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A Century's Photo History Destined for Life in a Mine

By SARAH BOXER

It will be a surreal burial.

The Bettmann archive, the quirky cache of pictures that Otto Bettmann sneaked out of Nazi Germany in two steamer trunks in 1935 and then built into an enormous collection of historical importance, will be sunk 220 feet down in a limestone mine situated 60 miles northeast of Pittsburgh, where it will be far from the reach of historians. The archive, which is estimated to have as many as 17 million photographs, is a visual history of the 20th century. Since 1995 it has belonged to Corbis, the private company of Microsoft's chairman, William H. Gates.

The Bettmann archive is moving from New York City to a strange underworld. Corbis plans to rent 10,000 square feet in a mine that once belonged to U.S. Steel and now holds a vast underground city run by Iron Mountain/National Underground Storage. There Corbis will create a modern, subzero, low-humidity storage area safe from earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, vandals, nuclear blasts and the ravages of time.

But preservation by deep freeze presents a problem. The new address is strikingly inaccessible. Historians, researchers and editors accustomed to browsing through photo files will have to use Corbis's digital archive, which has only 225,000 images, less than 2 percent of the whole collection.

Some worry that the collection is being locked away in a tomb; others believe that Mr. Gates is saving a pictorial legacy that is in mortal danger. One thing is clear. This is a momentous occasion. As Henry Wilhelm, a film preservationist in Grinnell, Iowa, put it, "This is the closing of the era of traditional photography."

The Bettmann archive, now housed at Broadway and 20th Street in Manhattan, includes not only Bettmann's private collection — millions of images of everything from sunglasses to demolitions to medical tools — but also the United Press International collection, 10 million news photos from archives that once belonged to Hearst, Scripps, The Daily News and The Chicago Tribune.

The pictures are moving for their own good, said Bill Hannigan, the editorial director of Corbis's digital archive. For years no one thought the photographs were valuable. They were "components of a business," he said. They were pictures made to be printed in newspapers and magazines. They were bent, scribbled on, captioned and recaptioned. Some were stored near radiators and leaky pipes. No one took care of them, and now many are falling apart. A lot of the color film has faded and the acetate-based negatives have begun to break down, bubble and crack.

By 1997 the verdict was clear, Mr. Hannigan said: "Get them out of here." Film needs to be in cold, dry storage. That is the only thing that can slow its deterioration, Mr. Wilhelm said. At the moment, the most vulnerable Bettmann negatives in New York are in two commercial freezers, awaiting the move to the mine. As Mr. Wilhelm noted, "Sara Lee cakes are much better taken care of than most film."

That will change soon. This fall, Corbis will start trucking all of its photographs, negatives and other graphic materials from New York to the new site that Mr. Wilhelm is helping to plan in the Pennsylvania mine. "The objective is to preserve the originals for thousands of years," he said.

When the move is done, Corbis's New York office will contain nothing but people and their computers, plugged into a digital archive. No photographic prints, no negatives, no rotting mess. Analog is having a



Librado Romero/ The New York Times
The Bettmann archive, home of the Corbis image of Einstein, is moving from New York City to a mine in Pennsylvania.

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Librado Romero/ The New York Times
The entrance to the underground storage facility, 60 miles northeast of Pittsburgh, that will soon house the Bettmann photography archive.

burial, and digital is dancing on its grave.

And that is the rub. "What is the point of conserving the photographs if no one can see them?" asked Gail Buckland, a photo historian and curator who used the Bettmann to research the photographs used in the book "The American Century" by Harold Evans. Photographs are original historical documents, she said. As a historian "you develop a sixth sense" when you work with them. You stumble on things you would never find on your computer.

"I know the ephemeral qualities of holding pictures in your hand," said Mr. Hannigan, who wrote "New York Noir," a book based on the crime photos in the Daily News Collection. Going through the Corbis collection, he said, he found a lot of images no one had seen before, including photographs taken by Weegee at Sammy's Bowery Bar and at Coney Island.

Ken Johnston, who has worked for the Bettmann archive since 1985 and is now the manager of Corbis's historical collection, sounded wistful about the archive's departure. "I love that stuff," he said. "Not being able to get my hands on it will be tough. But I will develop a relationship by remote control."

The remote relationship may already be compromised, though. Only a fraction of the photographs will be digitized before the move. And after the move, the digitization will be slow at best. In other words, the researchers who help newspapers, magazines and publishers find the images they need will not be working with a full deck of pictures.

When Mr. Gates bought the Bettmann and U.P.I. collections in 1995, digitization was his mission. Mr. Gates, who also owns Sygma (a documentary photo agency based in Paris that has about 30 million images) and Saba Press (a news-photo service based in New York that has about a million photos) and has the rights to license digital reproductions of works from the Hermitage in St. Petersburg, Russia, the Philadelphia Museum, the Barnes Collection in Merion, Pa., and the National Gallery in London, had always planned to make his worldwide collection, now 65 million photographs strong, fully digital.

So in 1996, Corbis began transferring the Bettmann and U.P.I. images into digital format at the cost of about \$20 per picture. But suddenly this January, when only about 225,000 photographic images had been scanned, the scanning stopped. Corbis laid off 79 members of its worldwide staff of 1,300, including those involved in editing and digitizing Bettmann and U.P.I. images.

Why? "There was too much of a preservation issue" to finish editing and digitizing the whole thing, Mr. Hannigan said. If Corbis had scanned everything it would have taken 25 years to finish. And that was time the pictures did not have. "It is heartbreaking to look at these images and see their structure breaking down."

The images scanned first were those deemed most valuable, both culturally and commercially. Pictures of Kennedys, Rockefellers, Roosevelts, the Depression, the two world wars and the Vietnam War have been scanned. As have money-making 20th-century icons: Einstein sticking out his tongue, Rosa Parks on the bus, Jimi Hendrix at Woodstock, Orson Welles doing his "War of the Worlds" broadcast and anything with Elvis Presley, Marilyn Monroe, Jackie Robinson, Babe Ruth or Martin Luther King Jr. in it.

Then the collection was searched for undiscovered treasures. "It's like shucking oysters," Mr. Hannigan said. One has to go through a lot of boring pictures of ribbon cuttings and mayors with their eyes shut before finding the pearls. But pearls were found: a blood-spattered Miles Davis being arrested after fighting with a police officer who had ordered him off a Manhattan sidewalk, Dorothy Dandridge with Samuel Goldwyn, and Joe DiMaggio in a batting cage at Yankee Stadium.

What will happen to the still-unshucked images? They will be going to the mine with the rest of the pictures. Eventually some will be digitized, Mr. Hannigan said, "but how and when has not been finalized." The mine will be staffed by only two people, one for research and one for scanning. With such a small staff, the prospect of finding hidden gems or doing much digitizing seems remote.

Meanwhile, Corbis's most popular photographs — say, the picture of John F. Kennedy Jr. saluting his father's coffin — will become ever more popular. Even now, Mr. Johnston said, "the same stuff is seen over and over again." Of all the pictures that Corbis owns, he said, "only a small amount have ever been used for stories — a tiny percentage." And the more pictures are requested, the more they are requested. Visual history is doomed to repeat itself.

But at least the history won't disappear. Corbis is lucky, Mr. Hannigan said, that "its owner is wealthy enough and committed enough to build the new facility." But critics are quick to point out that Mr. Gates is probably also rich enough to finish digitizing the collection and choose a more accessible location.

Many other photo and film collections are digitizing, and many have off-site storage facilities. The Museum of Modern Art has one in Pennsylvania and the Library of Congress has one in Maryland. But, Ms. Buckland said, "they are not packing up and moving out." Why should all of the Bettmann and U.P.I. photographs be moved when not all of them are in immediate danger? "Why send every one out to the boondocks just because a few are ailing?" she asked.

She added: "These images are part of our history and culture, a sacred trust, and if Bill Gates is buying it up, he's creating a monopoly situation by not giving access to it."

But the collection "was never a public trust," even in Bettmann's time, Mr. Hannigan said. "It has always been privately held," a for-profit business. "We don't allow people to get to the originals now," he added. And for most of Corbis's clients, like People magazine, American Heritage magazine, cable television stations and advertisers, it is easy to find a photograph to suit their needs. "It doesn't matter to them whether it's a daguerreotype or a digital image," Mr. Hannigan said.

And scholars, he said, can always look on the Corbis Web site (www.corbisimages.com) for a picture they want or have a Corbis researcher help them. If they need an image that hasn't been digitized, it can be defrosted and scanned in the mine. All of the written information that exists about the collection in card catalogs and logbooks will be in the digital database by the time of the move. So, "If we can find it now," Mr. Hannigan said, "we can find it then."

But maybe retrieving specific images is not the point. "I want to see everything," Ms. Buckland said. "I don't think Bill Gates understands the importance of originals." Maybe, she said, he is figuring that "as long as he keeps the reproduction rights, who cares about the objects?"

It is just the opposite, Mr. Wilhelm said. "I believe that thousands of years from now, Bill Gates will be remembered for having preserved — and made digitally accessible — a very important segment of our photographic history," he said.

Burial means different things to different people. To some it means preservation. To others it means death. "Conservators will think it's the greatest thing," Mr. Hannigan said. "Others will think Bill Gates locked up the collection and threw away the key."

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