ARCS Conference Session Review – Managing Historic Photographs in the 21st Century: A Case Study
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Presented on the first day of the conference, *Managing Historic Photographs in the 21st Century: A Case Study*, was an excellent and practical look at the difficulties and rewards of managing historic photography. Marc Boulay of the Department of Special Collections at the University of St. Andrews Library and Jamie Allen of George Eastman House spoke of their experiences working with extensive photographic collections that include not only photographs themselves, but also cameras and photo processing equipment.

Both speakers emphasized the importance of preserving photographs and making them accessible. Those of us who work in museum collections already understand this, but our administration and funders might not. Boulay noted that photographs are not only a valuable resource for research, but also serve as a "democratic tool for discovery." One does not have to understand the workings of obscure technology or be able to decipher historic legal documents in order to appreciate a photograph. The pervasiveness of photography also means that virtually anyone can find a photograph that speaks to them personally or that assists in a professional or personal research endeavor. If such philosophical discussions do not sway your director, remind them of the potential revenue stream that can be generated via reproductions. While a robust online catalog of historic photographs may take a large investment of time and money, it will likely lead to increased requests for reproductions and thus increased revenue.

Boulay and Allen also stressed that management of historic photographs, particularly if the photographs are to be included in an online catalog, requires thoughtful planning. Photograph collections can be complicated and often include multiple copies of the same image, sometimes in different media, as well as unedited proofs and other versions besides the final image. Those managing the collection have to make decisions about what to digitize, what to keep, and what to cull. There are also decisions to be made about the level of cataloging – how will you balance digitizing at an item level with the time constraints of item-level cataloging? Finally, copyright restrictions must be considered, as this may limit what can be digitized or reproduced. Fair use will offer protection in some instances, but museums should probably be more cautious when profiting from reproductions.

As a registrar who is currently planning and considering ways to make photographs and other objects available online, the experiences of Boulay and Allen were very helpful and instructive. Their suggestions for communicating the importance and usefulness of photographs will certainly help in securing funding and enthusiasm for future projects. I manage several collections that contain multiple copies and versions of images, so the discussion surrounding the difficulties of cataloging these collections gave me some new ideas and avenues to explore. And on a more light-hearted note, I really enjoyed watching George Eastman House's YouTube channel after the conference and plan to use some of their videos on photographic processes to train volunteers and interns.