



Famous Photos Frozen Forever

By [Reena Jana](#)

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Talk about creepy. Bill Gates' minions are currently laying the floor for a 10,000 square foot, tomblike facility in rural Pennsylvania to preserve, in part, an image of Albert Einstein's tongue.

It's the future home of the Bettmann Archive, a renowned collection of more than 11 million historic photographs and negatives -- including such iconic images as Einstein sticking out his tongue and the Wright Brothers in flight.

It's a symbolic declaration that physical photographs are dead and should literally be buried.

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Gates' plans call for more than mere burial. The Bettmann Archive will be stored in specially engineered, subzero rooms -- a first in the history of photo preservation.

The Bettmann facility, scheduled to open in 2002, will operate at minus-4 degrees Fahrenheit, with 35 percent humidity. In comparison, New York's Museum of Modern Art currently stores 95 percent of its photographs at 60 degrees Fahrenheit, with 40 percent humidity.

The current standard for cold storage of valuable still photograph and motion picture film is between 35 and 55 degrees Fahrenheit with about 40 percent humidity. Only NASA's Space Flight Originals preservation facility in Houston and the [John F. Kennedy Library](#) in Boston have items stored at zero degrees Fahrenheit.

"We treat cakes better than we treat important photographs," said Bill Hannigan, editorial director/digital archivist of the Bettmann Archive.

Hannigan said that consultants hired to design the new facility visited food industry giants such as Sara Lee to understand extreme cold storage options, which should preserve the photographs for 500 to 1,000 years.

The Bettmann Archive was acquired in 1995 by [Corbis](#), the stock photo company founded by Gates in 1989. Corbis is digitizing the photos, banking on the idea that pixelated versions of famous images will simply take the place of their film-and-paper-based predecessors.

"By digitizing the photographs, we're making the images more available to the public than ever," said Marc Osborn, a spokesman for Corbis, whose customers range from newspaper editors to regular Joes wanting to create custom screensavers.

Critics of Corbis say the digitization process is actually making the archive even more inaccessible, at least immediately. Only 225,000 of the 11 million photographs have been scanned in nearly six years.

"Yes, we've put long-term goals above short-term ones," Osborn said.

But because the photographs are fragile and highly valuable, it's already difficult for the public to get access to the originals. For the time being, Corbis has an office in Manhattan, where historians can make appointments to see the Bettmann photographs. Only 20 to 30 visits are granted per year, said Osborn.

Still, historians are worried that the new facility will make the photographs even harder to see. The Bettmann Archive is located within the Iron Mountain [National Underground Storage](#) site, a former limestone mine 220 feet underground in remote Boyers, Pennsylvania.

"I guess the new locale will be parallel to faraway museums that we never get to frequently," said Edward Earle, curator of digital media at the International [Center for Photography](#) in Manhattan.

Earle, who commends Corbis' extreme preservation efforts, nonetheless stresses that originals need to be easily accessible to art history scholars.

"We need to see the material nature of a photograph. It's an artifact," Earle said. "Maybe there are handwritten notes on the back. We need to access a negative to discover what the photographer saw before he printed and cropped it into a photograph."

Osborn stated that scholars and historians are welcome at the new site as well, although he admitted "It's definitely less convenient than Manhattan. But that's a small price to pay for the Bettmann photographs to be around for 1,000 more years."

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