



INDIANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY COLLECTIONS ADVISOR

A RESOURCE FROM IHS LOCAL HISTORY SERVICES

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MAKING CHOICES IN A DIGITIZATION PROJECT

Susan Sutton, director, IHS Digitization

In the wake of our recent Dissecting Digitization Projects workshop, we are doing a Collections Advisor mini-series on the topic. April's focus was on language and setting standards. This month, Susan Sutton walks through how to prioritize what to digitize from your collection.



[Camping Trip Slides, 1974](#). (Gift of the Clowes Family, Indiana Historical Society)

While the idea of making collection materials available online is exciting and energizing, deciding which items go up and how to organize them can be a daunting task. As I consider what to add to the Digital Images Collection, my two main considerations are our collections and our researchers. In addition, I consider current research and writing trends as well as upcoming major event anniversaries, such as the WWI centennial and the Indianapolis bicentennial coming in just a few years. I keep my eyes open for materials people do not yet know they want to see. By that I mean those collections or items that someone might call "hidden gems." None of us wants any of our collections to be called hidden.

Since we cannot scan our entire collection, I have to make choices-as I imagine you must, too. Developing a list of topical priorities and a list of preservation/access priorities will help with selection of materials to scan and it can help with the organization of your digital collections. Doing a collection survey before you start a digitization project will help create those lists as well as keep you organized throughout the process. Additionally, coordinating with other staff members can be just as important as a collection survey. They may have the information needed for the survey and may be able to point quickly to high priority items. Here is a list of survey fields to help you get started.



ONLINE RESOURCES

[Indiana Historical Society Digital Images Collection](#)

FROM OUR LENDING RESOURCE CENTER

[Digitization and Digital Archiving: A Practical Guide for Librarians](#)
(Elizabeth R. Leggett)

[Management: Innovative Practices for Archives and Special Collections](#)
(Kate Theimer, editor)

[Preservation Management for Libraries, Archives and Museums](#)
(G. E. Gorman and Sydney J. Shep, editors)

PRE-DIGITIZATION COLLECTION SURVEY

Identification data

Collection number
Collection name
Portion of collection surveyed

Value

High/Low (historical value, not monetary)

Demand

High/Low (use, requests)

Descriptive data (catalog data)-- demonstrates processing level for granting organizations

Collection-level description
Group or series description
Item-level description
Narrative about any descriptive material with collection

Arrangement (how is collection organized)

Fully
Partially
None
Is there adequate organization?

Condition (poor and at-risk items might need to be scanned first)

Good
Poor
At risk
Comments

Housing -- How is it stored? Need to re-house?

Good
Poor
At risk

Security Risks

Is it highly collectible? Does it have a high monetary value?
Yes/No

Dates

Date range covered by collection
Bulk of material from what time period?

Region/Area covered

County, township, town...

Subjects

General information on what the collection covers

Pre-Digitization Collection Survey sample.

This brings us to the nitty-gritty of the project, which can be very daunting. First, I strongly suggest that you refrain from putting up entire collections. (For the purpose of this article, a collection is a group of materials that came into the institution together such as the Brown Family Papers or the Jones Photo Studio Collection or a group of similar materials put together, such as The Bedford County Postcard Collection.) Our initial digitization project was so overwhelming that the person in charge at the time decided to scan and upload everything from a photography studio collection. While it did give access to the entire collection, there was space wasted on duplicates and images that have not been useful to researchers.

We value all our collection material, but making judicious and informed choices will be the best use of your resources. From the survey, look at use statistics and anecdotal evidence from staff members about what materials are the most useful and valuable to researchers. Individual items should be chosen with an eye to quality, information content and their ability to represent what is in the collection. When faced with 10 images of the same event, consider just a few which show the most information at the best quality. Thinking of your mission and collecting policies can sometimes help when you are faced with dilemmas. Occasionally, though, put up an image that is just cute, beautiful or unusual. Those eye catching images often have a separate value.



[Nuns Processing to the Shell Chapel at St. Mary's.](#) (Martin Collection, Indiana Historical Society)

Bear in mind what is most vulnerable in your collection, too. The survey can help identify items that should not be handled frequently. We have some items that don't get a high volume of use online at this time, but they are so fragile that we determined scanning was necessary to prevent further deterioration. Would using a digital surrogate save the item? Maybe you want to look at the possibility of have a digital version available for use by in-house researchers if you have limited online space available.

The results of the survey should not only help you decide which collections get the highest priority, but they can also suggest ways of organizing your digital materials; just organize the digitized materials under the name of the physical collection. If you decide to put up a selection from each of your collections, the organization is simple. Some collections, particularly small ones, don't lend themselves to just putting up a selection. Therefore, we also have topical digital collections. Your survey results along with a review of your collecting policies and reference statistics can help with creating a general topic list. I would suggest that building in this kind of flexibility from the beginning will save a lot of frustration later.

I doubt there is a plan that would work for every institution. What I do think is that you should go into a digitization project with a good idea of what you want to achieve, flexibility and an eye to future growth. Most importantly, though, is to enjoy sharing what you have so carefully collected and preserved.

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