

A Visit to the Corbis Picture Mine

June 2003

A Special Report by Dirck Halstead

It was heart breaking.

Ken Johnston loved photographs and photojournalism. For two decades he had been a researcher for the Bettman archives, one of the largest collections of photography in the world. In the late 1980s, Bettmann bought the United Press International archives, and in 1995, Corbis, the giant corporation privately held by billionaire Bill Gates bought the entire collection.

For Johnston the problem was that his beloved collection was rapidly dying. Of the 11,000,000 plus negatives, plates and prints stored in manila folders on shelves in Bettmann's Manhattan office, many were turning to vinegar.

The smell permeated the entire floor that Bettmann occupied. Employees would start to gag as they retrieved priceless photographs for clients. And worst of all, the negatives would crumble into dust as they were removed from their envelopes.

This collection represents a vast proportion of the world's visual legacy. And it was vanishing before Johnston's eyes.

The root of the problem is that photographs are inherently unstable. Many photographers are painfully aware that color negatives, prints, and transparencies have a relatively short life span. The dyes in color reversal film introduced in the 1950s are especially vulnerable to fading following exposure to sunlight. But serious photographers take comfort that black and white film has survived for as much as a century, and in most cases outlives the photographer. What they did not realize was that some insidious chemical reactions were taking place which would eventually destroy even the best cared for prints and negatives.

Negatives are comprised of two layers of materials--the base and the emulsion. Cellulose acetate, a plastic that decays, creating acetic acid, or vinegar has been used as a base. The light-sensitive emulsion glued to the top of cellulose acetate is very stable. But as the base decays, the emulsion starts to break away from it, bubbling up and contracting. Heat and humidity accelerate the deterioration. Once the process gets to this point, the photograph is rendered unusable and cannot be saved. As the bulk of the collection at Bettmann aged, the process started spreading like a plague throughout the shelves. In particular, the acetate based negatives from the 1930s and 1950s, were decomposing fastest.

Photographic archiving expert Henry Wilhelm was hired by Bill Gates to see if something could possibly be done to at least slow down the process. In a 21-page report Wilhelm recommended that the collection be put in cold storage. Specifically, the room temperature surrounding the photographs needed to decrease to the sub-zero range. Wilhelm was aware of the effects that cold had on a woolly mammoth that had stumbled into a pre-historic ravine, and essentially was frozen before decay could start. Thousands of years later the beast was still intact, complete with its fur.

But how would you refrigerate an area that held 11,000,000 photographs?

The answer it turned out was in an abandoned limestone mine near Butler, Pennsylvania. There were almost a million square feet of tunnels more than 200 feet below the Appalachian forest. In the 1960s the government had started moving critical information into the mine. The property was acquired by a company called Iron Mountain, which started to provide vault space to the Defense Department, the National Archives, major corporations, film studios. Gates decided that was answer.

So in late 2001, nineteen trucks moved the collection from Manhattan to the mine.

When Corbis announced the plan, far from being hailed as the savior of photographic history, Gates was pilloried by the press, photographers, and researchers. The New York Times' Sarah Boxer wrote in a front page story, "The Bettmann archive, the quirky cache of pictures that Otto Bettmann sneaked out of Nazi Germany in two steamer trunks in 1935 and then built into an enormous collection of historical importance, will be sunk 220 feet down in a limestone mine situated 60 miles northeast of Pittsburgh, where it will be far from the reach of historians." The Digital Journalist was just one of many other voices that in columns and editorials lambasted Corbis and Gates for removing accessibility to this great collection, and thus limiting choice for publications.

Gates did not help his image much during this period. Most of the move was done secretly. The entrance to the mine itself, complete with heavy iron gates and armed guards looked like some foreboding high security installation from the cold war. To Bettman's former clients, it appeared that they were being locked out.

So, it was with some surprise, especially after writing a [commentary for The Digital Journalist that baldly stated that Bill Gates was responsible for the biggest change in the health of the photography industry in 25 years](#), that I received an invitation from Corbis' Vice President of News and Editorial Photography, Brian Storm, to join a small group of photographers and editors to travel to the mine and spend a weekend helping to research and edit photographs for a new book commemorating Otto Bettmann's 100th Birthday.

On a beautiful spring day, we faced the huge iron gate that rolls up into the mouth of the cave. After being briefed and issued fire extinguishers, our small company was driven deep into the mine. 200 feet below the earth, powered by their own generators, mercury lights provided an eerie glow as we drove past red doors inserted into the rock wall. We were cautioned not to photograph them, because many of the clients that Iron Mountain provides services for do not want it known that their archives and vital records are stored there.

About a mile into the cavern, we turned a corner, to see two small palm trees and a plasma screen next to a door displaying the gray logo, Corbis. The plasma screen on the wall displays a continuing series of some of the world's greatest photographs, which represent the visual history of the past century.

Inside the door, is a long room dominated by editing tables and light boxes. It is here that researchers can spend hours, days, or weeks, looking through the collection. White-gloved employees bring in carts stacked high with folders filled with pictures.



© Bettmann/CORBIS
Making it quite obvious that she holds no brief for M. Dior or his ideas on un-curving the female form, Marilyn Monroe DiMaggio purses her lips for admirers at Idlewild after her arrival from the Coast yesterday.



© Bettmann/CORBIS
2/8/1945: Franklin D. Roosevelt, Josef Stalin, and Winston Churchill at the Yalta Conference.



© Bettmann/CORBIS
Vietnam- Kyoichi Sawada, UPI photographer in Vietnam, shown in the combat area in December of 1967. Depicted holding camera in the jungle.

This is one of the first things that began to change my opinion about the purpose of the mine. I had envisioned all these pictures being locked into cold storage, away from the eyes of people who wanted to search this knowledge base. In fact, the opposite was true. As any one who has tried to do major research in the New York office will attest, the process was not easy. There was limited desk space, and a flurry of coming and going which was not conducive to the sometimes lengthy hunt for photographs. Here, there seemed to be all the time in the world, with no distractions. True, you must go to Western Pennsylvania to do it, but for serious researchers this is not a huge problem.

In the meantime, Corbis continues to scan photographs from the collection. It is not a cheap endeavor. It costs about \$70 per image to make the high definition scans required, including captioning, photo shop, and research. Corbis encourages researchers to come to the mine. As the clients find photographs, the staff takes note, and if the photos ordered have not been scanned, that will be done as soon as possible. It is using intellectual karate to improve the collection's online resources. Searches can also be instigated from New York, or cities around the world.

Although the temperature of the vast vault which lies behind the editing room is capable of being lowered to the zero degree level recommended by Wilhelm, it will be kept at a level of 44 degrees for the next few years. This enables bundled-up researchers to spend the time they need in the archives.

To enter the vault from the edit space you must go through a pressure chamber. Once visitors are inside the pressure chamber, the outer door closes and the temperature and humidity are stabilized before the door into the vault swings open.

The vault itself stretches for hundreds of feet into the limestone room. There are long rows of filing cabinets that contain millions of envelopes of photographs, with captions. Glass plates are carefully boxed, but available. The employees, many of whom have worked at Bettmann for years, know exactly where the treasures are located.

Opening a drawer containing International News Photos images from the 1930s, the smell of vinegar suddenly emanates. For Ken Johnston, who is now the manager of Historical Collections, the satisfaction comes from knowing that the aging process is now being dramatically arrested. One of the big jobs facing Johnston and his colleagues is to identify the photographers who took the photographs. The filing systems of INP, ACME, and United Press, generally did not put the names of their staff photographers on the captions. The Corbis staff is trying to decipher the initials used on the captions to discover who the photographer was. They also encourage users who go to the Corbis web site to give them further information about the photographers who took the pictures.

During our two days in the mine, we all had projects that we wanted to research. I wanted to see the ENTIRE Vietnam War collection. Well, not quite the entire collection, since that was nearly a million images on its own, but at least all the prints made at the time, which were the selects made by the editors of UPI. I was one of them, as the picture bureau manager in Saigon in 1965-1966. For the next three hours, staff brought out cart after cart, more than 4,800 images, which I went through one by one. Some of them, such as the picture by Kyoichi Sawada which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1966, of a Vietnamese family swimming across a river to escape a battle, I knew about. But as I went through the pictures, I realized that I was amassing a major portfolio by a photographer who I had totally forgotten about.

The Corbis people were surprised as I laid out a story by Shunsuke Akaatsuka about the battle for Hamburger Hill. It was one of the strongest portfolios of combat photography I had ever seen. It had been sleeping, unnoticed in the archives for the past 35 years.

It is just this sort of thing that encourages me. As Corbis allows more and more photographers, editors, and academics into this room 200 feet below ground, our visual legacy will be enriched, and most important, preserved for the generations to come.

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dirckhalstead@austin.rr.com



Photographer Lewis Wickes Hine © Bettmann/CORBIS
Spindle boys in Georgia cotton mill. Photo by Lewis Hine. Undated.



Photographer Kyoichi Sawada © Bettmann/CORBIS
Vietnamese Mother and Children Flee Village Bombing
In this Pulitzer Prize winning photo, A Vietnamese mother and her children wade across a river, fleeing a bombing raid on Qui Nhon by United States aircraft. The raid was organized to knock out Viet Cong snipers in the village who were firing on United States Marines. Women and children were warned to leave the village before the bombs began to fall.

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Photographer Shunsuke Akaatsuka © Bettmann/CORBIS
American Soldiers and Rescue helicopter
Original caption: A wounded U.S. paratrooper is rushed to an evacuation helicopter on "Hamburger Hill" during fierce fighting against the North Vietnamese May 18. Men of the U.S. 101st Airborne Division are trying to wrest from the Communists the strategically located peak near the Laotian border.

Video Presentation

The Bettman Archives

by: Dirck Halstead & Alex Jones

*To view these interview clips, you
must have
the free [Quicktime](#) plugin*



Bettmann Archives

Quicktime
Hi-Bandwidth