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April 15, 2001

Photo Archive Heads Underground

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By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Filed at 5:17 p.m. ET

NEW YORK (AP) -- The Bettmann Archive, a collection of photographs encompassing the 20th century, is being moved to underground quarters for safekeeping but where its estimated 17 million pictures will be less accessible to scholars and editors, The New York Times reports.

The collection, owned by Bill Gates' Corbis Corp., is currently housed in drawers, drawers and boxes in offices in lower Manhattan that are permeated with a vinegar odor, "the scent of photographs decomposing," the newspaper reported in Sunday's editions.

Its new home will be a refrigerated, humidity-controlled complex in a commercial storage facility operated deep inside the tunnels of a former limestone mine near Pittsburgh.

While the move will protect the photos from vandals and natural disasters, the Times said, it will create a problem for researchers.

Instead of being able to browse through the raw material, they will have to rely on Corbis' digital archive, although only 2 percent of the photos have been copied into computer-readable digital files, the Times said.

The alternative will be going to Pittsburgh and taking a 90-mile drive to Iron Mountain/National Underground Storage, which already archives material ranging from government patent records to original Elvis Presley recordings.

The Bettmann Archive started with two trunks of photographs smuggled out of Nazi Germany by Otto Bettmann in 1935. Corbis acquired the Bettmann Archive in 1995 along with the 10 million news photos of United Press International.

Corbis began the next year to transfer both collections into digital format at a cost of \$20 a picture. Some 225,000 had been scanned as of January, when the process

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was suspended and Corbis laid off 79 of its 1,300 employees, including the scanning staff, the Times said.

Bill Hannigan, editorial director of Corbis' digital archive, said the task of digitizing the entire collection would take 25 years -- not enough time to save some deteriorating photos.

Gates, the founder and chairman of Microsoft Inc., also owns Sygma, a Paris-based photo agency, which has 30 million pictures, and Saba Press of New York, which has 1 million, plus licensing rights for digital images from several other collections and museums.

There was no immediate response Sunday to calls to Corbis for comment.

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