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April 15, 2001

Moving From Scruffy Quarters to a Limestone Labyrinth

The New York office of Corbis at Broadway and 20th Street, where the Bettmann and U.P.I. archives are now stored, is a researcher's candy store and a conservator's nightmare.

The place has an Old World scruffiness. It is full of old movie stills and yellowing logbooks. There are Otto Bettmann's thumbnail sketches of the items in his collection, little-known photographs of Diego Rivera with Frida Kahlo, never-seen pictures taken by Weegee at Coney Island and glass-plate negatives.

Two refrigerators are stuffed with negatives. There are stacks of unmarked boxes and millions of crumbling note cards. A tag on a file of one collection reads: "Jesus — Do not use." The photographic collections of Hearst, Scripps, The Daily News and The Chicago Tribune are all here, each stored according to its own system. It is organized chaos. And then there is the smell. Sniff the air, and it smells like vinegar. That is the scent of photographs decomposing.

But soon this office will be emptied of its pictures. The mine that the photographs are going to is a limestone labyrinth, a postapocalyptic city designed to outlast human life. To get there, fly to Pittsburgh and then drive northeast for 90 minutes through rolling hills. Signs warn of hunters in the hills. The entrance to the mine is barred by steel gates and guards. All visitors are immediately asked to surrender their firearms, drugs and explosives.

The air in the mine is chilly. Twenty miles of tunnels illuminated by fluorescent lights and hemmed in by thick, rough limestone walls and ceilings lead to the various storage facilities, which are owned by Iron Mountain/National Underground Storage. The mine has its own fire department underground. Flintstone-style golf carts cruise the streets, and smokers huddle and puff at roadside picnic tables. The walls are painted silver.

It is a city of giant vaults whose owners are nowhere to be seen. Dentists' records reside near archives that hold the original patents for cotton gins and mousetraps. Old government aerial photographs are near offices that hold original Elvis recordings and NBC radio broadcasts.

Some storage units are so large that they have their own ZIP codes. Some entrances have plain steel doors. Others are gussied up to look like mansions, with quaint lamplights and planters. Some have flypaper doormats that remove the dust from your shoes. Others require you to take an air shower that blows you clean in the vestibule. The place Corbis will rent is still dark and rubby, littered with empty dynamite crates and the soles of miners' boots. SARAH BOXER



Frances Roberts for The New York Times
 A few of the millions of photographs that are about to be removed from the New York office of Corbis.

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