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UNDER IRON MOUNTAIN Corbis Stores "Very Important Photographs" At Zero Degrees Fahrenheit

Gary Haynes joined United Press International as a photographer in Detroit in 1958. By 1969 he was UPI's assistant managing editor of photography in New York. From inside UPI, as a shooter and a boss, he saw nearly every UPI picture to move on the network for close to 11 years. Now, 35 years later, he's deep in a rock cavern underneath a Pennsylvania mountain, looking for historic UPI negatives and original prints for a new picture book. Here's what he and a few old cohorts discovered down at the bottom of a cold, deep mine, inside the "Corbis Cave."



By Gary Haynes

From Inside Iron Mountain, PA

Bill Gates caught flak from photographic historians and researchers in 1995 when he moved his vast Corbis photographic collection from New York City to a refrigerated cave 220 feet beneath the ground in a rural Pennsylvania mountain, near Butler, about an hour's drive northeast of Pittsburgh. The move, which took place between summer 2001 and March 2002, required 19 refrigerated trucks.

The photographs might be preserved, critics said, but nobody would ever again have easy access to them. "Far from the reach of historians," huffed The New York Times. Most of those skeptics now realize that Gates—and Gates is Corbis, which he founded in 1989—did the right thing. He has preserved an irreplaceable photographic history and has kept it accessible.

David Milne and I visited Corbis for the first time in June 2004 to locate photographs for a book about United Press International Newspictures. In addition to all the other things he owns, Gates owns all of UPI's pictures, including all the photographs I made during my 11 years with UPI. The Corbis headquarters are in Seattle, with offices in New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, London, Paris, Düsseldorf, Vienna, Hong Kong, Kuala Lumpur, and Tokyo.

Iron Mountain Storage Facility, where Corbis stores it all, is reached by a two-lane road that rambles through the bucolic Pennsylvania countryside. Suddenly there's the mountain, a sign with a cryptic symbol, and an expansive driveway. Iron Mountain has been in the storage business since 1951. They own several mines around the country that are similar to the Corbis Cave. By 1995 Iron Mountain's revenues exceeded \$100 million and they went public in 1996. Since then they've acquired 100 companies in 124 markets in 17 countries.

When you arrive at Iron Mountain and turn into the driveway, enormous concrete barriers slow your approach. Polite but armed guards emerge from a trailer to ask where you're going. If you are unable to furnish a name of someone inside who expects you, that's as far as you'll get. When you tell them your destination, they call to confirm that you're expected. They then inspect your car. The glove compartment. Under the seats. The trunk. The spare tire compartment.

The first encounter with Iron Mountain makes you wonder if you've somehow strayed onto the set of a James Bond film.



I've covered the White House. It's easier to get into 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue than inside Iron Mountain. After they clear your car, you navigate more roadblocks and stop at a traffic arm. When the arm is raised, you proceed down a ramp into mouth of the mountain itself. Giant steel gates open, swallow your car, and close behind you. There are more guards, friendlier somehow than the ones at the front entrance, but just as well armed. Everyone must sign in and produce two valid pieces of photo identification.

They give you an ID badge to wear and a fire extinguisher to carry in your car. You are told to park a few yards away to wait for your escort to arrive in a car to lead you to their site, a half mile or more away along a winding road through tunnels burrowed into this old limestone mine. More confining than a traffic tunnel, the ceiling is about 25 feet high.

We followed our host in serpentine fashion past doors of some of the other tenants of Iron Mountain: the U.S. Government, the National Archives, Warner Brothers, Universal Studios, the Federal Office of Management and Budget, US Investigations Services. Many doors are unmarked. At almost every turn side tunnels lead to other recesses of the cave. There are lights at the end of the tunnels—but our host makes clear that we are to do no exploring this underground hideaway is the workplace for more than 1,700 people. It has its own five-engine fire department, power generators, and dehumidification, refrigeration, and air filtration systems. There's a water purification system fed by an underground lake. High-tech sprinklers and plumbing and security system cables snake across and up the walls and ceilings. Security cameras are everywhere. The temperature throughout the old mine is kept at 55 degrees. The mine covers a thousand acres, and about 130 acres have been developed for storage by 2,300 clients.

Someone must escort you even when you're on foot outside the Corbis facility, which is how you reach the bathroom a few yards away. Your escort takes you there and waits to escort you back. Even the bathrooms are high-tech—the sinks and toilets must drain UP.

The Corbis entrance appears to be just a pair of doors hung on the side of the tunnel, with a doormat and two potted plants, flanked by a modest lighted "Corbis" sign on one side and an LCD photo display on the other.

Through the doors, which are kept locked, is a 10,000 square foot space carved out of the mountain with irregular walls and ceiling formed by the cave itself. A fourth of the space, in the front, is used for offices and a work area with high-end digital equipment, light boxes, editing tables, and copiers.

The walls are rough-hewn but white, and the facility is well-lighted. It is unsettling to be so deep underground, in part because there are no windows, but it's not somber.

Several commercial food freezers currently protect 28,000 "Very Important Photographs" at zero degrees Fahrenheit, including some famous gems like "Albert Einstein Sticking Out His Tongue" and "Marilyn Monroe Having Skirt Trouble on a Subway Grate."

Past the offices and workspace is the refrigerated, humidity-controlled Film Preservation Facility, about 600 feet long (the length of two football fields). You enter through a pressure chamber, through two doors to preserve humidity and temperature levels. Inside are orderly rows and hundreds of file cabinets and crates containing old negatives, glass plates, and prints.

So much work remains to be done inside the FPF by Corbis staff that a compromise temperature of 44 degrees protects the film without frostbiting the staff. There is no firm timetable, but sometime after 2005 the FPF will be lowered to 4 degrees below zero, and the "Very Important Photographs" will move back to the FPF.

UPI's vast collection is in there, the weathered and well-worn New York bureau daily logbooks, and the thousands of original 4x5 envelopes used for negative files well after UPI executive editor Harold Blumenfeld switched UPI photographers to 35mm in the 1960s (the 35mm film was cut into three-frame strips so it could be filed in 4x5 envelopes).

UPI's photographs had been produced for speed, not archiving. In the rush to transmit pictures to UPI clients, black and white film and prints were rarely fixed long enough to dissolve out all the residual silver. Acetate was the most common film base from the mid-1920s into the early 1980s and the base, in time, deteriorates. The deterioration occurs even more quickly when film is improperly fixed and when it isn't kept cool and dry. It is also believed that degrading acetate films are contagious and can hasten the decay of other films stored in the same area.



Bureaus and photographers would ship both film and prints to New York, where there was no motive or staff to re-fix the film and prints.

The 4x5 inch Kraft file envelopes were made of acidic paper and held together with animal glues —more enemies of film preservation. Prints were filed by subject in ordinary file cabinets and kept at room temperature with no humidity control.

In short, UPI was doing just about everything wrong in the way it stored and handled prints and negatives at its headquarters at 220 E. 42nd Street in New York. As early as the 1970s a strong hint of vinegar in the air warned of prints and film going bad.

IN 1972, UPI was sold to a couple of entrepreneurs whose management skills could never catch up with their cash needs. Things got so bad that they began selling irreplaceable parts of UPI, including its thriving foreign photography bureaus (sold to Reuters) and staff and client contracts, dispatched at fire-sale prices.

Perhaps the crown jewel was the picture library: 11.5 million images of events and personalities on glass plates, negatives, and prints dating back to the Civil War. The archive was priceless and not just because of its size, but because of the "you are there" quality of the collection: historic material from International Newsphotos (1912-1958), Acme Newspictures (1923-1960), Pacific and Atlantic Photos (1927-1930), and UPI's entire trove since 1907. Photo sales were bringing in \$1 million or more a year, every year, without any marketing effort and with only four salesmen. UPI's business department suggested that an electronic retrieval system and a marketing plan could double or triple that income.

UPI's chieftains didn't have money to spend as they scrambled just to meet the payroll. "Who cares about a damn picture library?" one of the owners said and in 1984, for a \$1.1 million "advance royalty," Bettmann Archive gained exclusive control of the collection.

That meant moving all of UPI's pictures from its headquarters on 42nd Street across town to Bettmann on 21st Street. UPI lost ready access to its own files and had to pay Bettmann \$35 every time it needed a copy of one of its own pictures.

The UPI collection, however, might not have survived at all had not Bettmann taken over. UPI didn't have the resources to preserve it, and the company's owners didn't understand its value. Even with Bettmann in control, several hundred negatives on glass plates were hauled to the trash because the glass was dangerous to handle and a pain to store. Despite entreaties by the UPI photography editor assigned to Bettmann, no prints or new copy negatives were made.

Bettmann could also "smell the vinegar" in the collection, rotting and even badly decomposed acetate negatives. Bettmann installed a computerized index system, cleaned up and reorganized the collection, and began investigating ways to better preserve it.

In 1995 Bill Gates' Corbis bought it all —UPI's 11.5 million images and the 5 million pictures Bettmann had accumulated since 1933 —for an "undisclosed" price, reported by Newsweek to be \$6 million. Corbis has since added several other large photographic collections and more than a dozen smaller ones.

Corbis kept its UPI acquisition in a New York office but knew that the clock was ticking on a collection that had been deteriorating for years from heat, humidity, and less-than-gentle care and handling.

Corbis's researchers (many of them longtime Bettmann employees) discovered that only about 100,000 of the UPI/Bettmann collection's 11 million original images had ever been looked at by a client, and of that number, only about 75,000 had ever been licensed.

Hundreds of "B" negatives had already deteriorated past the point of being saved. As it sought a long-term solution to preserving its collection, Corbis did a heroic edit of the vast archive, trying to learn what had sold well and what was most likely to sell in the future.

Corbis worked with Henry Wilhelm, an expert on the preservation of traditional and digital color photographs and motion pictures and the long-term preservation of photographic materials in subzero cold storage. Wilhelm wrote a 21-page recommendation for rescue options, and when Corbis decided that subzero storage was the way to go, Wilhelm oversaw the vault's construction at Iron Mountain.

Keeping the collection at 4 degrees below zero Fahrenheit would halt deterioration, Wilhelm determined, and leave the photographs intact and usable for at least another five thousand years. He compared the effect to that of a woolly mammoth whose perfectly preserved carcass was found in Siberian permafrost in 1999. The mammoth slipped into an ice crevice and froze before decay could begin, to be discovered 20,000 years later with tissues intact.

"It's a real demonstration of how cold storage works,' Wilhelm says. "The lessons for film materials are clear. The gelatin layer of film is made from connective tissue of cows, essentially the same as the woolly mammoth. There's just no doubt that this will work for film."

ON THAT FIRST visit I had a secret test for Corbis. I wanted them to find an obscure photograph I'd taken in July 1966, when Frank Sinatra married Mia Farrow in Las Vegas. We were in Los Angeles and were given less than an hour's notice to photograph the couple after the ceremony. Being Hollywood, I had some connections and called Clay Lacey, who sold Lear Jets. He got me to Las Vegas with minutes to spare. Sinatra hated the press, and we were allowed fewer than five minutes with the newlyweds as they just stood there, five yards away, taking no directions and answering no questions.

After photographing the couple, I shot a 300mm telephoto close-up of 98-pound Farrow's tiny hand weighed down with Frank's Lord-only-knows-how-many-carat diamond ring. Not a prize-winning photograph, but one that got UPI a lot of play and prompted AP to try to match the shot by cropping just the hand and ring out of their general view (enlarger to the ceiling and easel to the floor, resulting in a photograph with more grain than ring).

UPI's old daily logs are the Rosetta stone to UPI's files. The New York picture desk recorded every

photograph transmitted on UPI's wire by date, time, and number. Provided a date and sack number, a white-gloved researcher went into the FPF and, fewer than 10 minutes later, handed me the original file envelope.

In my cotton-gloved hands were the 35mm negatives that I'd touched last 38 years before! It was a wonderful, truly nifty moment.

FORMER UPI SAIGON picture bureau chief and photojournalist Bill Snead accompanied Dave and me on a second visit to Iron Mountain. Snead, who started at the Lawrence (KS) Journal-World in the photography department in 1954 while still in high school, rose up through newspapers in Topeka, KS, and Wilmington, DE, before running UPI's photo operation in Vietnam and then later working at The Washington Post and National Geographic. He's now back home in Kansas as the deputy editor of the Journal-World, in charge of the newsroom. He volunteered to scour the Vietnam files for us.



"From the late 1950s to 1975 literally hundreds of journalists from all over the world poked their heads in at one time or another to check out the war, do a little dance with death, and pop out again," Snead says. "You could push fate as far as you wanted. Shooters who got the best pictures played it (Vietnam) like a rubber band, and sometimes it snapped." Five of UPI's photographers didn't return from Vietnam. Snead was soon surrounded by UPI photography logs and immersed in the Vietnam film and print collection.

"For the 40-some years that I shot film I had a well-earned reputation for not filing my negatives," says Snead. "My locker at The Washington Post, crammed with stained coils of 35mm negatives hanging on hooks, was known as 'Snead's Hanging Gardens of Kodak.' But, when I worked in Vietnam (from 1967 to 1969) running the UPI photo bureau, I was pretty dependable at sending packets of captioned negatives to New York via air express after we'd transmitted the best pictures from Saigon. So 35 years later, while assembling a retrospective photography show, I wanted to see what happened to nearly two years worth of pictures that a lot of young men risked their lives to make with their choice to be combat photographers."

Snead says that after meeting Haynes and Milne at the Corbis Cave, Ann Hartman, manager of Library and Records Management for Corbis, and her crew happily pulled files that matched his time spent working in Vietnam.

"I found a half dozen frames that I'd taken —but only one had my photo credit. Six pictures, out of hundreds. I looked in vain for Kent Potter's incredible before-and-after sequence of a GI losing an arm to a rocket, for Kyochi Sawada's photographs of the Tet Offensive from Hue's Citadel, where a very-alive Marine buried under rubble popped out from under a 50-caliber machine gun that was blasting away. Wearing my little white gloves, sorting through the old negatives, I felt sad that there weren't more old memories to see and relieved when I'd see a frame that had put UPI on lots of front pages for a day."

Snead concluded, "It's ironic that these historic images are deep underground —just like the majority of the shooters who made them."

WHILE CRITICS HARPED about moving so much photographic history from New York to a cave in Pennsylvania, Corbis was still busy creating digital scans of many of the pictures, at a cost of from \$50 to \$70 for each high-resolution scan. The electronic archive of more than a quarter-million images, including the entire UPI collection, is available online to anyone at www.corbis.com.

The early fuss about hiding history came from critics who hadn't actually seen what Corbis has done. A Washington Post reporter was an early visitor, and reported that the FPF was a "vault, not a grave."

The furor has died down but Corbis must have been tempted to remind naysayers that Corbis legally owned all those photographs and could do whatever it wished with them. Bill Gates —Corbis —has the financial resources and clearly has an understanding of the importance of the irreplaceable records he is preserving. Corbis and its larger rival, Getty Images, now appear to dominate the photography market.

SEVERAL BOOKS ABOUT the old UPI have chapters about the Newspictures operation, but none of UPI's actual pictures (because the cost of buying the rights to use the photographs could have financially doomed the books). Gates agreed in January 2004 to give us unlimited access to, and use of, UPI's pictures for a hardcover book about UPI for a special fee that makes taking the risk of doing such a book possible.

UPI's photographers won eight Pulitzer Prizes along with every other award known to news, feature, and sports photography: World Press Photo awards, National Press Photographers Association Pictures of the Year awards, White House News Photographers Association awards, George Polk Memorial Awards, and regional and statewide photography competitions. We wanted the UPI Newspictures story told with pictures: for several decades UPI Newspictures gave world-class headaches to the folks over at the larger and richer Associated Press. The typical UPI photographer would travel the globe and shoot thousands of pictures. After a decade or more he would leave UPI and have less than two dozen prints (and no negatives) of his work to show for his career. Our new book will celebrate UPI Newspictures, showcase some great pictures, and include some of the photographers' inside stories about their pictures and what it was like to work for UPI.

Bill Gates started Corbis with the idea of selling homeowners photographs for display on wall monitors throughout their houses. On the walls of his Seattle mansion, he can display digital photos or fine art as mood and occasion dictate. On his tenth wedding anniversary, the monitors reportedly displayed wedding pictures. But whatever photographs may interest Gates or a Corbis client, it's comforting to know that, thanks to Gates, it will all still be here, perfectly preserved, 5,000 years from now.

We will return to the Corbis Cave to continue mining the UPI photo collection. We've been enthralled by hundreds of images, including unfamiliar photographs of familiar events that we didn't know existed —because they aren't the "iconic" photos of an event, or because they haven't been published since the day after they were taken. We hope this fresh look will provide our book about UPI Newspictures with more depth than we first dreamed.

In addition to his career at UPI, Haynes has also worked at the Salinas (KS) Journal, was a national picture editor for The New York Times in 1969, and in 1975 was the assistant managing editor of photography for The Philadelphia Inquirer. He can be reached at verity@rochelle.net.

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