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Mixed Media: Working with Audio and Visual Materials

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Mixed Media: Working with Audio and Visual Materials— Paul Eisloeffel, Assistant Editor, Nebraska State Historical Society

Expanding Access to Archive Photographs through Historypin

By Elizabeth E. Reilly, University of Louisville

Opportunities for institutions to expand access to their archival collections grow steadily as new Web sites and social media are introduced on a regular basis. With a specific interest in promoting collection materials in innovative ways, the University of Louisville Photographic Archives (ULPA) accepted an invitation to participate in the beta testing of the new Web site Historypin.com. In just over a year, the ULPA has contributed 170 photographs to Historypin and has explored the Web site's various features, and has discovered that with a little work comes a wonderful way for users to experience the historic photographs in our collections.

Historypin is a free, user-generated on-line archive of photographs that was developed by the British non-profit company We Are What We Do in partnership with Google. Users can upload photographs and “pin” them on a Google Map corresponding to where the photos were taken (Figure 1). Information about the photographs



Figure 1: ULPA pinned photos on Google Map of Louisville, KY.

can include anything from address, date, and names, to personal stories, which allows for a certain amount of descriptive context to remain with the image. Also, users can add descriptive content to any photograph, thereby adding a crowdsourcing aspect that can enhance metadata and spark discussion.

Images on Historypin can be searched by location, subject, and date, and they can also be compared with modern-day views using Google Street View. Some images are more successful with this feature than others—only photographs taken at street level will create the desired effect with the “fade” function, which toggles from one

image to the other in order to compare the two. However, when the Google Street View is paired with a historical image that was shot from a similar angle, the result is mesmerizing (Figure 2). This method of bringing together past and present is part of Historypin's strong appeal.



Figure 2: 1935 photo of Bardstown Road layered over Google Street View of the same location.

These features, and the fact that content uploaded to the site is presented at screen resolution and protected from commercial use, were factors in our decision to accept the invitation to participate.

With over two million images in the collections of the University of Louisville Photographic Archives, we had first to choose which photographs to include on Historypin. Working from images that had already been digitized, we considered criteria such as subject, location, and historic value. We began with recognizable locations around Louisville: views of places and things that would be familiar to many people, and images that illustrate what made Louisville a noteworthy city in the early part of the twentieth century, such as Churchill Downs, “Whiskey Row” on Main Street, and the *Belle of Louisville* steamboat. We also included photographs depicting significant events in Louisville's history, like the 1937 flood and the tornado of 1890. We hoped images like these would provide viewers a link to life in Louisville many years ago.

Just as intriguing as Historypin's historical view of sites is the opportunity to see parts of Louisville that have long since vanished. We chose to include images of the White City Amusement Park, streetcars, Fontaine Ferry

Park, and other sites around the city that no longer exist. We hoped these images would be interesting to younger generations who have probably never seen or heard of them, and would raise questions about how and why these sites did not endure. We deliberately included images that show people, to help anchor the photographs in a specific timeframe and connect the viewer on a more personal level. We also chose photographs that show a wide range of neighborhoods throughout the city, including more underrepresented areas of Louisville for which historic photographs can illustrate tremendous transformation.

Historic photographs that match well with their contemporary Google Street View provide a wonderful juxtaposition between past and present and work as a means to explore change in the cityscape. Much can be gleaned from comparing a 1933 image of a building to a modern image (courtesy of Google) of the same building (Figure 3); visible changes in architectural details and the surrounding environment offer many details for viewers to investigate.



Figure 3: 1933 photo of a building compared to modern Google Street View of the same building.

While we initially worked hard to find historical images to match contemporary street views, we quickly realized that the simple act of “pinning” a photograph to a Google map without superimposing it over a modern street view enhanced its meaning by situating that image within the context of a specific geographic location. An interior photograph pinned to the location where it was taken adds to historical information, and offers new details for analysis, such as understanding an image’s location with respect to block, street, and neighborhood. With this insight, we uploaded photographs showing the interiors of the Louisville Slugger baseball bat factory, Fontaine Ferry Park, and various whiskey distilleries.

The ULPA has been quick to adopt new site features launched in 2012 to expand the kinds of experiences offered by Historypin. Using Historypin “Channels,” we have customized our page with a logo, banner heading, color scheme, and background image, as well as links to our other social networking accounts (Figure 4). Through the use of buttons and banners, we have embedded our



Figure 4: University of Louisville Photographic Archives Channel on Historypin.

new Historypin Channel in our library Web site, thereby allowing direct navigation for both regular users and new visitors from our homepage to our new Historypin content. A statistics page tracks total pin, Tour, and Collection views, and the number of our channel’s fans. View counts for each image are also offered, as well as sorting by our most popular images, according to views.

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This information is critical for measuring the impact of a project like this. Since this data has become available, we have witnessed increased traffic to our library site, as a result of various blog posts and other linked announcements about our Historypin Channel.

“Collections” is also a new feature that allows grouping of photographs by subject, location, or event, and offers an additional access point for visitors searching for specific images. So far, ULPA has created a collection of historic images depicting Louisville’s whiskey business, as well as a collection of contemporary photos of Louisville “ghost signs” (faded, hand-painted advertising signage that remains on the sides of old buildings). “Tours,” another new feature, are compiled by the users themselves to recreate the act of visiting different sites within a specific neighborhood. A map view in the corner of the screen places each photograph geographically, while descriptive information and a street view remain with each image in the tour. Collections and Tours are ways for users to explore images from the ULPA collections without getting redirected to another institution’s photographs from the generic map view.

To date, we have had one staff member create all of the content for the ULPA Historypin Channel, but we plan

to train a student worker for the task of uploading images. With vast improvements since the site’s official launch, the processes of uploading an image, adding metadata and copyright information, pinning to the map, and aligning the image in Google Street View are rather quick and easy, (although we cannot yet speak to the ease of uploading audio or videos files to the site, which is also possible). The majority of the time spent on the project goes into choosing the photographs to upload, sizing the files down for Web use, and maintaining a record of our work.

Overall, our experience using Historypin has been very constructive in expanding the ways in which our archival photographs can be experienced, and it has garnered users’ positive feedback. We have plans to upload a great deal more content to our channel, create more Collections and Tours, and explore uploading audio and video content from our holdings. As a free on-line application, Historypin offers the University of Louisville Photographic Archives a new way to provide innovative access to collections that are locked behind doors—in effect, lowering the human and physical barriers between our collections and our users. We hope this means of expanded access will allow us to serve successfully traditional audiences and attract new ones.

Up-and-Comers: News for Student Archivists—Matthew Peek, Assistant Editor, Kent State University

Please submit “Up-and-Comers” items to Matthew Peek at freakyhistorian@hotmail.com.

Correction: It has come to the attention of the *MAC Newsletter* that we twice incorrectly listed the name of Dr. Albert B. Sabin in the “Up-and-Comers” column on the MAC 2012 Annual Meeting student poster session in the July 2012 issue.

“Up-and-Comers” will return to the *MAC Newsletter* for the January 2012 issue.



Reds Stadium, Cincinnati riverbank.