

Corbis' Film Preservation Facility at Iron Mountain & the Bettmann Archive

Frequently Asked Questions, Updated November 2013

What is the Corbis Film Preservation Facility?

The Corbis Film Preservation Facility (Corbis FPF) in western Pennsylvania houses the Bettmann Archive, Corbis' treasure of 11 million historical images. The Facility also houses another 9 million Corbis owned images including the collections of William Rau (1870-1910), Pach Brothers (circa 1900 - 1985), Pacific and Atlantic (1925-1930), Lynn Goldsmith (circa 1975 - 2000) and several others. The Corbis FPF houses a film digitization lab, assuring access to the collections. In 2001, Corbis built this state-of-the-art, sub-zero film preservation facility at the Iron Mountain facility in Pennsylvania to store and preserve the collection. Corbis chose this facility after a careful and extensive search aided by some of the world's premier film preservationists. The 10,000 square foot underground storage facility is designed to be environmentally controlled with specific conditions (minus -20°C, relative humidity of 35%) to maintain photographic collections in an unchanged state for countless generations. These conditions preserve unstable acetate film, fading dyes in color transparencies and negatives, and photographs, enclosures and indexing systems.

What is the Bettmann Archive?

The Bettmann Archive could be called the world's photo album. It is a compilation of more than 11 million historical photographic negatives and prints from the 19th and 20th centuries representing some of the most recognizable faces and events from the century.

Beginning as the contents of two steamer trunks that Otto Bettmann took with him as he left Nazi Germany in 1935 for the United States, the collection grew over the years with the eventual merger with the news photo library of United Press International. The historically important collection includes such iconic news images as the Wright Brothers in flight, an irreverent Albert Einstein sticking out his tongue and Rosa Parks seated in the front of the bus.

The images in these collections had been used though the decades by Bettmann and others as the cornerstone of their business of licensing for use around the world. Corbis leverages the collections in a similar fashion, but also realizes that due to its age and condition, this historic trove of visual treasure was in danger of permanent loss if it is not preserved properly.

What has Corbis done to preserve the Bettmann Archive?

Since 1995, Corbis has undertaken an unprecedented effort to preserve the Bettmann archive and ensure access to it by housing it in the Film Preservation Facility. This project has entailed three key elements - editing, digitizing and selecting a safe, accessible location for storage. As a result of the editing and digitizing efforts, more of the Bettmann archive is now easily viewable and accessible than ever before in history. Because Corbis moved the archive to a safe, environmentally stable film preservation facility with a digitization lab, the availability and access to the Bettmann will be assured long into the future.

How much of the Bettmann Archive has now been edited and digitized?

More images from the Bettmann archive are now easily viewable and useable than ever before because of the editing and digitizing effort conducted by Corbis. Corbis specialists have spent the equivalent of 60 “staff years” finding and digitizing images from the collection. The Bettmann archive contains 11 million images total, including duplicates. Not counting duplicates, there are 7.5 million “original objects.” To date, 5 million original image objects have been edited and more than 250,000 have been digitized and are available on Corbis.com. In an unprecedented move for a for-profit company, images were chosen for digitization based not only on commercial potential but also their historic significance. Additionally, though this process many “rare finds” were discovered that never would have been seen.

Did Corbis buy the collection directly from Otto Bettmann?

No. In 1995, Corbis bought the Bettmann archive from Kraus Thompson, now known as the Kraus Organization. Kraus bought the Bettmann Collection in 1981, and in 1984 the Kraus-owned Bettmann acquired the expansive United Press International Photo collection.

Why is Corbis preserving the Bettmann Archive?

Without preservation, digitization, and proper storage, a significant visual record of the 20th Century would be lost forever. Parts of the Bettmann collection were in a precarious state of deterioration that if unchecked would have led to significant loss of the collection. Corbis took immediate and unprecedented steps not only to preserve this historical record for centuries to come, but also preserve and improve access to it.

Why do photographic materials decay?

All photo materials contain organic materials and as a result, degrade. Emulsions can fade, flake and peel; plastic film base can liquefy or dry out; cellulose acetate, the most common film base, releases acetic acid as it decays. This syndrome, called “vinegar syndrome,” causes the plastic film base to shrink, distorting the negative image beyond use. Additionally, other items that are stored with the collection’s negatives -- mimeographed captions and acidic paper envelopes, for example -- enhance degradation. Considering the age of the collections, and the fact that they’re about 75% acetate, preservation is necessary.

What impact has deterioration had on the Bettmann Archive?

The deterioration had been progressive, which was a serious situation. As the Corbis preservation staff determined the scope of the deterioration, and the editing staff delved deeper into the collection to determine what photographic treasures were untapped, it became increasingly clear that waiting the projected 25 years to edit all images was out of the question. Many negatives, including those in the UPI collections, were deteriorating.

Are the collections open to the public?

The collection’s prints and negatives have never been available for the general public to access. From its very beginning, the Bettmann Archive and all the collections within it have been private entities used by their owners as moneymaking assets. In reality, the large digital archive that Corbis has created enables a much larger audience to view the images than ever before.

Are researchers able to go through the images?

Yes, researchers are able to visit the archive. Typically, only a handful of non-Corbis researchers visit the Bettmann archive at the Film Preservation Facility to look at pictures annually. In-person visitors should have specific projects, needs and credentials, and have made arrangements in advance. When there, they are asked to stay to specific areas of the facility, and a Corbis specialist retrieves, handles and returns the requested images.

How can clients request and receive images?

More than two hundred and twenty five thousand archive images are quickly and easily available online at www.corbisimages.com. If a client needs an image not in this database, Corbis researchers can find the image via a digital text database from their desktop computers and on site in Pennsylvania. On-site Corbis staff at the archive then locates scans and fulfills the images.

What is Bill Gates' role in this project?

While Bill Gates is the sole investor in Corbis, he is not involved with decisions relating to the preservation of the Bettmann archive. Gary Shenk, the CEO of Corbis, runs Corbis and directs the company's efforts with the Bettmann, while delegating important strategic and tactical decisions to image and preservation experts who make the strategic decisions that are best for the archive and Corbis.

Why is the facility in Pennsylvania?

The facility in Pennsylvania was chosen because it is the most seismically sound and environmentally optimal location for film preservation in the United States. The facility provides a controlled temperature and humidity environment, conditions specifically calculated to maintain photographs at an unchanged state. Additionally, the facility provides an extremely high level of security, has an excellent maintenance record and is utilized by many large corporations for storage. Finally, because files are fulfilled digitally, the location is not as significant as in decades past.

When did the facility open?

April 2002.

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