



Notes From the Archive

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This is a publication of the Seaver Center for Western History Research, a section of the History Department. If you are informed by what you read here, please share it with a friend or colleague.

The work of our Archival Research Assistants is featured in this issue. Taryn Haydostian is pursuing a Masters in Library and Information Science, Archival Studies, at the UCLA School of Education and Information Studies. Prithvi Dinesh Chandra is a senior at Occidental College and graduating in May from the undergraduate program for History and International Relations.

Adventures in the Archives

By Taryn Haydostian, Archival Research Assistant

On a rainy, soggy Tuesday in March, students from two Cypress College classes - led by instructors Elizabeth Preger (teaching the history of photography) and Tony Maher (teaching alternative photographic processes) - combined to visit the Seaver Center. They came to view historical photographic processes they had been studying but would likely never see outside of an archival context.



For most of the students this was their first-ever visit to an archive, so John Cahoon and I made sure to explain the role of archives in learning and preservation. We then moved on to look at examples of early photographic processes such as daguerreotypes, ambrotypes, and tintypes, discussing the physical and chemical differences between the processes, and explaining how the labor-intensive and dangerous methods involved in developing images eventually shaped their use as mainly studio processes. A cyanotype (shown below) featuring survivors of the Donner Party illustrated their original use as a proofing process in contrast to the more creative uses for cyanotypes today.



Pictured left to right: 1) Virginia Reed Murphy 2) Patty Reed Lewis 3) Frances Donner Wilder (MSS-488)

We compared a wet plate collodion negative from the [William Stinson Soule Collection](#) circa the 1870s to a box of dry plate collodion negatives labeled "Calderon Wedding Mexico Pres. Candidate" circa the 1880s-1910. We further looked at the evolution of photographic processes to nitrate film

using the [Film Frame Collection](#), and then to acetate film - including some compelling examples of the deterioration that occurs when these processes are not cared for or stored correctly!



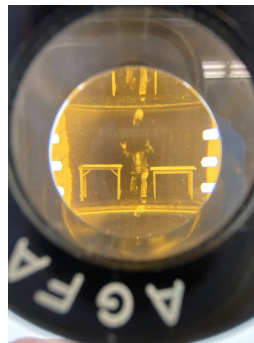
Together we also looked at different ways photographs were distributed commercially (including stereographs and lantern slides), and how the use of photo albums evolved from the nineteenth century when studio portraiture dominated, through the early twentieth century with the invention of cheaper, lighter, and more available cameras and film. This created a rising interest in and demand for amateur travel and documentary photography, as shown in a selection of turn-of-the-century albumen prints of Hawaii, Samoa, Tonga, and the Philippines pasted onto album pages. The images within these pages also revealed graphic scenes from the Spanish-American War, contextualizing the importance of archives in preserving artifacts from such events. Another [album of a 1914 road trip](#) around the western United States, was an excellent example of how the new, more accessible photographic processes as well as the consumer expansion of cars influenced photography.

The students thoroughly enjoyed their visit, with many admiring our rolling shelves for storage. One student later commented, "I didn't realize archivists were like Indiana Jones." If only!

Staff News

Prithvi Dinesh Chandra has returned to the Seaver Center as an Archival Research Assistant through generous funding by the Louis B. Mayer Foundation. Last summer Prithvi began volunteer work on the Film Frame Collection digitization project. He then headed to New York City for an internship with the United Nations Refugee Agency, an eye-opening and engaging experience that he said exposed him to the inner workings of the UN and international organizations as a whole.

Below Prithvi is processing an 1898 film frame from *Un homme de têtes* (A Man of Heads) by Georges Méliès.



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Digitized Collections

The collections are a part of the History Department of the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County. The Seaver Center opened in 1986 through a generous grant from the Seaver Institute.

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