Inclusivity: How AI is Changing Archives," panelists highlighted several pilot projects that are pushing the boundaries of archival practice.

FromThePage, a software company that provides digital services to various archives and institutions, reported on ways AI is poised to revolutionize online

This is just one of the coolest transportation-themed art pieces I've ever seen: Chris Burden's kinetic sculpture *Metropolis II* at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Miniature cars (and trains!) travel along eighteen Teflon-coated tracks, including a six-lane freeway, at scale speeds ranging from bumper-to-bumper to 240 miles per hour. When the vehicles reach the bottom, they are connected by magnets to three conveyor belts and raised back to the top of the sculpture. Running at capacity, the sculpture can launch about 100,000 vehicles an hour. An operator stationed in the midst of the sculpture looks for accidents and can push an emergency stop button. Photograph by Adrienne Evans

Getty Research Institute staff provide SAA attendees with a behind-the-scenes tour. This image features documents related to the history of the Getty displayed in the institute's reading room. Photograph by Adrienne Evans

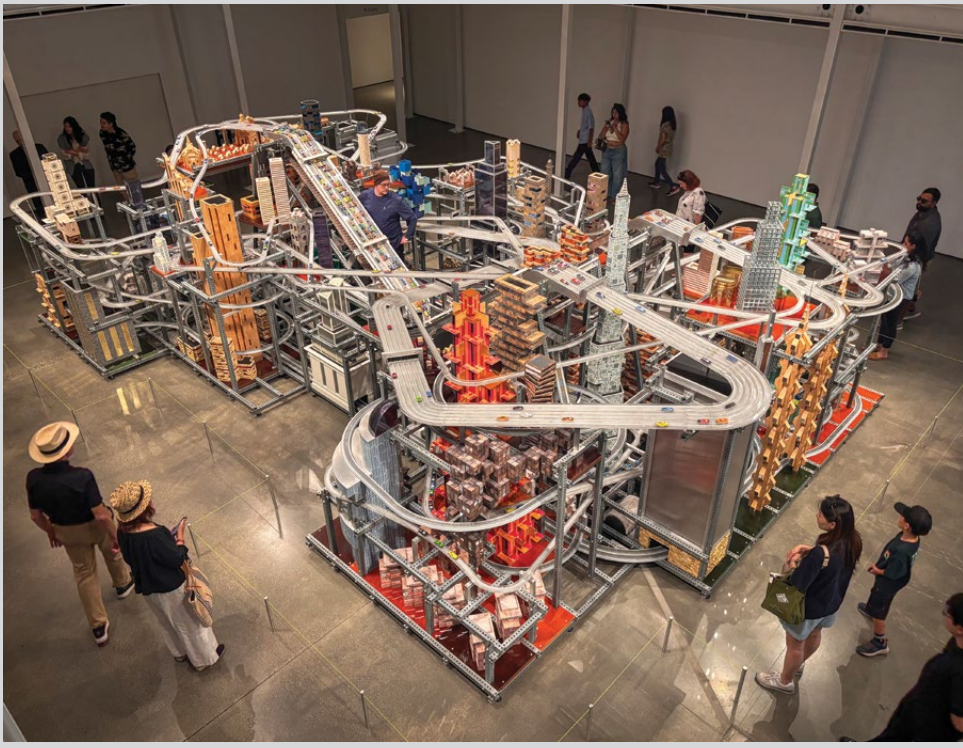
image discovery. One particularly interesting test case comes from Yale, where archivists use vision-language models to extract conceptual data from digital images, enabling researchers to query online databases by concept, rather than by keyword or controlled vocabulary tag. FromThePage also introduced the audience to its semantic search bot, which interacts conversationally with users to guide them through online discovery tools in a more intuitive way.

Other projects demonstrated how AI can support metadata generation, testing how automated description might supplement traditional cataloging to improve access at scale. The Luster Company, an archival consulting community that specializes in Black history, detailed its experience using custom ChatGPT to update legacy catalog records with more inclusive language. Together, these experiments illustrated the creative possibilities—and future potential—of AI in archival work.

AI caveats and considerations

With that said, it's important to mention that every AI-centered panel at SAA acknowledged that AI won't be taking the place of human-led archival work any time soon. No matter how promising AI tools appear, they have notable flaws that render them virtually unusable without close staff supervision. For instance, several presenters underscored that AI tools, while efficient at tasks like transcription and metadata creation, frequently produce "hallucinations"—confidently stated but false information that can distort records and mislead researchers. Even more concerning, presenters discussed the problem of "deception rates"—the frequency of instances where an AI system intentionally presents misleading or false information. [Editor's note: search Google for "AI deception rates" and check out the AI Overview.]

In archival contexts that demand accuracy, transparency, and trust, such deceptive behaviors undermine the integrity of both historical records and public confidence in their authenticity. Panelists agreed that these issues highlight the ongoing need for human archivists to critically evaluate, correct, and contextualize AI-generated content before it becomes part of the historical record. Panelists also stressed that, depending on the needs of the institution, AI is definitively not always the best tool for the job. As Dominique Luster, CEO and principal archivist of the Luster Company, noted at the closing of her panel, "If you most value speed in completing your projects,



you should consider including AI as part of your project workflows. If you most value accuracy, stick with archivists."

An additional consideration in using AI for archival work is its significant environmental impact, a topic that received little attention at the conference. AI systems require vast computational resources, and the data centers that now train and run them consume enormous amounts of water for cooling—often millions of gallons annually—to prevent overheating during energy-intensive processing. Despite this, archivists have yet to fully grapple with the ecological costs of integrating AI into their workflows. This oversight became clear in one SAA 2025 panel, when an audience member pointed out the irony that an AI project designed to remediate outdated or harmful language in metadata might itself be contributing to environmental harm that disproportionately affects the same marginalized communities the initiative sought to support. Following this comment, the panel ground to a halt as every presenter struggled to respond.

Another AI topic that went largely unaddressed at SAA 2025 was the profession's disposition toward AI generated imagery and other creative products. AI is already shaping the cultural record—major companies routinely use AI in advertising campaigns, and AI-generated music has even topped popular charts—so these works are undeniably part of contemporary history. Certainly, some AI-generated products will be accessioned into archival collections to document this period in history. Yet whether these products can stand on their own as creative work deserving of recognition in galleries and museums remains an open question. During the annual update from SAA's Intellectual Property Working Group, I learned that AI-generated works are not eligible for copyright, complicating both legal protection and attribution. Without traditional markers of human authorship or skill, it becomes complex to assess the artistic merit of these products or even how or why they should be collected, described, and preserved.

The only other mention of AI-generated imagery occurred in a panel about a project at the Library of Virginia by a group called Virginia Untold. The project manager created a workshop in which participants used Stable Diffusion, a text-to-image AI tool, to envision their ancestors. They drew from textual descriptions in the Free Negro Registers, court records created between the 1790s and the Civil War that were legally mandated for free people of color, who had to register with local courts to document their status and freedom.

While the workshop initially seemed like a creative way to facilitate public engagement with archival materials, the project manager ultimately decided she would not repeat it. The project confused some participants, who mistakenly thought the AI-generated images of their ancestors would be accessioned into the archive—a deeply problematic outcome that was not at all the intention of the workshop. Further, the project manager felt that introducing AI into the process of connecting participants with their forebears had, in some ways, reduced the ancestors and their lived experiences represented in the Registers to datapoints and outsourced the opportunities for meaningful human connection through the historic record to a bot. She said she would consider running the workshop in the future, but would seek the participation of human artists instead of leaving the interpretation up to AI.

Getting the shot

This all got me thinking about what we do here at the Center. Sure, we digitize old photographs of EMDs and GG1s, transcribe their captions or try to write our own when none exist, and get them online for public consumption. But it's more than that. The photographs are not only great representations of locomotives, lines, workers, and stations, but also of the pursuit of railroad photography itself—the lived experience of gathering your railfan friends, studying timetables and maps, staking out locations, and running out to get the shot.

It puts me in mind of the time I spent at Fullerton. I'll never forget the elation and shock on El's face when he paused to review his images and discovered his most recent was crazy-reminiscent of a Richard Steinheimer photograph from 1958. El's astonishment only grew as he realized he had channeled Stein on what would have been the old master's ninety-first birthday! This early success seemed to fuel the group as we carried on through ninety-three-degree heat, finding reprieve only when a BNSF freight, an Amtrak passenger, or a Metrolink commuter train breezed past us, briefly stirring the air into cooling relief.

As the sun began to set, its low golden light transformed the bustling passengers into dramatic silhouettes, fleeting shapes cut from the glow. This is why Fullerton is a rail photography hotspot, our attendees told me. I'll always remember how weirdly obsessed

A commuter throws a long shadow on the side of LA-bound Metrolink train 1667 at Fullerton, California, just before sunset on August 23, 2025. Photograph by Elrond Lawrence

Elrond realizes his shot is a dead ringer for a Stein classic. Photograph by Adrienne Evans

Casting rich shows, commuters board a Southern Pacific bi-level at San Francisco in March 1958. Photograph by Richard Steinheimer, Steinheimer-Burman-DF-TEMP-011


Southern Pacific
in Los Angeles

Collection	Processing Status
Jim Shaughnessy	Negatives complete; 10% of slides complete
Henry Posner III	Odyssey posting in process
Steinheimer / Burman	In progress: 57% of slides complete
Karl Zimmermann	In progress: 52% of images onsite complete
Stan Kistler	Slides complete; negatives just started
John Gruber	Negatives complete; slides to commence in 2026
Keith Bryant	Estimated start: early 2026
Gordon Glattenberg	Estimated start: mid-2026
Tom Gildersleeve	Estimated start: mid-2026

Right: An Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railway freight train speeds past a signal between Goffs and Needles, California, in December 1989. Photograph by Stan Kister, Kistler-03-38-08

Opposite: BNSF 6018 was part of a light engine move that paused at Fullerton, California, on the evening of August 23, 2025, in the "first railroad photograph I took that I'm actually a little bit proud of," according to the photographer, Adrienne Evans.

we got with photographing a mysterious, errant cloud of smoke, rendered ethereal in the headlight of a BNSF ES44AC. We all grinned like kids when we figured the smoke was from a sneaked cigarette between stops, astonished at how something so ordinary could look so otherworldly through the lens.

While I don't want to overlook how useful generative AI can be in archival work and image-making—nor understate its impact on the creative sector in the coming years—it can sometimes feel like the wrong priority. When I think of what we try to preserve about railroad photography and the experiences—like mine at Fullerton—bound up in going out and shooting with friends, the human experience of it all seems pretty irreplaceable to me.

Railroad Heritage Visual Archive updates

At our Monroe Street office in Madison, processing archivist Natalie Krecek is off to a great start on Jim Shaughnessy's slides. She's sorted and rehoused about 12,000 slides, selecting a few hundred for digitization thus far. The Shaughnessy slide series includes the photographer's personal and family-oriented photographic work alongside his rail images. Right now, we're prioritizing getting Shaughnessy's personal work back to his family.

At our South Park Street location, Gil Taylor, reference and processing archivist, is working on uploading a selection of Stan Kistler's color work to Odyssey. Gil has processed twelve binders from the collection over the past year, so he should have plenty to choose from. Heather Sonntag, Gil's suitemate and our associate archivist, continues her digitization work on Richard Steinheimer's "Desert Series," which depicts locations between Mojave, California, and El Paso, Texas. Heather has so far digitized more than 10,000 of Steinheimer's slides, and she is preparing to upload her first batch of selections to Odyssey

Jordan Craig, digital projects archivist, has been splitting her time between maintaining Odyssey, tending to the Center's digital preservation and IT needs, and processing the Karl Zimmermann Collection. Jordan has digitized a little more than 1,400 of Zimmermann's black-and-white negatives since she started processing the collection in early 2025. She's also looking forward to posting a selection soon. •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