

The Thomas Wolfe Photographs: A Problem of Preservation and Accessibility

Jerry Cotten

Thomas Wolfe (1900-1938) was photographed far more often than most of his contemporaries. In 1950, the brothers and sisters of the Asheville novelist donated to the North Carolina Collection in the University of North Carolina Library at Chapel Hill almost 1,500 family-related photographs. Of this number about 150 were of Thomas Wolfe. Many of the photographs were loose, but more than half of the massive collection was contained in seven photographic albums assembled by the family. The entire group provided a pictorial account of the Wolfe family from ca. 1860 to ca. 1945, spanning three generations. This collection is possibly the most comprehensive on record of a major North Carolina family.

As interest in Thomas Wolfe increased during the 1960s and 1970s, use of the collection and deterioration of the photographs also increased. Iconographic materials are usually more sensitive to handling and environment than most other library holdings. The album pages made with acidic paper were brittle, and glue used to mount many of the prints had soaked through to stain images. These problems compounded the tendency of photographs to yellow and fade with time due to improper processing and storage or prolonged exposure to light. Mounting the prints in albums gave the collection a certain unity, but also contributed to deterioration.

Use vs. Preservation

In addition to being a stumbling block for preservation, the photographs mounted in albums did not lend themselves to accessibility by researchers. They were not arranged by subject, and though there was some chronological order, it was broken in many places. This required researchers to look at every page in all seven albums—a result which further aggravated the fragile condition of the photographs and also introduced the possibility of theft if use was not closely supervised.

Preventing deterioration of library holdings is usually cheaper than correcting damage once it has occurred. With the Wolfe family photographs, there was an obvious need to curtail patron use of the fragile albums. Removing all prints from the albums and arranging them in envelopes by subject was briefly considered, but this could not be accomplished without damage to many of the glue-mounted photographs. The albums also had intrinsic value, and there was, consequently, a need to keep them intact. Arrangement of the album prints, while not convenient for research purposes, was assumed to reflect something of the original owner's desire to tell a story



W. O. Wolfe and Julia Wolfe
our parents - the year
before Tom was born - 1900



Carroll's Norton
Sister of
Ralph H. Norton
my husband



Tom



Tom

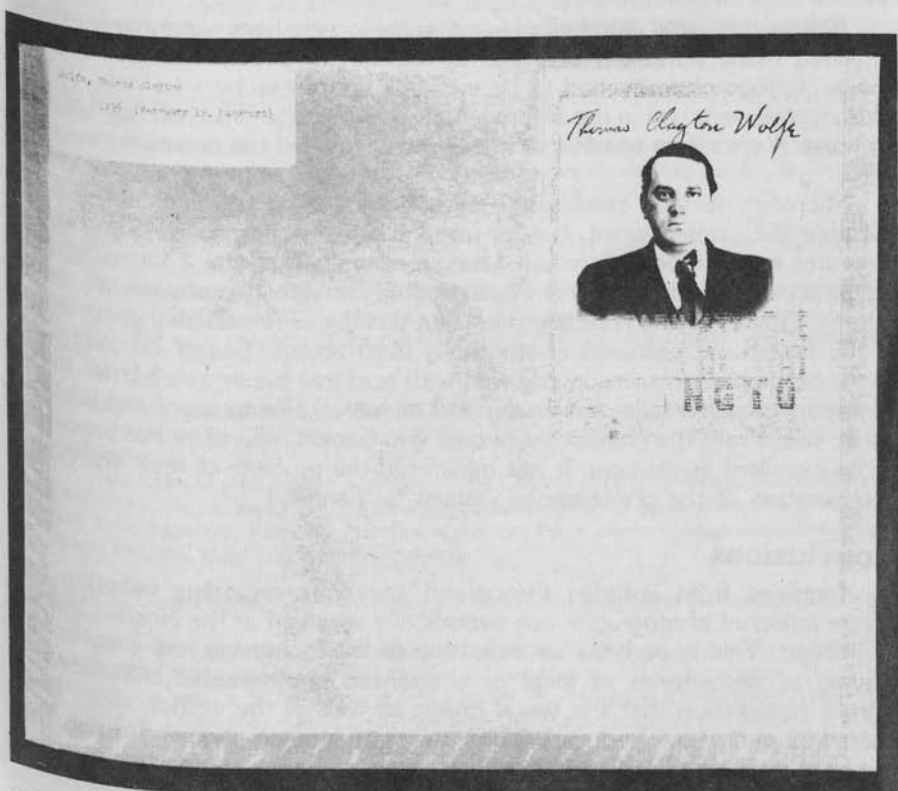
This is a typical page from one of the Wolfe family albums. It was important not to disturb the family's arrangement of the prints. Stains on the middle right photograph are a result of the glue used to mount it.

in a way he or she felt was important. Responding to the research needs of the public without compromising the physical integrity of the photographic collection was a basic problem.

Access via Copy Negatives

Preservation and accessibility can sometimes be two sides of the same coin. A first step with the Wolfe collection was to decide which of the album photographs were most important. This largely subjective decision was based in part upon the types of photographs past users had asked to copy. The most obvious center of interest was Thomas Wolfe himself.

Four-by-five inch copy negatives were made of all likenesses of Wolfe found in the albums. From each negative a 4x5 inch reference print was then made and dry mounted to the outside of 9½ x 12 inch acid-free envelopes of the type available from several manufacturers of library supplies. This mounting process utilizes heat from an iron to melt the schellac-like dry mounting adhesive placed between the print and the envelope. The long-term safety of this process has been established through years of successful use.



The 9½ x 12 inch envelopes have a reference print in the upper right and a label listing subject, date, and occasion in the upper left. Negatives and loose prints are stored inside. The advantage is rapid accessibility without use of the original photographs.

The envelopes were labeled and placed in chronological order inside a filing cabinet. In addition to serving as a reference file, the envelopes provide storage for negatives and any written information accompanying the prints. Original loose photographs of Wolfe were also copied, stored in envelopes, and interfiled with those from the albums. The final result is a print and negative file of all photographs of Thomas Wolfe in the collection. This file of reference prints mounted on envelopes can be consulted easily by patrons.

Copy negatives were also made for badly deteriorated photographs of subjects other than Thomas Wolfe. This procedure was followed for the group of loose prints as well as those in the albums. The step was necessary to preserve the images, since photographic deterioration can never be completely halted. Reference prints were made, dry mounted to envelopes, and arranged in appropriate subject categories. Filed with these, also in acid-free envelopes, were the remaining loose photographs for which copy negatives were not made.

Access via Microfilm

Although a large number of photographic negatives were made, there remained many hundreds of prints in the albums which were not copied. These photographs also had to be available for researchers to view, as did their arrangement within the albums. Many album pages also had handwritten captions. A microfilm positive of the albums provided the necessary accessibility.

Microfilm is well established as a means of preserving and making available the printed word, but its usefulness in photographic preservation programs may not be well known. Using medium high contrast 45mm film, the University of North Carolina Photographic Service microfilmed all seven albums. Quality of the resulting microfilm positive is remarkably good. Some of the faded and yellowed photographs even appear clearer on microfilm. Pages of the albums were interleaved with acid-free paper as a barrier to the migration of silver salts and acids, and all seven albums were retired from public use. From the standpoint of cost and benefit, microfilm has proven to be an excellent investment. It has minimized the problem of theft and halted deterioration of the photographs caused by handling.

Conclusions

Inquiries from libraries throughout the state regarding indexing and preservation of photographs are periodically received at the North Carolina Collection. This is perhaps an indication of the increasing role libraries are playing as repositories of local or specialized photographic collections. It signals recognition that the visual image as well as the written word is an important part of our heritage which is worthy of preservation and study. That this was not always the case is in part responsible for the probable lack of photographic records for subjects such as Black and Indian history.

Cost is a major factor which often inhibits good library preservation programs. This is true at all levels, from the installation of adequate temperature and humidity systems to the purchase of proper storage materials. The

acquisition and public use of pictorial materials should be balanced by recognition and their uniqueness and problems of preservation. Acceptance of this responsibility always entails a commitment of staff and finances on the part of the host institution. This commitment extends beyond that normally required for many other library holdings. Basic familiarity with the photographic process, proper supplies and storage facilities, and access to a qualified photographic laboratory are essential. The experience with the Thomas Wolfe photograph collection demonstrated this in microcosm.

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SELECT, ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY OF REFERENCE SOURCES USEFUL IN INDEXING, STORAGE, AND PRESERVATION OF PHOTOGRAPHIC COLLECTIONS

Dane, William J. *The Picture Collection Subject Headings*. Hamden, Conn.: Shoe String Press, 1968. 103 p.

This is a listing of subject headings used in the picture collection of the Newark Public Library. The headings are comprehensive, detailed, and international in scope. Libraries with small locally-oriented photographic collections will probably find subject headings listed in other sources to be more useful. Priced at \$6.00.

Eastman Kodak Company. *Copying*. Kodak publication no. M-1. Rochester: Eastman Kodak Co., 1974. 33p.

This well illustrated technical publication is intended for those with some knowledge of photography. It describes techniques for copying all types of print material and recommends equipment and supplies. Available at \$1.50.

Ireland, Norma Olin. *The Picture File in School, College, and Public Libraries*. Boston: F. W. Faxon Co., Inc. 1952. 136 p.

Subject headings for picture collections should be simple, short, and descriptive. This volume contains 82 pages of headings which meet these criteria. Unfortunately, parts of some of the early chapters of the book are dated and somewhat misleading. Available at \$9.00.

Ostrow, Eugene. "Conserving and Restoring Photographic Collections," *Museum News*, LII (May, 1974), 42-46; LIII (September, 1974), 40-42, 48; LIII (November, 1974), 42-45; LIII (December, 1974), 34-36.

This series of four articles is written by the Curator of Photography at the Smithsonian Institution. The causes of photographic deterioration and the steps which can be taken to limit it are discussed. Particular attention is given to the problems of daguerreotypes, ambrotypes, tintypes, glass and nitrate negatives.

Photographic Conservation. Vol. 1, March, 1979. Rochester: Rochester Institute of Technology, [Quarterly].

This new 8-page periodical is publicized as "a forum of photographic preservation and restoration." It is currently the only regular journal dealing with these subjects. The annual subscription rate is \$5.00. Address inquires to: *Photographic Conservation*, Rochester Institute of Technology, One Lomb Memorial Drive, Rochester, N. Y. 14623.

Shaw, Renata V. "Picture Organization: Practices and Procedures," *Special Libraries*, LXIII (October, November, 1972), 448-456, 502-506.

Three commonly used approaches to the arrangement of photograph collections are self-indexing, individual cataloging, and group cataloging. The author of this two-part article, a Library of Congress staff member, explains these methods in detail. For those unsure of which way to go in organizing a picture collection, these articles are a good starting point.

Time-Life Books. *Caring for Photographs: Display, Storage, Restoration*. New York: Time-Life, Inc., 1972. 192p.

Time-Life has combined a wide variety of subjects in this volume. There are technical but practical chapters on photograph restoration and archival processing for prints and negatives. Persons interested in displays will find the chapter on this subject helpful. Mounting prints, the making of mats, frames, albums, and murals are discussed in detail. There are many useful illustrations in both black and white and color. The volume includes a bibliography and index. Priced at \$9.95.

Vanderbilt, Paul. *Filing Your Photographs*. Technical Leaflet no. 36. Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1966. 8p.

This leaflet, written by a recognized authority in the field, explains some fundamentals of photograph preservation, and describes one method of storing photographs. The leaflet is available for \$.50 from: AASLH, 1400 Eighth Ave. South, Nashville, Tn. 37203.

Weinstein, Robert A., and Booth, Larry. *Collection, use, and Care of Historical Photographs*. Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1977. 222p.

This is probably the best single work currently available on these subjects. The volume is comprehensive, well illustrated, and includes appendices and an index. Some of the subjects treated are the educational use of photographs, copyright, cataloging, storage, and the preservation and restoration of photographs. Available at \$16.00 from: AASLH, 1400 Eighth Ave. South, Nashville, Tn. 37203.

Welling, William. *Collector's Guide to Nineteenth Century Photographs*. New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1976. 204p.

If you don't know a daguerreotype from a tintype, this volume is a good investment. It is extensively illustrated and is a helpful guide for identifying and dating early photographs. Covered in considerable detail in addition to the daguerreotype and tintype, are the ambrotype, carte de visite, cabinet card, and card stereograph. Lesser known examples are also discussed. The volume has a bibliography, index, and appendices. Priced at \$15.95.

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