

# What Is Preservation?

by Stephen M. Priest

What I am about to say is based solely on my personal experiences as a small publisher trying to access collections to support publishing projects. I want to directly address the issue of donating collections from the standpoint of having them accessible once donated. I feel access is one of the key points to donating a collection along with preservation. I have researched across the country in a huge variety of research facilities from universities to small town historical societies where the curator is often as old as the collection. It is not my intent to bash any repository or elevate another. Hopefully, this input will start an important flow of needed and relevant information as well as stimulate the readership to think about their collections.

The steam generation will be fading in the next few decades. Sadly, that is a reality that will face all of us at some point. The current generation of locomotives, freight cars, and the like are very well preserved because good reliable cameras are affordable and prevalent. Nearly everyone has a good camera. This was not always the case prior to the 1960s. Cameras were not as common as they are today and good photography is somewhat rare from the earlier eras. Furthermore, the subject matter simply cannot be replaced. Try to get a good shot of an Alco PA this weekend, or perhaps a 2-10-2. It is not possible, these things are simply gone, and they will never be back. That leaves us with their images and their keepers. It is of the utmost importance in the next two decades that we try to preserve both the collections and their accessibility. What good is a beautiful collection of images if they are never seen and/or are impossible to access? This serves and honors no one. We as a group and our combined experiences as a group are a vast resource. This resource may have the effect of helping people who are wanting to donate material choose a location which to do so.

First off there are several issues to be dealt with when one talks about donating:

1. Will the images be safe where preserved. This varies greatly. The Kansas State Historical Society would be a good example of the upper end of archived preservation. Images

are stored in archival materials and images are even air conditioned to preserve their life. Other locations are lucky to have a roof over their head. Kodachrome, Ektachrome, and other film chemistry can be damaged by high humidity and heat.

2. Does the management of the repository care (a burning passion) about what is being donated, or is the library there for the sake of employing librarians. Unfortunately, I have found this to be the case at the one well-known library. We have been there three times and I count each time a disaster. The "people" really do not seem to care about the collection, have very little knowledge about it, and are uninterested in learning about it. Furthermore, they do not seem to want to help. It is very frustrating because the collection is so vast and wonderful. I personally believe it is a waste to have it there!

3. How easy and cost effective is it to retrieve materials from the archive once they are donated. Once again I am going to pick on the the same library because my trips there were so frustrating. It was not easy to find the materials and it was very costly to get images. They even charged us for each scan. I am sure that an endowment is in place to forever pay for the upkeep of the collection. I understand charging for photographic prints etc, but scans should be free or very reasonable as there is no cost to the repository. Reproduction is preservation!

4. Does the location have an endowment which will help to preserve the collection for long periods of time. Anyone that has been in the model railroading club pool quickly realizes that with the stroke of a pen or the change of a mayor, years of work can be lost. The same is true of collections. Universities and or large state or private funded historical societies are far more likely to have the advantage of "being around" over time. Check with the repository you are thinking about donating to and see what their situation is.

5. Does the repository allow scanning (or does it have scanned versions of material) or do you have to purchase prints of archived materials. Archives like the National Archives in Washington, D.C., allow scanners inside the premises and allow original materials to be scanned free of charge. The irony of this is that even when you purchase prints of archived materials, they have to be scanned

prior to publishing. Either way the time and effort must be put forth to scan the images. It is better spent up front. Scanning usually places less stress on the original because the light source is much dimmer than that of an enlarger.

6. Does the repository charge for reproduction or publishing rights. As a publisher trying to keep the price of magazines and books as reasonable as possible it is frustrating that some repositories charge very hefty fees for the "rights" to publish "their" collections. Some charge as much as \$75.00 per image. Most of these images will never be in print because the cost is so prohibitive. Small niche publishers cannot afford to print the material and you cannot afford to buy it. That simply means that you as the consumer (train lover) will never see those images. To me that is very infuriating. What is preserved about those collections? They are not helping anyone.

7. Does the repository have an active marketing or advertising section that will allow future generations to know what collections are preserved where? While that may sound funny or strange many collections are virtually unheard of. They sit in their boxes with no one coming to call because their presence is unknown. Historical materials advertising can be accomplished in many ways. Temple, Texas, has accomplished it by partnering with us, the historians. By now, most of us have visited or at least heard about the collections that are being assembled in Temple. The internet is another way to inform interested parties about collections present in a repository. Check to see if the repository you are interested in has a good internet presence.

8. Staffing. While this is self explanatory, staffing make the real difference when researching a large collection of collections. The process of cataloging and preparing a collection for researchers is a vast and time-consuming process. Many repositories are simply overwhelmed and understaffed. This condition manifests itself by making a collection unavailable possibly for years at a time. Many repositories will never have the manpower to make their collections available. This is a sad and unfortunate situation which often leads to the loss of access to the collection if not loss of the collection by deterioration. Many good collections are rotting away

in a garage or a semi truck baking in the summer sun as I type this. Is this really preservation? Intention is not preservation!

9. Does the repository have an active educational process. Are classes and tours of railroad materials, history, and images regularly offered. Does the repository publish any magazines, books, and/or papers. Are their collection open to scholars, model manufacturers and or publishers. What is the repositories general approach to "outsiders".

Again let me reiterate that I am not trying to bash any repository. But there are realities that need to be addressed. Your collection needs to be available for publication so the next generation of railfans can be educated. Physically preserving an image is only half of the process. Instilling the value, purpose, and meaning of the image in a new young mind is the other half. We can save an image by locking it away. But if the next generation does not value it or has no idea of its significance in railroad history, all is lost. Preservation is as much an educational function as it is a protective process. I only know of the Pennsylvania Railroad by what has been shared with me in publications, magazines, videos, and models. These were all functions of active preservation of publishing, modeling, and sharing.

I implore you to read through this next paragraph and think about it before passing judgment. You may want to consider passing your collection to any of the dozens of small publishing companies that are actively preserving history. There are dozens of them including White River Productions, Paired Rail Railroad Publications, McMillan Publications, Four Ways West, Signature Press, TLC Publishing, Withers Publications, Hundman Publications, and many others. It does not take too much investigation so see what impact these companies have had on our

education and modeling. They are clearly the engine that runs the majority of the educational process occurring in the next generation of railroaders. We all flock to devour the new data offered in the latest book. The combination of their publishing efforts and your imagery creates the potential for both preservation and education. Furthermore, who could possibly care more about the subject matter, preservation, and story retained in a collection than the many scholars who have made it their lives work to study, research, and write about the very subject matter you have gathered and photographed. The real passion for preservation is clearly seen in the works that many of you have on your shelves. The writing and imagery was carefully put together by the many publishers that write to preserve what they love. What you love. I can personally tell you that I would make far more money being an architectural engineer than I ever will publishing. But that is not the point. I have an intense desire to research and then share that research with everyone. Few repositories can ever make that claim.

Cynthia and I have purchased several large collections of slides, books and data in the last few years. The reasoning behind these purchases is not to dangle the carrot in front of others eyes touting "look what we have," but rather to share and learn about the Santa Fe. You will all be able to see, and own, as many of these images as I can afford to send your way in my lifetime. The medium by which you will receive my collection varies. It will be shared by public speaking, by writing articles, and mainly by publishing books and magazines. Kevin EuDaly has also acquired several collections, and methodically collected imagery to support his publishing efforts. All the publishers listed above probably feel that same way. My collections will be passed on to someone in the next generation

that I clearly identify as a preservationist that actively publishes, publicly speaks, and has a burning passion for railroad history. Those people are the ones that will best preserve my collections. That is not hard to understand. It is also easy to check on. I'm certain Kevin and many of the others listed above have much the same goals I do. Unlike a large repository, the track record of a small publishing company is easy to check on. How many books have they published? Do they do a good job which the material they have? Do they exhibit the same passion for the subject matter as you? These are not fictitious traits, they are easily verified. The passion and value that these small companies will place on your material is far greater than that of any large repository of materials. Furthermore, they are far more likely to utilize, share, publish, archive, value, and pass your collection on to someone who feels the same about the subject matter as we do.

This letter is written to share how I feel about preservation. Get your collections to someone or to a repository that cares about the subject matter and will STRIVE to share it. There, and only there, the true value of your collections will be known and more importantly shared. I think of the many slide shows that Joe McMillan has shared with me. I would never have developed my feelings toward the Santa Fe if it had not been for his willingness and sacrifice to share his collection, his life, with me. He has been my role model because he has taken the active approach to share what is his with me. His transfer of railroad knowledge, practices, and operations to me preserves what has been. His images and the images of dozens of others were the medium used to transfer that history to me.

Thanks to all of you who share, speak, and write. Now, please, take the time to preserve -because there is no going back.

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