

# BETTMANN 100

Celebrating the legacy of Dr. Otto Bettmann



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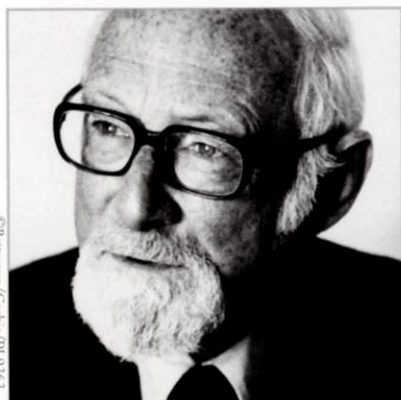
An Interview with Henry Wilhelm

## **INDELIBLE MOMENTS**

Photography and the Zeitgeist



# THE MAN WHO SAW THE BIG PICTURE



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We live in a world of photographic images.

It's a world in which no one doubts their power to teach, inspire, entertain, and persuade. We revel in them, critique

them, debate them, and sometimes strive to insulate our children from them. It wasn't a stretch for Dr. Otto Bettmann to refer to these 100 years—quite prophetically—as the "Visual Age." When Dr. Bettmann, then curator of rare books at the Prussian State Art Library in Berlin, began assembling his collection during the early 1900s, the photograph was viewed, at best, as a utilitarian tool. The age of the novel—the word—was in its flower. Cameras were the photocopiers of the era. Dr. Bettmann, however, recognized photography as an unmatched form of artistic expression and historical preservation. His passion for photography drove him to collect thousands of images of all kinds. And in 1935, when the rise of Nazism forced him to leave Germany, it was this collection, and very little else, that he packed into two steamer trunks and carried

to America. Dr. Bettmann's arrival in New York City coincided with the exploding popularity of photojournalism. Setting up shop in his one-bedroom apartment, Dr. Bettmann began creating a business for himself, continuing to collect and classify images and developing an organized system for licensing them to publications. In doing so, he virtually invented the image resource industry. His endeavor was a success from the start, with early clients including *LOOK Magazine*, *Life*, and the Book-of-the-Month Club. Spurred by World War II, the advent of television, and the overall growth of print media, the demand for imagery continued to skyrocket. Dr. Bettmann spent the next five decades meeting and often anticipating that demand. He never missed a chance to acquire image collections that would add to the depth and quality of his own. As a result, the archive grew from fifteen thousand images in 1938 to over two million by 1980. But quality of images, not quantity, was Bettmann's obsession. Throughout his career, he demonstrated an amazing aptitude for choosing images with historical relevance, artistic composition, drama, humor, and impact. In 1981, Dr. Bettmann retired to Florida, USA, where he spent time enjoying his family and writing the nine books that he was to publish. When he passed away in 1998, at the age of 95, he had witnessed most of the 20th century and left behind images that will help countless future generations witness it anew.

# A Closer Look at Image Preservation

## A Q&A With Henry Wilhelm The Man with the Plan

By Mike Lape

It was always an extraordinary project: to move the 11 million images of the Bettmann Archive in a fleet of 18 refrigerated trucks from their traditional home in central Manhattan to a 10,000 square foot, sub-zero vault 220 feet beneath a mountain in rural Pennsylvania.

And, largely, it was the vision of one man: Henry Wilhelm. Wilhelm has spent a lifetime researching, writing and consulting on image permanence. A consultant to the Museum of Modern Art in New York and a member of multiple ANSI/ISO subcommittees, his book *The Permanence and Care of Color Photographs* is the bible on the subject. It was Wilhelm who advised Corbis, owner of the Bettmann Archive since 1995, to take this extraordinary step to preserve a major portion of our visual record of the 20th century.

**Q** Henry, how did you get involved with image preservation?

**A** I'd always been interested in photography, but the cathartic moment was when I was a member of the Peace Corps in Bolivia, in the rainforest. It was a very primitive area, no electricity or telephones, but almost everybody there had photographs of their children or family photographs, and these were really the only records that they had of their lives. It was almost an accelerated aging condition of heat and humidity there, and seeing all of this documentation deteriorating at a rather high rate of speed had a profound impact on me.

**Q** What were you doing when Corbis called you—and how did they find you?

**A** Actually, I became involved with the Bettmann Archive before Corbis. It was an extraordinary collection and also one in dire need of improved storage conditions. The biggest problem was the deterioration of film-based negatives, particularly black and white. I would guess that roughly ten percent of the early negative collection has already been lost in terms of acetate cel-base deterioration, what is commonly referred to as the "vinegar syndrome." That's because one of the decomposition products is acetic acid and you can smell it very distinctly.

**Q** I would guess that a lot of the material in the Bettmann Archive were the images that informed you as you grew up—the iconography of a generation, if you like. So, what was your reaction on seeing the Archive?

**A** There were things in the collection, like the UPI Vietnam work, which was the first war photographed to any great extent in color. To look at those pieces of Ektachrome film and to realize they were actually there, at the battlefield, in the camera. Well, the value of those photographs as original artifacts was extremely important.

There was a great deal of material that photographers had shot about the ordinary life of soldiers in Vietnam, washing clothes, eating Army C-rations—things which really weren't published to any great extent because they were too ordinary, not considered terribly important. But I knew that some of it certainly would be in the future and we needed to preserve that. I thought it was a unique collection, just for the Vietnam material alone.

**Q** Obviously, in hindsight, the cold-storage project was a vital move if the Archive were to be saved. But did you feel that people fully understood that at the time?

**A** It was clear that with a collection the size of the Bettmann Archive there was no other permanent solution other than cold storage. After Corbis acquired the archive, I was contracted to go through the whole collection again and write a report. That was done in 1996-97 and the recommendations were for care at a level that had not been done before in a commercial collection.

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**Q** So how did Iron Mountain get into the picture?

**A** Well, when you start talking about preserving something for 1,000, 2,000 or 5,000 years, think of all the things that could happen—in fact, *would* happen in a building in New York City—including water leaks. That was our biggest fear, that of water pipes bursting on the upper floors. Or if the buildings catch on fire, even if the fire department was able to put it out, water damage would be absolutely certain.

We were very worried about the physical security of it, too, even the possibility of sabotage, partly because of Bill Gates' visibility.

The Iron Mountain facility in Pennsylvania has broadband data access, high security and low cost—and it can be viewed

as an absolutely permanent place to keep it. It's also the place where many government records are kept. For instance, the United States Patent Trademark Office has its entire digital backup archive there, Social Security administration records are there and even things like records of most of the nuclear power plants in the country, they're all kept there. It has also been for many years the primary backup preservation facility for the major Hollywood studios. So it was a natural option for us.

**Q** Corbis started out to create a purely digital archive, so what do you think it was that convinced them to spend money on the long-term preservation of the physical material?

**A** When the idea was first proposed, it was a tough sell, but after they looked at the available options and started to think about the future ramifications, I was really impressed with their response. One thing that the collection really had going for it was that there was no question of its value. It had obvious, not just historic value, but commercial, immediate value, as well. The images were being licensed—they were bringing in an income.

Anyway, they came to appreciate that the number of images in the collection was so huge that it was not possible to digitize it in any sort of rapid manner, and because of the rate of deterioration, particularly the black-and-white film negatives, that was a crisis. What do you do, if you can't digitize it fast enough? Remember, they were losing images every single day. Cold storage was the solution to all of that, and it would stop deterioration right where it was.

**Q** Corbis took a deal of criticism at the time. People were implying that Corbis, and Bill Gates, were trying to monopolize the world's supply of pictures. That must have been pretty galling for you?

**A** I thought it was very shortsighted, even selfish, and, really, a misunderstanding of the preservation process itself. Corbis had a much clearer view of where the entire field was going, that people would come to rely ever more

on digital catalogues and digital searches, even if the collection hadn't moved out of Manhattan.

Twenty-five years from now, this will be considered a brilliant plan that,

in fact, saved the collection. What I hope, as someone who has devoted his life to preservation, is that this will inspire other collections to take better care of their own material.

**Q** It's been five years since your report laid out the strategy for the Bettmann project. Looking back now, what are your feelings about what has been achieved since then?

**A** One of the real values of what Corbis has done is to create a model of care for not only commercial collections, but for museums, too. I would say, without a moment's hesitation, that it is the best long-term photographic preservation facility in the world, offering the world's very highest standard of care of original photographs. It is a more advanced facility in terms of preservation conditions than any fine art museum in the world, than any motion picture preservation facility. There's nothing in Hollywood the equal of it, the British Film Institute in the UK doesn't have anything approaching this. They all should... before it's too late.



ABOVE: Eleven million original Bettmann prints and negatives are housed in a state-of-the-art facility designed by Henry Wilhelm.

**“It is a more advanced facility in terms of preservation conditions than any fine art museum in the world, than any motion picture preservation facility.”**