

Picturing 1930s St. Louis: a Case Study of the Implementation of Set-Level Records

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Abstract: The full collection of a commercial photography studio is one of the most important photographic resources in any archive. The breadth and scope of a complete work-for-hire collection provides critical insight into the commercial sector at large, while also revealing the cultural ephemera, built environments, and day-to-day life of an urban citizenry. The accompanying business records provide a wealth of detailed documentation about the creation of those images, often including date, client, subject, and location information.

However, large photo studio collections present a unique processing challenge. The diverse subject matter and clients represented in such collections defy easy summary at the collection-level or even series-level. Without detailed cataloging, there is no access to this rich material. The Missouri Historical Society has developed a solution in the form of the “set” level of cataloging, used for individual photo shoot assignments. Each set-level record captures the detailed information from the photographer’s records and allows for discovery through client, subject, and location access points. It also facilitates rapid image-level cataloging by interns and volunteers during digitization.

Our method will be examined through a case study focusing on our work to process sixty-one linear feet of negatives and photographs created by Sievers Studio during the 1930s. Over the course of this two-year NHPRC grant-funded project, the project archivist created 4,460 individual set records representing assignments paid for by 1,938 individual clients. These set records were used by Digitization Specialist and Catalogers to produce over 4,000 image-level records.

About the Author:

Lauren Sallwasser is the NHPRC Project Archivist in the Photographs and Prints Department of the Missouri Historical Society. She has spent the past two years working on an NHPRC-funded project to process photographs and negatives created during the 1930s by Sievers Studio, part of the Sievers Studio Collection. She has been at the Missouri Historical Society since 2013 and previously served as the Elkington Architectural Photo Processing Archivist. She holds a Master of Science degree in Library Science from Simmons College.