

From the Road to Obsolescence: Recovering and Reformatting Photo Film Negatives and Slides in Archives

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Abstract:

The Cordillera/Northern Luzon Historical Archives, a section of the University of the Philippines Baguio Library, was established in 2007. It is located in the Cordillera Region. The Region, located north of Manila, the capital city of the Philippines, is home to the second largest group of indigenous peoples of the Philippines. A decade after its establishment, the Archives has become a repository of papers of various individuals who made enduring contributions to the historical as well as cultural development of the Cordillera. Along with the personal papers are audiovisual materials such as Sony Beta and VHS cassettes, sound recordings in various formats and mediums and photo film negatives and slides that these individuals have collected during their lifetime. What is interesting and of primary consideration are the photo film negatives and slides which my paper will focus on. Photo negatives and slides have, over the years, fast become a dying medium. The proliferation and popularity of digital cameras have slowly and unprecedentedly made these media a thing of the past.

When the Archives started receiving these materials in 2007, I thought that there is nothing we can do about these materials thinking that their contents will forever be kept hidden. Thanks to new technology, these negatives are given a new lease on life which otherwise would have been rendered useless. In 2016, the Archives purchased a film scanner, thus we were able to get a look at what these images are; determine their relevance to the Cordillera Region's history and culture; be able to preserve their content; provide access and most of all be able to disseminate their content through the Library's OPAC. The digitization efforts of the Archives have slowly revealed the interesting and unique contents of the negatives and slides. Some of these images have never before been seen. Scanning the negatives revealed the Region's past, hidden and well preserved in each of the frames. Images such as anthropomorphic woodcarvings, healing rituals and ceremonies, head hunting ceremonies, American colonial administrators of the Cordillera Region, material culture of the indigenous peoples of the Region, and historical milestones are some of the images captured and brought to light by new technology. Further, the paper will describe the Archives' preservation and digitization process. Although, the digitization project is not an elaborate process since I am the only staff working at the Archives, nonetheless, it fulfills the all too crucial aim of preservation, access and dissemination keeping in mind the aphorism, preservation without access is useless.

Keywords: Photo negatives, Slides, Cordillera/Northern Luzon Historical Archives, University of the Philippines Baguio, Digitization

I. Background

The early years of reformatting analog information sources to digital format was characterized by intense debate on whether digitization is a form of preservation or not (Smith 1999, Gertz 1999, Hart 2004, Lee 2001). Arguments against digitization as a form of preservation cite technology, paradoxically the very essential component of conversion, as the primary factor for not favoring the process. Instability and unreliability of the medium are among the reasons enumerated. Rapid hardware and software obsolescence calls for regular inspection and migration of data to newer versions. Unlike microforms which when kept under optimum environmental conditions can last for centuries, digital formats can easily become inaccessible after a decade. The instability and fragility of the medium makes digitization an unreliable mode of preservation (Smith 1999, Hart 2004). Digitization, however, has been acknowledged to enhance access to information and sources especially in an online setting (Hirtle 2002, Conway 2010, Punzalan 2014). Digitized versions of materials allow full-text searching, zooming in for clarity, and remote online access defying time, distance and geographical location.

Unlike print textual materials, however, film-based formats benefit best from digitization both for preservation and access. In fact, it is the recommended method of preservation for damaged and deteriorated films. Film-based materials, particularly photo negatives and slides are an inherently unstable medium of information. Acetates and nitrates are the two types of negatives that were in use in the late 1880 to the early 2000. Eastman Kodak last produced film nitrates in the early 1950s due to its safety hazards namely flammability and health risks. Film acetates replaced nitrates beginning in the mid-1920s. Although safer than nitrates, acetates have stability problems as well. Once acetates deteriorate, there is no stopping the problem (Fischer 2007, Messier 1993). Capell (2010) and Matusiak (2014) enumerate the many benefits of digitizing photo negatives. The digitization projects of the American Geographical Society of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (Matusiak 2014) and the Robert Waller Photograph Collection of the University of Southern Mississippi Libraries (Capell 2010) attest to the success of the digitization reformatting works of damaged and deteriorated negatives as well as negatives in good condition. The digitized AGS photographs and the Robert Waller Collection are now accessible online.

Predicated on the preceding insights, my paper will focus on the digitization work of acetate photo negatives and slides that have been deposited with the University of the Philippines Baguio Cordillera/Northern Luzon Historical Archives. Given that these are a dying media, it is important to preserve not only the physical carrier but the information content of these formats. Relatedly, a brief content description of some of the images in the photonegatives and slides will be presented.

II. The University of the Philippines Baguio Cordillera/Northern Luzon Historical Archives

As early as 1990, a plan to establish an archives at the University of the Philippines Baguio was conceptualized. It was less than two decades later, however, that the plan materialized. The UP Baguio Cordillera/Northern Luzon Historical Archives was established in August 2007 to commemorate the centennial of its mother unit, the University of the Philippines. The University of the Philippines is a network of eight autonomous campuses spread across the Archipelago. The different campuses strive to be centers of excellence and lead universities in particular areas of concentration, with UP Baguio pursuing its niche in ethnic studies particularly Cordillera studies. Through the years, the research endeavors of its faculty have focused on learning and furthering their understanding on the different ethnolinguistic groups of the Cordilleras.

Parallel to the avowed vision and mission of its mother unit, the Archives is a repository not only of the University's non-current institutional records but of personal papers that relate to the history and culture of the various ethnolinguistic groups of the Cordillera in particular and Northern Luzon in general. As an institution that serves as a collective memory of the Region, the Archives endeavors not only to collect archival documents but to preserve and make these accessible and available to scholars and researchers. To this end, the objectives of the Archives include: to collect, reproduce, catalog, preserve, and provide access to collected archival materials.

III. The Photo Negative and Slide Collections of the UPB Archives

A decade after its establishment, the Archives has become a repository of papers of various individuals who made enduring contributions to the historical as well as cultural development of the Cordillera. Along with personal documents are audiovisual materials such as Sony Beta and VHS tapes; sound recordings in various formats and media; and photo film negatives and slides that these individuals have collected during their lifetime. What is interesting and of primary consideration are the photo film negatives and slides which my paper will focus on. All photo negatives are of the acetate or safety film type. When the Archives started receiving these materials in 2007, I thought that these artifacts will no longer be usable, their contents forever hidden from public view. Thanks to new technology, these negatives which would have been regarded useless are given a new lease on life.

The initial collection of the Archives started with the papers of Dr. Robert B. Fox, Sr. and Laurence Lee Wilson, both Americans who came to work and live in the Philippines. Laurence Wilson was a mining prospector, anthropologist, folklorist who was born in Nebraska. He came to the Philippines in 1930 and worked in the mines of Zambales. He later got into collecting and recording stories and legends of the Cordillera Region often publishing these in the Baguio Midland Courier, Baguio City's local weekly paper. His photo negative collection consists of 57, 35 mm black and white negatives and 24 acetate negatives which come in various sizes. One 80 x 115 mm photo negative is badly damaged. The images depict American colonial administrators of Baguio and Benguet, photos of mining companies, streets, trails, buildings, and dwelling houses in Baguio, Benguet and the Cordillera Region in the olden days. Some of the images captured are never before seen. The negatives bear images showing *bulol* figures. *Bulols* are anthropomorphic woodcarvings that are revered as rice gods and guardians of rice fields in Ifugao culture. Other images

uncovered are photographs of a Cordillera elder along with human skulls. It can only be assumed that this is a photo of a head hunter with his treasured possessions. Another interesting image is a photo of the Baguio City Post Office presumably taken in the 1950s. The image was uploaded in Facebook for crowd sourcing as to the possible date when the photo was taken. Viewers admit that this for them is a first taken from such an angle.

The biggest photo negative collection is that of Augustus U. Saboy. The papers of Mr. Saboy were donated to the Archives in May 2010 by his son, Scott, a faculty member of UP Baguio. Mr. Saboy's papers consist mostly of documents on the Kalinga *bodong* and *pagta*, the indigenous system of ensuring peace among and between the different tribes or groups in Kalinga, a province of the Cordillera Region. Mr. Saboy is a journalist by profession having worked in various capacities as news reporter, editor, correspondent, and writer in both government and private print and broadcast media outfits. He also held various executive and administrator positions in the local government of Kalinga and in government offices that were set-up to pave the way for the establishment of a Cordillera autonomous region. A known scholar and student of Cordillera history, he has written numerous articles on history and culture. He was an active participant in the peace process of the Cordillera. There is no exact count just yet of the Saboy negatives. The number is approximately set at 5,000 negatives. The films come in 35 mm size. Some are encased in plastic sleeves, some in paper envelopes while 78 film rolls are in plastic film canisters. When the Archives received the negatives, I expressed doubts to Prof. Scott regarding the capability of the Archives to preserve these. I was advised that I can discard those that are no longer worthy or beyond salvaging. Fortunately, I held on to the negatives. Presently, 1,515 photo negatives have been digitized. As a journalist who covered important happenings in the Region, he captured photos of significant events and activities of Baguio, Benguet, Kalinga and other places in the Region. Likewise captured on film are notable personalities and dignitaries who participated in the different historical events of the Region. A number of his collection chronicles the Saboy family's momentous events such as birthdays and graduations. Some of the negatives have shown signs of damage and deterioration. In a number of films, the color has started to fade and turn red. Bubbles, crystals, molds and mildew are evident in some frames. While in some, the emulsion stuck on to the plastic sleeves. Improper storage likewise, resulted in some negatives sticking together. As a result of these damages, images have been obliterated.

Another significant photo negative collection is the Jules de Raedt slides. Prof. de Raedt was born in Belgium in 1926. He came to the Philippines as a CICM missionary in 1951 and was stationed in the Cordillera where he worked among the northwestern and southwestern Kalingas. He obtained his master's and doctoral degrees in Anthropology from the University of Chicago. He has written about Kalinga political organization and governance, myth analysis, rituals and religion. The 302, 35 mm color slides have no annotations save from a single word topic that is written on the cover of the boxes. The slides are grouped according to the following subjects: *anitu*, *anito*, nature, food, rice, people, houses, and de Raedt. It is difficult to ascertain if the contents are still in their original arrangement given that when these were turned over to the Archives, the slides were assigned numbers and some slides do not match the subject topic of the boxes. Interesting images show healing rituals being performed by a woman medium. Some images likewise, portray sacrificial rites and offerings together with material implements like pigs, baskets, beads, betel nuts, eggs, jars and coconut leaves among others. His book, *Kalinga Sacrifice*, which documents the healing rituals and religion of the Buaya Kalinga is a thorough companion to the slides. Sadly, a number of the collection has been damaged and is beyond recovery.

The Fay Dumagat papers are the latest papers to have been added to the Archives collection. Dr. Dumagat is an Itneg or Tinguian, the indigenous peoples of Abra, a province of the Cordillera Region. He obtained his undergraduate and graduate degrees from the University of the Philippines. He later wrote about Itneg justice system as a result of his family's experience of injustice from the hands of land grabbers. Dumagat donated his papers to the Archives in 2015. His papers document the oral traditions, customs and beliefs of the Tinguian or the Itneg. The collection highlights the historical as well as cultural development of the different municipalities of the province. Although few in number, the 76 slides are relevant cultural information sources. The colored images depict rural life in the Philippines as well as images of indigenous peoples clad in g-strings.

Also among the collection of the Archives is the photo negative collection of UP Baguio. The over 1,000 acetate negatives along with print photographs were deposited by the Office of Public Affairs to the Archives in 2018. The negatives document the growth and development of the campus in the 1970s to early 2000. Significant events and activities when the UP Baguio was still a College up until the time when it was transformed to an autonomous University are captured in the films. Sadly, however, some of the negatives have manifested signs of deterioration of the so called "vinegar syndrome." There is thus, an urgent need to digitize the films the soonest.

IV. The Digitization Project of the Archives

Digitization, the process of converting print documents (analog) to computer readable (digital) format, entails scanning documents to produce a replica of the original. The process aims to preserve the original documents which are in danger of deterioration and to make the surrogate accessible to researchers. The documents are preserved for posterity thereby limiting handling of the originals. Digitized duplicates prevent the handling of the original documents by researchers to prevent further damage and deterioration caused by continued wear and tear. Digitization, therefore, prolongs the life of the original documents as well as the information contained in them. Providing access to the surrogates is an equally significant objective of digitizing materials. Rapid and easier access to the digitized materials will benefit researchers either on site or remotely.

Efforts to digitize the collections of the Archives started in 2013. A project proposal on digitizing the Archives collection was submitted to the administration. The approved proposal resulted in the purchase in 2015 of a planetary scanner and a document management system. Print documents were digitized first. In 2016, an Epson Perfection V800 Photo flatbed film scanner was purchased purposely to scan the numerous photo negatives and slides that are in the possession of the Archives. When the digitization project began, a dilemma encountered was the limited knowledge on digitizing documents let alone familiarity with negatives and slides. But with firm resolve to learn the ropes of digitization, the project slowly proceeded. Together with the background knowledge gained from trainings and a course taken in 2014 on audiovisual archives, a simple work flow for the digitization process both for print text and film-based materials was drafted. After devoting time to extended readings and research on resolutions, color, size and other film characteristics that need to be identified in reformatting negatives and slides, guidelines on procedures were designed. The internet, which is replete with sites on how to digitize archival materials, has immensely aided in the acquisition of knowledge and skills on digitizing.

The Archives' flatbed scanner comes with a Silverfast® software for creating digital and archival images. Dialogue boxes with options for frames, tonal resolutions, size of slides or negatives, picture settings, bit depth resolutions, and file format characteristics can be decided upon easily making scanning and digitizing convenient. One only needs to know the standard archival values for these characteristics. The output archival master files are saved in tagged image file format. Multiple storage devices such as computer hard drive, external drive and cloud storage are utilized to store the digital images. The final stage of making the images accessible to a wider audience is perhaps the highlight of the digitization process as digitized images are made available while preserving the original and master file formats. Access copies or derivatives are then produced out of the master files. The derivatives are attached as links in the OPAC for access by researchers. In the meantime that an Archives digital repository is being planned, providing access links to digitized materials through the OPAC will be the most viable option for researchers at the moment. Describing the images will be another concern that needs to be addressed in the future.

When the Digitization Project went underway in 2016, the Archives was fortunate enough to have the assistance of a contractual librarian who assisted in the numerous tasks that needed to be accomplished. Digitizing print documents as well as photo negatives and slides was a gargantuan and overwhelming task to say the least. The assistant was tasked to perform the more manual functions of cleaning the materials, generating an inventory of the photo negatives and slides, and the initial scanning. However, the staff's appointment was no longer renewed in 2017 hence, I was left alone to accomplish the tasks of digitizing materials as well as performing a number of other works at the Archives. Presently, a drawn up work schedule has to be closely followed and time management has to be strictly observed to be able to produce desirable outputs and worthwhile accomplishments.

V. Conclusion

The evolution of digital cameras has altered the way people view and treat photography. Photo negatives and slides have, over the years, slowly and unprecedentedly become a dying information format, brought about by the introduction of digital photography. The remaining photo negatives and slides are the last link to images captured in the late 19th century to the early 21st century. The unstable condition of these formats calls for their immediate reformatting and preservation.

The photo negatives and slides deposited with the UP Baguio Archives are a showcase of the culture and history of the Cordillera. The images depict the traditions, customs, rituals, historical events and material culture of the Cordillera that are in danger of being forgotten due to modernization, religion, migration and education. There is thus, an urgent need to preserve the physical as well as the information contained in these formats. Obsolescence and impermanence of the physical carrier are issues that necessitate actions to avert further deterioration and damage. Aware of these issues, the Archives embarked on a Digitization Project which started in 2016. The flatbed film scanner which was acquired exposed the rare images that could have been kept hidden forever. Along with the objective of digitization is the need to provide access to the digital images and the information content of this unique collection of materials. The project is expected to increase local and global awareness on the rich cultural heritage of the various ethnolinguistic groups of the Cordillera Region. Providing access to digitized materials will hopefully increase use thereby sustaining interest and research on the Region not just by researchers and scholars but by the different Cordillera indigenous communities themselves. It is further hoped that by providing indigenous

communities a glimpse of their history and culture, they will be able to gain new insights and perspectives into their past. And with these new insights and perspectives, hopefully new research opportunities will be generated in hopes of advancing knowledge on the indigenous peoples of the Cordillera.

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