

THE AOA PHOTOGRAPH PRESERVATION PROJECT

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The Archives & Museum of Optometry holds more than 10,000 photographs that document the history of the American Optometric Association, state affiliates and optometry's leaders. Among these are many oversize photographic prints, including 43 unique panoramic photos of AOA Congresses, state meetings and events from the last century (1913-2000).

Digitally preserving and providing online access to these resources is a long-term goal for our repository, but only a few digital images have ever been made from this collection and these are of poor quality. Many of the photographic prints are damaged or in fragile condition and need to be rehoused in archival containers to keep them from deteriorating. Still others require expensive conservation treatment before we can create digital masters.

Conservation

In the fall of 2016 our University of Missouri-St. Louis Museum Studies interns, Brittany Golden and Sophie Grus, finished an inventory of the photographs in our collections. This year, they have been preparing our oversize and panoramic photographs for digitization and rehousing.

Most of our large photos were rolled for compact storage. Once photos are stored this way forcing them open can cause damage to the emulsion, cracking and flaking the images. Before we can begin to digitize our panoramic photos they must be humidified, unrolled and dried flat.

While it is recommended that conservation treatment of historic photographs be performed by a conservator, humidification and flattening can be performed by trained museum staff and interns under the supervision of a curator.

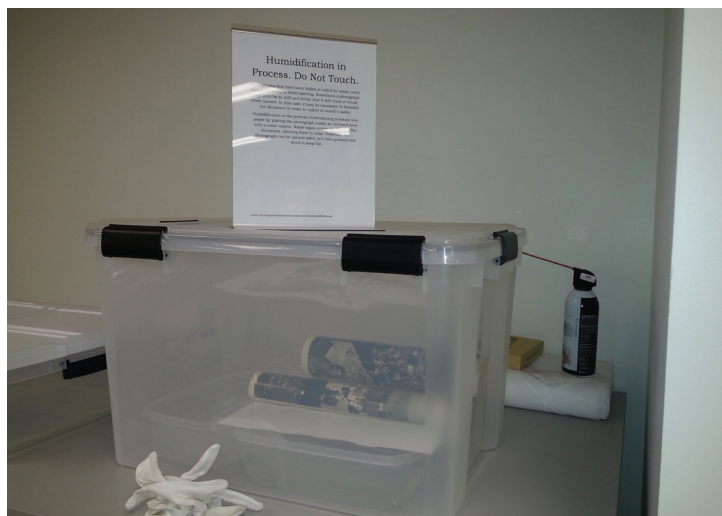


Figure 1. Rolled panoramic photographs in a humidification chamber



Figure 2. Flattened panoramic photograph drying before rehousing.

Humidification and Flattening

Photographs that are tightly rolled are placed in a humidification chamber and monitored every hour. The chamber in Figure 1 was constructed from a plastic container and baker's racks lined with muslin. The students must make sure that the photographs become pliable without getting so moist that they buckle or develop mold. The photos will begin to unfurl on their own, but very large photographs may need several sessions and be placed in larger containers as they unfold.

When they are ready to be unrolled, the photos are carefully placed on sheets of archival blotter paper and held flat with glass weights. By stacking the blotter sheets, several photos can be processed at once. They are allowed to dry slowly in a clean, climate-controlled space (Figure 2).

FROM THE ARCHIVES

Preservation Rehousing

Once they have been flattened, a custom Mylar sleeve is created for each photograph to prevent damage from handling and dust. The sleeve is left open along one of the long axes in order to accommodate removal for digitizing or conservation work. Encapsulated photographs are stored flat in archival boxes (Figure 3).



Figure 3. After treatment, photos are encapsulated and stored flat in archival boxes.

Digital Preservation

Digitization achieves two goals. First, digital images published online can provide access to researchers across the globe. Second, allowing researchers to access digital surrogates protects the original object from damage due to handling. This is particularly critical for large-format archival material, but it is also difficult as most panoramic photographs will not fit on a scanner and require the use of very expensive photography equipment to capture images of sufficient resolution and clarity.

The few images that we have already digitized were created by scanning or photographing portions of the image and “stitching” them together using photo editing software such as Photoshop to match overlapping edges (Figure 4). Unfortunately, the images were not captured properly to ensure long-term access nor was the color adjusted to give an accurate depiction of the original images.

Very high-quality images can be produced this way if one is skilled working with the software and familiar with standards for creating digital masters. It is preferable to outsource this project to professional photographers who have experience working with historical photographs and who have access and expertise in using specialized equipment. This way, the photograph is not damaged by placing on a scanner that does not support the entire photograph, and a high-resolution image can be captured and used to make service copies while preserving the master.



Figure 4. Images stitched together to produce a panoramic. Pre-Congress Post graduate Course, AOA Scientific Section, 1913, Rochester, NY. Original held at The Archives & Museum of Optometry.

Panoramic Photographs

The technology used to produce panoramic photographs was developed in the early nineteenth century, but the first panoramic cameras were not widely available to commercial photographers until 1898--the same year as the AOA was founded! A typical panoramic print is twice as long as it is high, but they vary in size. The prints in our collection range from 4" tall x 12" long to 18" tall x 60" long.^{1,2}



Panoramic photographs are special because they allow the photographer a wide field of view. This means they can capture a large group of people in great detail. Naturally, the association used this new and exciting format to photograph their annual convention attendees. The photograph in Figure 5 was taken in front of the Planters Hotel in St. Louis, MO in 1914

*Figure 5. 17th AOA Annual Congress,
St. Louis, MO,
July 18-25, 1914.
The Archives & Museum of Optometry.*



The panoramic photographs in our collection not only capture the association's past, but also can serve as a time capsule for historic landscapes. Photos taken outside can provide insight into how the environment has changed over time. The [Omni] Shoreham Hotel grounds featured in Figure 6 have changed drastically in the past six decades.

*Figure 6. 61st AOA Annual Congress,
Shoreham Hotel,
Washington D.C., 1958.
The Archives & Museum of Optometry.*



Panoramic photographs can also provide interior detail that assists architectural historians in restoring historic furnishings or researching structural histories. Located just two blocks from the [Omni] Shoreham, the Sheraton Park Hotel [now the Marriott Wardman Park] is the largest hotel in the Capitol and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The ballroom seen in Figure 7 in the photo of the AOA's 77th Annual Convention in 1974 is still used for large banquets and other events.³

Figure 7. 77th AOA Annual Congress Banquet, Sheraton Park Hotel, Washington, D.C., 1974. The Archives & Museum of Optometry



Historians and city planners often use historic photos to understand changes in land use and plan developments in urban landscapes. In the rear of this 1934 (Figure 8) photograph of the 27th AOA Congress you can see Kansas City's second convention center. Built after the first convention center burned to the ground in April of 1900, this building was erected in only 3 months to accommodate the July 4 Democratic Convention. This historic building has since been replaced by a parking garage.⁴

Figure 8. 27th AOA Annual Congress, 1924, Kansas City, MO. The Archives & Museum of Optometry

Next Steps: Conservation and Accessibility

Digitizing large photographs is a necessary and expensive part of our preservation program, but some of our photographs have suffered damage from years of poor storage and treatment. Photos hung in hallways are faded from UV light or have adhered to glass as a result of poor climate control. Still others have suffered mold infestation, tearing or damage to the emulsion from exposure to environmental pollutants or poor storage practices. These will need the services of a professional conservator before they are lost and this treatment must be done to stabilize the photographs so that they can withstand the digitization process.

Your contribution to Optometry Cares – The AOA Foundation (www.aoafoundation.org) can help us in meeting our preservation goals and making these remarkable photographs accessible. Please remember to select “Museum and Archives” as the program designation.

References

1. Library of Congress. “A Brief History of Panoramic Photography.” Accessed: <https://www.loc.gov/collections/panoramic-photographs/articles-and-essays/a-brief-history-of-panoramic-photography/>
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