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# Tribune-Review

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## World's photo album goes underground

By Joan Greene  
Sunday, June 30, 2002

A picture is worth a thousand words, and that is why millions of prints and negatives are safely preserved in a national underground storage area in Butler County.

Security measures at the Iron Mountain facility, located north of Pittsburgh, are as tight as passing through airport security.

Images of world leaders, pop-culture icons, wars, assassinations, sports, fashion, natural disasters and countless other political, social and cultural events depicting the history of the 20th century, are treated with almost the same care and reverence accorded a priceless work of art.

In December, the Seattle based Corbis Corp., a global leader in digital photography and imagery, moved its' vast Bettmann/UPI Archive of photographs from New York City to its new home, a 1,000-acre limestone mine converted into a storage facility during the Cold War era of the 1950s. Today, 2,500 major corporations and government offices lease space to store important

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[Albert Einstein photo](#)

Timothy Fadek/Corbis

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[A photo of Otto Bettmann](#)

Christopher Horner/Tribune-Review

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documents at the Iron Mountain facility.

Otto Bettmann started the valuable collection, when he fled Nazi Germany in the 1930s, with two trunks of photographs. In the 1980s, the United Press International photo collection was added to the archive, and Corbis, a Bill Gate's corporation, acquired the entire collection in 1995.

The massive array of historical images was moved from downtown Manhattan because the negatives and prints were beginning to deteriorate due to heat, humidity and handling, and they needed to be stored in a colder environment, said Marc Osborn, Corbis spokesman. "Corbis takes its role as the steward of this collection very, very seriously by preserving the visual history of the 20th century" Osborn said. "Each picture is valuable and historical, depicting thousands and thousands of everyday events that provide a really good look of a time period and place."

The new, 10,000-square-foot underground storage facility is environmentally controlled with specific conditions (45 degrees F, relative humidity of 35 percent) calculated to maintain photographic collections in an unchanged state for thousands of years. These conditions preserve unstable acetate film, fading dyes in color transparencies and negatives and photographs, enclosures and indexing systems.

After traversing miles of winding country roads, guests at Iron Mountain get firsthand looks at the facility's security and safety measures. There's a security guard and a drive through a tunnel to the



[Robinya Roberts](#)  
Christopher Horner/Tribune-Review

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[Ann Hartman](#)  
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underground security station. A guest gives his Social Security number, shows his driver's license and states the reason for the visit. If that process goes smoothly, the guest is given a fire extinguisher to place on the dashboard of his car and is escorted to the Corbis facility, driving 200 feet underground through the curving tunnel.

Images of the Beatles, Albert Einstein and Truman Capote dancing with Marilyn Monroe, flash on a screen as visitors enter the state-of-the-art, million-dollar facility.

The temperature inside the research area and scanning lab is comfortable, but it's cooler in the film preservation vault, where 160 cabinets of print files are lined up in rows. Behind the tall, gray files, millions of negative files are stored.

“There are a lot of hidden treasures buried beneath these hills,” said Ann Hartman, library and records manager, referring to the massive collection of prints and negatives. She noted that “millions” of images are still untapped and haven’t been digitized yet. “They may never be if no one requests them,” Hartman said. To date, approximately 225,000 images from the vast collection have been digitized and are available online at [www.corbis.com](http://www.corbis.com).

Last October, library associate Robinya Roberts began the daunting task of organizing the archive. Roberts explained that the negatives are organized by collections, such as Reuters or Acme, and the prints are filed by subjects, and separated into color or black and white. Thousands of glass negatives, stored in wooden crates, are securely wrapped in foil to keep



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the negatives free from contamination, Roberts said.

“When the pictures are preserved, so are the “captions, labels, identifications and file folders,” Roberts explained, so that they will be in pristine condition for generations to come. Within one year, to arrest all further deterioration, the temperature of the film preservation vault will be reduced to -4 degrees.



“The collection is priceless, it needs to be preserved,” Hartman said. From fashion to fishing, from the common man to the famous, the vast archive “captures life.”

The preservation vault safeguards the photographic history of nearly every aspect of life in the 20th century, from the Beatles dressed in Elizabethan clothes to the searing images of Pearl Harbor in flames and the poignant picture of John F. Kennedy Jr. saluting his father’s casket. Pictures of local interest include the Johnstown Flood and steel magnate Andrew Carnegie, with labor union representatives. Although most of the pictures can be released to the public, some photos are restricted, including some of the Kennedy’s, John Lennon and Judy Garland.

The momentous job of preserving the Bettmann/UPI Archive began in earnest in 1995. Wilhelm Imaging Research Inc., a highly respected company in the research and preservation of film and photographs, assisted Corbis in the preservation project. The Iowa based company provides consulting services to museums and archives on low-temperature cold storage for the long-term preservation of black-and-white and color still photographs and motion pictures.

“The preservation of these photographs will make certain that the original negatives and transparencies will continue to be available in the best condition possible for future digital color restoration, film grain reduction, and image sharpness enhancement technologies, said Henry Wilhelm, president of the company. “For photographers, whose images are contained in the Corbis collections, the new preservation facility will help preserve their life’s work – and their place in photographic history – far into the future.”

In the last six years, Corbis specialists have spent the equivalent of 60 “staff years” finding and digitizing images from the vast collection. Five million of the 7.5 million original image objects are slated to be edited. To date, 1.3 million, or 26 percent, have been viewed. So far, 225,000 photographs have been digitized and placed on the Web site.

If a picture can’t be found on the Web site, Roberts will search among the dozens of file cabinets to locate it, scan it and deliver it. Although most of the pictures are accessible via the Web site or by requests through Corbis account executives, special request, in-person visits to the facility can be arranged. However,



because of the fragile and historical nature of the prints and negatives, a library associate will retrieve and handle the requested images.

According to Osborn, anyone can license a picture for use from the Bettmann/UPI Archive. Whether it's a photo of the popular comedy team from the 1970s, Cheech & Chong, or a picture of Anne Frank, chances are Corbis will have it. A student doing a research paper on World War II can request photos of Nazi Germany, an ad agency can request a picture of a popular icon during the '60s, or a national magazine or television network can request a historical photograph to accompany a story on a current event. Photographs are even available for personal use, such as wall art, Osborn said. If the pictures are among the 225,000 available on the Corbis Web site, they can be downloaded directly off the computer.

Often, a major world event will trigger a request for a picture, Hartman said. She noted that requests range from companies, such as Sony Pictures seeking a picture for PlayStation2 to Elizabeth Arden searching for photographs of Elizabeth Taylor to use for advertising the famous movie star's perfume line.

It takes approximately four hours for a picture that is not in the online database to be found, scanned, digitized and sent out, Hartman said. Usually, a Corbis account executive requests the picture for a client, and Corbis researchers find the picture via a new digital text database from their desktop computers.

After Roberts locates the image from the film preservation vault, Dina Keil, library associate, scans, edits and digitizes it in the facility's high-resolution film digitization lab. Using the digital camera and e-mailing the image to the client is the quickest, Keil said. Often, several images of a subject will be emailed so clients can select the ones they want. A click of the mouse erases any imperfections, such as dirt or scratches, so that the "integrity" of the picture is preserved, Keil said.

A ticker-tape parade in 1969 honoring the Apollo 11 astronauts after their return from the moon, designer Christian Dior illustrating the new hemlines for 1953, and a Vietnamese woman in 1968 holding a wounded baby in her arms, reflect the millions of historical images that have been captured on film.

In essence, the Bettmann/UPI Archive serves as a time capsule filled with historical pictures that can continually be opened for generations to come.

### Frequently asked questions

**Q:** What is the Bettmann Archive?

**A:** The Bettmann Archive is like 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 merge with the news photo library of United Press International. The historically important collection includes such 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.

**Q:** Did Corbis buy the collection directly from Otto Bettmann?

**A:** 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 Collection acquired the UPI photo collection.

**Q:** Why is Corbin involved in preserving the Bettmann Archive?

**A:** Without preservation, digitization and proper storage, a significant visual record of the 20th century would be lost forever.

**Q:** Why do photographic materials decay?

**A:** All photo material 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.

**Q:** What is Bill Gates' role in this project?

**A:** While Bill Gates is the sole investor in Corbis, he is not involved with decisions relating to the preservation of the Bettmann Archive. Corbis' dual team of Steve Davis and Tony Rojas run Corbis, and they have directed the company's efforts while delegating tactical decisions to image and preservation experts.

**Q:** Why has the collection been relocated to rural Pennsylvania?

**A:** 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 environment of -4 degrees F and a relative humidity of 35 percent, conditions specifically calculated to maintain photographs in an unchanged state. Additionally, the facility provides an extremely high level of security, has an excellent maintenance record and is used by many large corporations for storage.

– Corbis

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