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Preserving and Cataloging the Charles F. Snow Photograph Collection

By Helen Baer and Jennifer C. Sanchez

It is wonderful when a significant collection like the Snow Studio of Photography, which was in business for over 55 years, survives. What is even more amazing is that the information linking sitters with their images has also survived. The owner, Charles F. Snow (1886-1964), was a notable portrait photographer, earning accolades from around the nation and across the pond. Snow was known to push the artistic boundaries of photography within his business.

Throughout his early career, Snow considered himself to be the informal photographer of the University of Colorado. Before his death, Snow sold the portion of his collection dealing with the University of Colorado Boulder to the Library. A few years after his death his son sold the business to Hans Hink. In 1972, and again later in 1984, Hink donated the rest of Snow’s negatives he had in his possession. Each donation has been handled differently by library staff. Therefore, the Charles Snow Photograph collection has had multiple organizational schemes imposed on it over the years.

PRESERVATION

The biggest problem within the collection is the numbered nitrate negatives. These have serious preservation issues that have forced Jen Sanchez, the Photographic Archivist, to physically separate the numbers while maintaining intellectual control. In simple terms the nitrate film is deteriorating quickly because the environmental conditions have not been perfect. Sanchez has had to dispose of large chunks of negatives while others teeter on the point of deaccession.

From 2013 to 2017, Sanchez conducted a preservation survey and determined that out of the approximately 64,000 images in the collection, 27,000 were cellulose nitrate. Research indicated it was best to separate damaged negatives in order to avoid accelerating the deterioration of good negatives. In 2017 the Library’s Digital Libraries Management Group (DLMG) approved Sanchez’s proposal to digitize the part of the collection that held the nitrate. Digitization would provide needed access to a highly used collection. At this point, Sanchez compiled data about the sitter’s name, sitting number, box number, condition rating, material type and size into a spreadsheet.

As Sanchez began physically processing the collection in 2017, it became apparent that one person could not hope to rehouse and provide necessary metadata for this project within a reasonable length of time. Therefore, student help was enlisted. At one time we had about 10 students, working 6-10 hours a week, on the project. With so many people on the project, there were many revisions to the initial plan. These included changing from an Excel spreadsheet to a Google spreadsheet, reducing the amount of information in the spreadsheet, reducing the information placed on the envelopes, and changing workflow.
from the Metadata Services Department. The metadata was prepared according to the Visual Resources Association’s VRA Core metadata standard. Going forward, images are created by the Digitization Lab at CU Boulder’s Norlin Library and cataloged by Metadata Services staff using the Photo Archivist’s spreadsheet as a starting point.

Currently, cataloging is completed by three discrete teams under the direction of project manager Helen Baer: 1) one cataloger and his supervisor enter sitting numbers in a spreadsheet for each box of newly digitized index (invoicing) cards, 2) two other catalogers create metadata for the negatives, and 3) Baer renames the index card images with the actual sitting numbers, supervises a student assistant’s cataloging of the index cards, and maintains the master list of sittings. There are no strict deadlines, and all project personnel (five staff members and one student) complete their work as time permits.

One unexpected challenge was the collection’s organization by sitting number, which works well except when the numbers are used more than once. To avoid accidentally assuming that two sittings with the same number are for the same person, we maintain a master list of all sitting numbers already “in use” so that we can de-duplicate the numbers as we work through the project. The other challenge is that student assistants have a hard time reading the handwriting on the negatives and the invoicing cards, and their work must be checked by a cataloger.

CURRENT STATUS AND FUTURE WORK
As of July 2018, we have published 5,912 records/6,416 images in LUNA (roughly ¾ index cards and ¼ negatives), and recorded sitting numbers for an additional 16,203 index cards. To enable collaboration by the different teams of catalogers, metadata for work in progress is stored in Google Sheets. Unfortunately we have reached the limits of Sheets’ functionality: calculating functions has become extremely slow, and the dynamic linking between the master list of sittings and other spreadsheets had to be removed because it failed regularly. In the coming months, in partnership with our colleagues in the Libraries Information Technology Department, we hope to replace the sitting number spreadsheet with a database. We will also explore options for moving the item-level metadata to a collection management system (CMS).

In a follow-up article, we will describe the results of our efforts to replace Google Sheets with a database, and possibly implement an enterprise CMS for the Libraries.

ArchivesSpace: https://archives.colorado.edu/repositories/2/resources/99
LUNA: https://cudl.colorado.edu/luna/servlet/CUB~2~2

*The Rocky Mountain Archivist*