

Picturing 1930s St. Louis: Implementing set-level records for photo studio collections

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Introduction

The complete collection of a commercial photography studio is one of the most valuable photographic resources in any archive. These collections provide 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 utility of these collections is often enhanced by accompanying business records that provide a rich and thorough documentation about the creation of each photograph, including detailed information regarding dates, clients, subjects, and locations.

Problem

How do you provide researchers access to the rich material in these collections without resorting to item-level description?

- The diversity of subjects and clients represented in such collections defies easy summary at the collection-level or even series-level.
- Material is often organized either chronologically or according to a photo shoot number assigned by the photographer, making browsing by client or subject nearly impossible.
- Each job may contain multiple formats or items in varying conditions, necessitating a variety of storage conditions to address preservation concerns. This makes cataloging at the folder-level impractical, as material from a single intellectual file could be spread across multiple boxes.

Solution

The Missouri Historical Society has developed a solution in the form of the “set” level of cataloging, used for individual job assignments.

- Material produced during a single job assignment is cataloged as one unit, despite physical separation into multiple boxes or folders.
- Set records capture the detailed information kept by the photographer and allow for discovery through client, subject, and location access points.
- Much of the information contained in a set record will copy down to the individual image records, making the creation of detail-rich image-level records quick and easy.



Crowd outside Loew's State Theatre, 715 Washington Avenue, St. Louis. Photograph by Isaac Sievers, August 10, 1933. P0403-05109-03-8n.



Apartment building at 7544-7548 York Drive in the Moorelands neighborhood of Clayton, Missouri. Photograph by Isaac Sievers, April 8, 1937. P0403-07575B-01-8n.



Missouri Transit Company bus pulling out of the Greyhound bus depot in St. Louis. Photograph by Isaac Sievers, October 2, 1937. P0403-07853-02-8n.



Bartenders and customers at Michell's Tavern, on St. Charles Rock Road in St. Louis County. Photograph by Isaac Sievers, August 6, 1937. P0403-07776-01-8n.



1935 Buick displayed on a flatbed streetcar maintenance car. Photograph by Isaac Sievers, May 1, 1935. P0403-06248-01-8n.

Case Study

The Sievers Studio Collection is one of the largest studio collections at the Missouri Historical Society, containing 253 linear feet of photographic negatives, prints, and business records dating from the 1910s through the 1980s. The *Picturing 1930s St. Louis* project, sponsored by a grant from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC), focused on processing 61 linear feet of material created during the 1930s.

Each set-level record used Describing Archives: A Content Standard guidelines to capture detailed information about the job assignment from the photographer's files. Records contained the following fields, including all applicable Added-Value fields from DACS:

- Identifier
- Title
- Description
- Creator
- Date Created
- Subjects (LCSH or TGM)
- Access Conditions (physical, technical, and viewing)
- Copyright Status and Owner (if known)
- Place Created
- Condition data
- Extent (number and types of negatives and prints)
- Links to the associated box records to track location

Results

The project archivist created 4,460 set records representing assignments paid for by 1,938 clients. Overall, the average processing rate was 31.1 hour per linear foot. Early material had been partially processed, and picking up the strands of several previous attempts greatly slowed processing speed. Speed increased as the project archivist reached job files that were not part of earlier projects, and the average rate for the second half of the project dropped to 20.5 hours.

This labor-intensive processing at the set level allowed our Digitization Specialists and Catalogers to easily generate item-level records, incorporating relevant information from the parent set record and customizing it to the individual image. The median speed for creating a master digital file and a complete image-level catalog record was 12 minutes, and our fastest Cataloger performed both tasks in an average of 7.95 minutes.

Documenting the extent of each job file in the set record worked well to preserve intellectual structure, while maintaining control of physically separated material.

Once the set records were published online, we immediately saw increased use of the collection. In the last six months, the Sievers Collection has become one of our most viewed collections, with over 5,000 clicks on individual images.

Conclusions and Further Research

Set-level cataloging has proven to be a huge success for our photo studio collections. It allows us to take advantage of the rich documentation left by professional photographers, to more quickly process studio collections in our backlog, to store material in conditions appropriate to each format and condition, and to easily create image-level records as needed. Looking forward, we envision expanding the use of set records to any collection where photographic material is separated by format or condition. Use of set-level cataloging would allow us to group materials intellectually, while separating formats for proper storage. This would be particularly useful when attempting to catalog prints and their associated negatives. While we haven't yet had the opportunity to implement set records in this manner, we hope to experiment with this implementation during future projects.



Interior view of Schenberg's Market, located at the corner of Vandeventer Avenue and Finney Avenue, St. Louis. Photograph by Sievers Studio, November 11, 1932. P0403-04653-01-8n.



Sally Rand posing with a Philco radio display in the radio department at the Union-May-Stern Company department store in St. Louis. Photograph by Isaac Sievers, September 17, 1937. P0403-07787-01-8n.



Samuel Katz family celebrating the Passover Seder in Katz's home at 2640 Nebraska Avenue, St. Louis. Photograph by Harold Sneekner, April 11, 1933. P0403-04860-01-8n.



Mrs. Catherine Gaylord (right) and three other women posing with an enlarged sample ballot to demonstrate how to vote for repeal of Prohibition. Photograph by Sievers Studio, July 26, 1933. P0403-05083-01-8n.