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a NewsHour with Jim Lehrer Transcript

ONLINE FOCUS

# FROZEN IN TIME

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Terence Smith visits the Bettmann Archive, one of the world's most renowned private collections of historical photographic and graphic images, and explores the arduous process of preserving delicate historic images.



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TERENCE SMITH: With its imposing name and military-tight security, you might think that the Iron Mountain National Underground Storage Facility is one of those forbidding places where presidents and generals huddled during the Cold War.



But these days there is a much different sort of planning going on.

Here, in an old limestone mine some 200 feet beneath the rolling hills of western Pennsylvania, is the Corbis/Bettmann Film Preservation Facility. The goal here is not to destroy but to preserve, not to end time, but to stop it altogether.



What is being preserved is the famed Bettmann Archive, some 11 million-plus images that represent the visual history of the 20th century, the century of photography. Pictures of everyone and everything are stored in this vast repository: Presidents and kings. Sultans and queens. Starlets and stargazers. From the ridiculous to the hallowed. Victory and

**NewsHour Extra**

calamity.

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TERENCE SMITH: All these moments live on in Otto Bettmann's archive. Bettmann, who began his career as a curator of rare books, fled Nazi Germany in 1935 with steamer trunks brimming with photos, drawings, and engravings. And until his death in 1998, his namesake archive continued to amass images of every type.

He virtually invented an industry himself, creating one of the most important and widely used visual libraries in the world. The archive was stored in New York, where its clientele included publishers, researchers, and historians.

Ken Johnston is the archive's manager of historical collections.



KEN JOHNSTON: It's a national treasure. It shows not just American culture, but world culture through certainly if not the 20th century, way back to pre-history, as far back as you can get pictures from.

TERENCE SMITH: But this collective memory of life at the turn of a new millennium was fading and fading fast.

HENRY WILHELM: The rate of deterioration of the collection as a whole was really mind-boggling.

TERENCE SMITH: Enter Henry Wilhelm, an authority on the care and preservation of film and photos.

HENRY WILHELM: If you just extrapolate out 50 and 100 years, you could see the entire collection was going to be lost. It was a tragedy waiting to happen and was kind of unfolding.

TERENCE SMITH: Unfolding because film, especially older film, literally dissolves over time, leaving a tell-tale vinegar stench of decay.

KEN JOHNSTON: What happens is the film disintegrates. It actually turns into vinegar. And when you can smell the vinegar, you know there's something wrong.

HENRY WILHELM: Even its location, you know, in an old building on lower Broadway in New York, the biggest fear you have in a building like that is a water pipe break on an upper floor. Or, God forbid, the building catches on fire.



TERENCE SMITH: There was, however, a major roadblock on the path to preservation: Money. Saving the archive was not a cheap proposition.

But money became no object in 1995 when Bettmann was bought by Corbis, a photo agency founded in 1989 and held privately by Bill Gates.

Gates was intent on collecting the visual arts, photography especially, for the digital age. He sketched out his ideas in an interview right after he bought Bettmann.



BILL GATES: Having the largest digital archive will make it easy for people who have images to make them available and easy for people who want to get images, to find them.

HENRY WILHELM: My first reaction when I learned that Bill Gates had acquired this collection -- you know, think Bill Gates is the personification of the digital age -- I thought, "oh, my god, they're going to scan the whole thing and then just let it go."

TERENCE SMITH: To Wilhelm's satisfaction, Gates decided to preserve the archive as an artifact while scanning its decaying components.

Corbis then put Henry Wilhelm's radical solution for saving the Bettmann archive into motion. The entire archive would be moved and put into cold storage. So it was meticulously packed up, carted away, and

trucked eight hours west of New York City to Iron Mountain's facility near Pittsburgh.

At Iron Mountain phase two is under way: Freezing the entire collection, suspending already- suspended animation even further, and putting the icons on ice. For that, Iron Mountain was a natural choice.



TOM ROTH: The mine itself is over 1,000 acres. We currently have about 130 acres developed for storage.

TERENCE SMITH: Tom Roth is the general manager of the Iron Mountain facility.

TOM ROTH: About 2,300 different customers do business with us down here.

TERENCE SMITH: 1,700 people work here. It has its own water purification system, fed by an underground lake.

TOM ROTH: So this is one of three generator rooms down here.

TERENCE SMITH: And emergency generators with seven days of power. Iron Mountain is a city unto itself. In the 1950s, it was advertised as a blast-proof nuclear bunker, complete with all the comforts of home, minus the fallout.



Now, records of all types are kept within this cavernous facility.

TOM ROTH: So this room is the length, actually the length of two football fields, about 600 feet long.

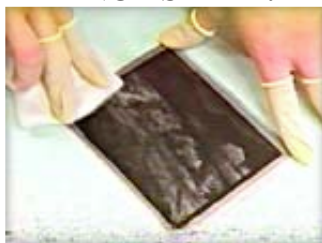
## The painstaking process of preserving the images

Bettmann users in New York who were accustomed to visiting the archive in person were worried about the move to such a remote location. Compounding the concerns were questions about access to the archive stemming from Gates' private acquisition of the collection. Ken Johnston:



**KEN JOHNSTON:** This was never a public collection, and it was never accessed like a public collection, like a library or a public archive. It's basically more accessible now than it was, again, because everyone can go online and see this information.

**TERENCE SMITH:** Dina Keil is helping put the archive online. Each image is cleaned carefully, delicately placed on a scanner, and edited on a computer. Most of the 11 million images have yet to be scanned. The time-consuming, painstaking process is repeated for each negative.



**DINA KEIL:** It would take, I would say, maybe 20 minutes or half hour, and that's not including transfer time to our Seattle office, and then from there on to the client. I'll be very busy for a long time. ( Laughs )

## History, frozen in time

**TERENCE SMITH:** For now, some of the most precious of the Bettmann icons are stored below zero in these freezers.

**HENRY WILHELM:** And at this temperature, that type of deterioration is basically stopped completely. It's literally frozen in time.

**TERENCE SMITH:** And how long will these last?

on accelerated aging data, depending on the original condition, we're basically talking about thousands of years; not hundreds, thousands.



TERENCE SMITH: Wow.

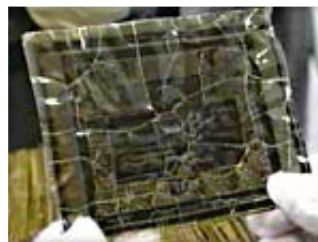
And next November, the temperature in this in this 10,000-square-foot cavern -- Wilhelm likens it to an ice cave -- will be dropped to minus- four degrees Fahrenheit, bringing time to a standstill. For now, the collection is being stabilized at 45 degrees, temperate enough to allow a walk through time.



KEN JOHNSTON: So this is the international news photo collection, which was part of William Randolph Hearst's news empire. The negatives in this drawer are all from about 1937, 1938, and there's about 2,000 negatives per drawer. This particular era of the 1930s is particularly bad for deterioration. And we can pick one at random here, and you can see. There's two negatives, and you can see how crinkled up they are.

HENRY WILHELM: And this is caused by the deterioration of the plastic film base itself. This is a worldwide problem. It's a worldwide tragedy.

TERENCE SMITH: It's a photograph of the invitation to the coronation of King George VI and Queen Elizabeth in 1937.



TERENCE SMITH: In addition to the huge Bettmann acquisition, Corbis has acquired many other collections over the years. They, too, are stored at Iron Mountain.

KEN JOHNSTON: This is the Lynne Goldsmith collection. Lynne Goldsmith, rock 'n' roll photographer. It's really important to have this sort of material in a space like this because it's color film. Color film not only deteriorates... the plastic

deteriorates, but the color dyes fade, and so in some ways it's even more crucial to get your color stuff in as quickly as possible into a safe space.

One of her big subjects, Lynne Goldsmith, was Bruce Springsteen really early in his career. So let's see what we find.

TERENCE SMITH: Here you are, down below the Sex Pistols.

KEN JOHNSTON: Uh-huh.

TERENCE SMITH: And Carly Simon.



KEN JOHNSTON: These are pretty early Bruce Springsteens, and it's pretty famous material.

TERENCE SMITH: The boss as a boy.

SPOKESMAN: Yeah.

TERENCE SMITH: It was then on to Vietnam and part of the United Press International collection acquired by Bettmann in the 1980s.

KEN JOHNSTON: Now, these are Kyoichi Sawada's. Sawada won the Pulitzer while in Vietnam. Died in Vietnam. This is Hue, South Vietnam. An elderly Vietnamese man hobbles along on crutches.

TERENCE SMITH: Here he is. So this could be the battle for Hue.

HENRY WILHELM: I remember when I first saw this collection, that I guess sort of in a visceral emotional way, these affected me more than anything else in it, and that these are...

TERENCE SMITH: As you say, this is in his camera...

HENRY WILHELM: The film was actually there.

TERENCE SMITH: ...On this street, at this time, in Vietnam.

KEN JOHNSTON: These are the... what we call the personality files. Their photographic print files. These prints were all made from negatives in the collection.



TERENCE SMITH: The Bee Gees?

KEN JOHNSTON: Yes.

TERENCE SMITH: Harry Belafonte?

KEN JOHNSTON: It's quite funny sometimes who ends up next to each other. We've got Carol Braun and Brezhnev, you know.

TERENCE SMITH: And around the last corner awaited a surprise: Buried amid the "s" files, photos of my late father, the sportswriter, "Red" Smith. I'm pretty familiar with these.

KEN JOHNSTON: 1951.

TERENCE SMITH: At the New York Herald Tribune. Note the bow tie.

HENRY WILHELM: And the typewriter is an older piece of technology.

TERENCE SMITH: The Remington, the old Remington. Cigarette and the coffee cup, that's realistic.



TERENCE SMITH: With the coming deep freeze, here in Iron Mountain, Corbis hopes to keep their millions of icons realistic permanently.





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