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From Private Photographs to Public Narratives: the Swainson/Woods Collection

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Abstract

When the Swainson/Woods Collection of studio photographs was donated to Puke Ariki regional museum in 2005, it required challenging logistical and managerial decisions to ensure its stabilisation and preservation. The gift doubled the size of the museum's Pictorial Collection and external grants were needed to enable the museum to house, store, describe and make the collection accessible to the public. A programme to promote the collection to the people of Taranaki, New Zealand has seen increased engagement between the museum and its community.

Introduction

In 2005, a collection of approximately 255,000 photographic negatives was donated at very short notice to Puke Ariki in New Plymouth, New Zealand. The collection is the work of two local commercial photography firms, Swainson's Studios and Bernard Woods Studio. Photographer Joseph Swainson established Swainson's Studios in 1923 in Devon Street, New Plymouth, until he sold it to Bernard Woods in the early 1960s. Woods' daughter, Jennifer, took over the studio in the 1980s and ran it until it closed in 1997. In 2005, with support from the New Plymouth Branch of the New Zealand Society of Genealogists and former Swainson's Studios employee Judy Kirkland, the Swainson/Woods Collection of negatives was donated by Jennifer Woods to Puke Ariki.

The collection became known as the Swainson/Woods Collection and is comprised of materials typical of a photographic business during those years: various formats of glass plates; cellulose nitrate and acetate film; silver gelatin and



Fig. 1. Swainson/Woods Collection negatives stacked in Jennifer Woods' garden shed, New Plymouth, 2005

chromogenic dye images; along with proof prints on developing-out papers and some unprocessed printing-out papers (fig. 1.). The negatives had been stored in a garden shed for a number of years after the business closed. The shed was a light steel construction surrounded by several large trees. The collection was housed in glassine sleeves and office stationery in wooden drawers and cardboard boxes that were on a damp earth floor. New Plymouth has a moist, temperate climate, with average temperatures ranging between 13° and 22°C (56° and 72°F) and receiving 1,432mm (56.4 inches) of rain annually. On arrival at the museum some of the collection was in poor condition: damp, mouldy, covered in dirt and the remnants of animal nesting (fig. 2.).



Fig. 2. Mark Strange, Senior Conservator of Photographs from the National Library of New Zealand, vacuuming negatives when they first arrived at Puke Ariki in 2005

When Jennifer Woods' house and garden shed were sold, Puke Ariki had five days to consider the collection acquisition. Achieving a museum standard of preservation and access required several more staff and years of work along with large investments in enclosure materials and facilities for environmental control. The Swainson/Woods Collection doubled the size of the museum's Pictorial Collection, with all the attendant requirements for cataloguing and online access. While this was not all clear when the collection was offered, it was believed that it had significant and lasting social and historical value. It was also thought that there was no other appropriate institution or collector who could manage its preservation and access. The museum sought advice from Senior Conservator of Photographs from the National Library of New Zealand, Mark Strange, about the condition of the collection and project management for the rehousing, cataloguing and descriptive work.

Over the last eight years, Puke Ariki has appraised, cleaned, catalogued, re-housed and begun digitising the collection. The museum has also implemented a range of strategies to reconnect the Taranaki community with this sizeable portion of their visual heritage. The Swainson/Woods Collection is an extraordinary catalogue of Taranaki history spanning eight decades. It is both a collection of privately meaningful photographs and publicly valuable narratives. Filled with images of ordinary Taranaki people, the collection holds a mirror up to our humanity. From individuals to sports groups, family portraits to weddings, formal group photographs to candid shots of social occasions, the photographs document a myriad of life events that add depth and colour to the community's memories.

Managing the Swainson/Woods Collection

Puke Ariki is a combined museum, library and visitor information centre in New Plymouth that serves the Taranaki region of New Zealand. Puke Ariki has approximately 20 dedicated museum

staff and four curated heritage collections – Archives (700 linear metres), Social History (50,000 items), Taonga Māori (*Māori treasures*) (7,000 items) and Pictorial (350,000 items). The first challenge Puke Ariki faced after accepting the Swainson/Woods Collection was sourcing funding for specialist technical staff and conservation supplies to care for the collection. It was decided to break the project down into three phases: phase one involved cataloguing and re-housing the Swainson's Studios portion of the collection; phase two involved doing the same with the Bernard Woods Studio material; and phase three comprised digitising the collection. Although digitising the collection later in the project meant the photographs would not be accessible to the public for a longer period of time, the decision was necessary to achieve workflow efficiencies and to minimise any further degradation of negatives housed in acidic enclosures. Since 2005, Puke Ariki has successfully secured five grants totalling \$NZ1.2 million, which indicates the level of resourcing required to make a collection of this size accessible to the community.

The Swainson's Studios portion of the collection primarily comprised negatives housed in decaying glassine packets inscribed with studio annotations. The later negatives from Bernard Woods Studio were housed in acidic paper envelopes. Phases one and two of the Swainson/Woods project required four contracted technicians to appraise the contents of each packet, record the metadata onto worksheets and enter the information into Puke Ariki's collection management database Vernon (fig. 3.). Only the last name of the client had been recorded by the studio on the packets. The full names of the people pictured in the negatives were seldom noted. As the technicians appraised the collection, they considered image content, exposure variation, the presence of proof prints and negative retouching in assessing which items should be retained. Duplicate negatives were disposed of and where indicated, the negative the customer ordered or the studio favoured was retained as a priority. Each negative retained was either dusted with a soft brush or, when the negative was particularly dirty, cleaned on the base side using a mixture of ethanol and water with cotton wool. It was then identified with a unique accession number. Glass



Fig. 3. Cameron Curd, former Swainson/Woods Project Technician, recording metadata from a negative packet onto a worksheet in 2010



Fig. 4. Swainson/Woods Digital Technician Sekove Mataitoga working on the digitisation project's camera capture station, August 2013

plates and film negatives were housed in acid-free paper enclosures with the accession number noted in pencil. Negatives were sorted according to size and medium, and then were housed in Corflute® boxes in a controlled atmosphere room. Colour material was transferred into cold storage (5.8°C/42.44°F, 27% RH). The written catalogue records were made accessible to the public through Puke Ariki's website. The museum's two permanent Pictorial Collection staff accepted requests to view negatives from the public during these phases and digitised negatives in an on-demand basis. When phases one and two of the project were completed, 115,000 negatives had been retained from the estimated 255,000 originally donated.

Puke Ariki commenced the digitisation phase of the Swainson/Woods project on July 1, 2013. In consultation with specialist digitisation staff from the National Library of New Zealand, equipment and automated processes were set up for a camera capture station, two image processing stations and a quality assurance station. Four technicians were contracted to complete the work over a three year period (fig. 4.). The decision was made to start digitising black and white sheet negatives due to their ease of processing, allowing the technicians to gain experience and develop an optimal workflow. Currently the technicians digitise and upload an average of 1,200 negatives per week. Although digitising the collection's colour material first would be preferable from a preventive conservation point of view, the work is more technically demanding and time consuming than processing monochrome negatives, requiring further colour management training to do the work correctly.

Lessons Learned

The most important lesson Puke Ariki has learned during the course of the project relates to accession number formats. The decision was made at the beginning of phase one to insert a date into the prefix of the collection's accession numbers – for example, 'SW1923-1965.00001'. The result – beyond long and over-complicated accession numbers with nineteen different 'SW' prefixes – is that Puke Ariki's collection management database cannot differentiate between some accession numbers, returning multiple results when searching for a single accession number. The mistake was realised near the end of phase one and a simplified accession number format was implemented for the Bernard Woods Studio negatives processed in phase two of the project (ie. WD.000001).

Another major lesson learned relates to the management of staff and their comfort with particular tasks. When a scanning pilot was undertaken on 1,000 Swainson/Woods negatives by a consultancy company in 2010, it was discovered the technicians employed during phase two had been retaining large amounts of duplicate material. For example, eighteen different frames of a couple in an almost identical pose had been accessioned and then digitised through the scanning pilot at a cost of \$10 per scan. The problem highlights that retaining duplicate material is not best practice when responsibly and efficiently managing the museum's resources. Making decisions about which photographs should be retained requires advanced curatorial judgement and in hindsight this process should have been managed more closely.

Collection Promotion

Since it was acquired in 2005, significant labour and capital commitments have gone into the continued promotion of the Swainson/Woods Collection to the Taranaki public. Simply preserving the collection – without a sustained effort to connect the images with the community – would never have yielded the public engagement Puke Ariki was hoping for when it accepted the collection. This promotional effort has primarily centred on identifying the people pictured in the photographs. Puke Ariki has sought identification information through a range of methods. Since July 2009, a photograph from the collection has been printed weekly in the *Taranaki Daily News* newspaper. Members of the public call the museum to make identifications and pass on stories related to the images. In 2010, with funding assistance from the Taranaki Electricity Trust (TET), Puke Ariki installed five digital display screens in regional venues around Taranaki to showcase the collection. Each rotating display – which is changed with new images every two months – is accompanied by a book in which people can note identifications.

The Taranaki public has embraced the opportunity to bring alive the collection's photographs. In April 2013, the exhibition *Photographic Memory: The Swainson/Woods Collection* opened at Puke Ariki (fig. 5.). In conjunction with the exhibition, a commenting function was added to Puke Ariki's website. This enabled the public to make identifications or tell stories about the people and events pictured in the collection from anywhere in the world. The museum currently receives more than a comment a day on Swainson/Woods Collection items online. The number of comments received has been steadily increasing since the commenting function went live.



Fig. 5. *Phillip and Hereklia Yiannett, Wedding* (circa 1940s), Swainson's Studios, collection of Puke Ariki, New Plymouth (SW1923-1965.00200). Mike Yiannett, the young boy pictured in Greek national costume front left, discovered this photograph in Puke Ariki's *Photographic Memory* exhibition. All of Mike's family photographs had been lost in a fire so Puke Ariki was able to provide him with replacement copies.

By actively encouraging the public to connect with the Swainson/Woods Collection, the collection itself has become greatly enriched through thousands of identifications and staff have been rewarded with some incredibly moving moments (fig. 6.). One such example involves former Taranaki resident Rex Hopkins. After a family member saw a photograph of his wife on a poster advertising Puke Ariki's digital community exhibitions, Rex wrote a letter to Puke Ariki staff that read:

'This is a photograph of my wife. It was taken in 1955, just prior to our marriage. Her name was Palma Joy Wesley, born in Ballarat, Australia. While living in Melbourne she

entered a beauty contest and won it. We were married at St Mary's Church in New Plymouth. After farming on Tipoka Road, Rahotū for 20 years, we sold and lived in Pahiā, Bay of Islands. Sadly, in 2002 she contracted Alzheimer's. I go to feed her lunch every day at her rest home in Orewa. She is 77 and I'm 80 years.' (Hopkins, 2010).

Palma's photograph was included in the *Photographic Memory* exhibition and was voted by the public as their favourite photograph from the collection, undoubtedly influenced by Rex's touching story that was displayed with it. When told of his wife's popularity, Rex wrote another letter and said: 'Although she cannot speak or walk, I am left with some wonderful memories of our life together.' (Hopkins, 2013). Rex visited Puke Ariki in October 2013 to personally express the value he'd gained from connecting with the museum through his beloved wife's photograph. This is just one of the many stories that demonstrate the importance of providing the community opportunities to connect with the Swainson/Woods Collection.



Fig. 6. *Palma Joy Hopkins* (April 1, 1955), Swainson's Studios, collection of Puke Ariki, New Plymouth (SW1955.0888). The discovery of Palma's photograph in the collection by a family member sparked an ongoing relationship between Puke Ariki and Palma's husband Rex.

Conclusion

Retrieved from a garden shed and preserved over an eight year period, Puke Ariki's Swainson/Woods Collection has evolved into a vehicle for expanding Taranaki's collective memory. Through the museum's preventive conservation, cataloguing, digitisation and promotional work, the collection has taken on a community-wide narrative. The personal histories recorded in the photographs contribute to the wider social, historical, aesthetic, political and spiritual values that museum collections strive to preserve and share. By saving the Swainson/Woods Collection, we know more about how Taranaki people lived, what they valued and how they wanted to be seen. We recognise a collection of experiences many of us know: growing up, family life, getting married, working, socialising. Suddenly we see ourselves in the lives of others.

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