Creating a Searchable History

by

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A Project

Approved by the Department of Museum Studies

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ABSTRACT

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Throughout the summer and fall of 2016, I worked on a project for the Mayborn Museum Complex in Waco, Texas. For 6 months, I worked to archive the Mayborn's digital born photographs. These images were taken at events, during renovations, and in the general running of the museum. My task was to find a place to store these images and make them accessible to the Mayborn staff. The first 3 months of this project involved uploading over 19,000 photographs and organizing them appropriately. To finish the project I needed to tag each image with applicable search terms and create a procedural manual, so the work I had been doing could continue. From start to finish I processed over 19,000 photographs and met with my project supervisor weekly to tag and identify images. Concluding this project, I gained experience in archival standards for born digital files and the measures needed to ensure accessibility.

It is commonly said that a photograph is worth a thousand words. As an archivist, however, this adage is only partly true. A photograph is only worth a thousand words if you already know the story behind photograph. Such photographs may contain images of doorways, churches, or people, but without any information about the origin of the photograph, or the subject, the photograph is useless to researchers. For institutions, such as museums, it is vital to keep records and maintain intellectual control of photographs taken for the institution.

Taking photographs of events, activities, exhibits, and museum changes is a part of everyday museum life. These images are a record of institutional history. They are a reminder of what worked, what did not, and what has and has not been done in the museum. Often containing information about staff, volunteers, visitors, donors, and more, having such photographs well organized and searchable for the institution is exceedingly important. Over the summer and fall of 2016 organized the photographs of the Mayborn Museum Complex. By taking disorganized digital photograph files and arranging them in a searchable fashion, now the Mayborn has a collection that is easy to manoeuver and to which more may be added.

During the spring of 2016, I was struggling to come up with an internship, project, or thesis to complete for my degree. It was brought to my attention the Mayborn had a large number of photographs they wished to have organized. As an aspiring archivist, this project sounded fun and interesting to me. So, I met with Rebecca Tucker Nall, and discussed what was going to be done. The process appeared to be decently simple. I needed to decide on a database to hold the photographs, upload, rename, and tag each image. Once this was completed, I would write a procedural manual allowing anyone to be able to continue the process I started. Upon first glance it appeared that it was going to be rather straightforward, however, once I delved into the project there was a bit more to the process than I originally thought.

One of the easiest decisions that was made was the choice of database for the photographs. These images were intended for the Mayborn's internal use, so something inexpensive and easy to use for staff was important. Perusing some options on the internet, looking at cost and function, Flickr seemed to be the best choice. There were several reasons for the choice of this database, first and foremost, it allowed one terabyte free storage before any money would need to be spent. If at any point the Mayborn exceeded this storage allotment, additional storage was still very inexpensive. After uploading over 19,000 photographs onto Flickr, only a very small fraction of the terabyte storage was used, thus confirming my choice in the system.

Another feature of Flickr that contributed to its selection was its storage capabilities. The system allowed for both public and private display of images, including a tiered system for access. Images could be set to "private" where they were only visible to the administrative account, "friends only" allowing the administrator to invite others to view certain images, and "public" giving access to anyone who cared to look. The purpose behind organizing the Mayborn's photographs was to allow easy access by staff to photographs of events and people. These pictures were going to be most often pulled for the Mayborn newsletter, Facebook page, or other marketing and promotional events. With the "private" and "friends only" settings on display, Flickr would allow staff to view and download the images as needed without allowing the public access. This function also allows for growth and change of the Mayborn's use of photographs. In the future, if the Mayborn wishes to use Flickr as another space to post images from events they are hosting, or even begin online exhibits, they may change the privacy settings. This outlet allows for another form of promotion for the museum.

Another aspect of Flickr that promoted its selection for this project was its organizational structure. With its ability to organize files into albums and collections, it reflected the structure of paper archive's series and subseries. This allowed me to organize the images by event, but also by subject, exhibit, and more. In addition to this organizational structure, I was also able to tag photographs allowing for multiple points of access. By typing in key words photographs can be accessed across albums. This tagging feature allowed for easy searchability within the entire collection, and would be useful to employees as they search for specific images they may need.

Once the database was decided upon, it was time to start uploading photographs from the museum's ToasterDrive into Flickr. I began the process by testing the organizational plan on a small number of photographs. Initially, I uploaded about 500 photographs to get a feel for the basic process, but soon realized figuring out the organization system would require a larger number of photographs to form multiple albums and collections. Thus, I started uploading all of the photographs. After several weeks, all the current images were uploaded totaling over 19,000 photographs.

During the uploading process, I attempted to keep as much of the original order as possible from the ToasterDrive. Uploading one folder at a time, I created albums with the title of the folder in the ToasterDrive when possible. In many cases, however, photographs were simply in a folder titled with the year (ex. 2009). When this occurred, I kept this organization when moving the photographs into Flickr, but knew they would need to be broken into more descriptive albums in the future. There were also photographs without a specific folder title to transfer. I placed these in an album on Flickr titled "Unprocessed." Before these images could be organized I needed to consult with Rebecca. With her assistance I was able to sort the photographs into existing albums, or create appropriate albums for a group of them.

After the photographs were uploaded, and separated into albums, the organization became top priority. Many of the photographs dealt with the traveling exhibits of the museum, including themed events, exhibit installation/deinstallation, and more. For these I created one album per exhibit, titling it with the exhibit name and year of installation, then added all photographs pertaining to the exhibit into this album. All of these albums would then be put into a collection titled "Traveling Exhibits." Other photographs were placed into albums titled with the event name and year, or the people associated with it, such as "Staff". If a photograph was not associated with a specific event, it was split into one of three main albums "Village", "Natural History", or "Discovery Center" The main exceptions were photographs not associated with an event, but simply documenting the museum.

Once all of the photographs were in appropriate albums they needed to be tagged and renamed. When uploading the photographs it was discovered that in some cases two photographs had the same image number, but were different photographs. To separate these images, and avoid future confusion, I created a trinomial naming system for the majority of the photographs. This system used the subject, date, and photograph number to differentiate images. For example, an image from the *Shipwrecked* exhibit may have been titled "Shipwrecked_2016_25." In some cases a further delineation of the naming was used to differentiate between separate events held within an album. If an image was of a specific event related to *Shipwrecked*, for example a membership party, it may have been titled "Shipwrecked_MemberParty_2016_13." The renaming of pictures took several weeks, and as more images were found in the "Unprocessed" folder some rearranging needed to be done.

While renaming the photographs I would also assign tags to the images. The initial tagging was not terribly difficult. I decided that the basic tags needed for photographs were the

year, season (fall, spring, summer, or Christmas), location within the museum, and if applicable event or exhibit. These tags would be given to every photograph uploaded. To ensure that I used terms that would be easily searchable and helpful, I met with Rebecca every week for several months in attempt to tag individual people within the photographs, such as volunteers, staff, and donors. By tagging these people employees are able to find specific images of people they may need, whether it be of a museum demonstration, event, volunteers or staff. Through this process, I was able to learn about the people who have worked at the museum in the past and continue to do so today. These images document the institution's history and the people who have worked in and for it for over 10 years.

After all the images were organized on Flickr, the next step of my project was to write a procedural manual, so that the photographs can continue to be organized similarly in the future. As I was writing the manual I went through every step of the process from uploading photographs onto Flickr, to tagging and renaming them, while also changing the privacy settings. To assist in explaining the process I took screen shots of each step, highlighting the step being completed. The manual also included a tag library, photograph naming standards, album naming standards, and a revision timeline. Once I had a rough draft I took it to Rebecca. Working through it together, I highlighted areas that appeared to be unclear and noted suggested changes made by Rebecca. Once those changes were made to the manual, another member of the Mayborn's staff went through the instructions to ensure that everything was clear. After all additional changes were made the manual was finished and my project was complete.

During the seven months I worked on this project I learned a lot about digital collections. Being the first time working with born digital materials, I made some mistakes. I spent a lot of time going back and changing the system I created after realizing there was a better way, but I

have learned a lot. In the end, there are aspects of the organization that I would change if I were to start from the beginning again, but the end product is something of which I am proud. I created a searchable archive of photographs using a user friendly database for the Mayborn. It is a low cost, easy to use, and relatively straightforward system with a manual to help explain the process.

Through this project, I was able to walk into an institution and develop a system in which photographs can be organized and used with ease. Before the creation of this system, the photographs sat in a drive on the computer without a time efficient way to search through them. The images weren't named, only some of the images were in titled folders, and they were not searchable. Now they can be searched by event, exhibit, date, title, and other relevant tags, making them more accessible to all employees. These photographs also serve as a sort of institutional history for the museum. They include pictures of events, programs, activities that have been done over the last twelve years. Staff, students, volunteers, and donors are documented in the photographs and can now be found with simplicity.

Even before I was finished with this project Rebecca was using it. She told me that one day she was in the ToasterDrive searching for a picture of a train for the Mayborn Express exhibit in the newsletter. She was frustrated because she couldn't figure out where it was and then remembered the Flickr account. Logging in and simply searching for the word "train" brought a plethora of images to choose from, only taking a few minutes. It is great to hear that the hard work that I put into this project has already started to help those at the Mayborn. My work on this project has left me with confidence. I am now able to walk into another institution and be able to create a digital archive for whatever purpose they may need.