Guide to the Underwood & Underwood Glass Stereograph Collection

NMAH.AC.0143
David Haberstich
June 1986
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Collection Overview

Repository: Archives Center, National Museum of American History
Title: Underwood & Underwood Glass Stereograph Collection
Identifier: NMAH.AC.0143
Date: 1895-1921
Extent: 160 Cubic feet
Creator: Underwood & Underwood
Language: English
Digital Content: Image(s): Underwood & Underwood Glass Stereograph Collection

Administrative Information

Acquisition Information
Collection donated by June Stratton (Mrs. John M.) on December 19, 1966.

Provenance
Unofficially in custody of Archives Center as of January 1983, but officially transferred from the Division of Photographic History, August, 1986. This collection apparently was separated from the Underwood & Underwood material acquired by the Keystone View Co. in 1912 and 1921, but its precise location or usage from that period until Mr. and Mrs. Stratton acquired it is uncertain.

Related Materials
California Museum of Photography, University of California—Riverside, Riverside, California 92521.

Underwood & Underwood stereographs in this collection and the Smithsonian Underwood & Underwood Collection originally were components of the same company file.

Available Formats
Additional and/or related photographs by Underwood & Underwood and other publishers are available in many public and private collections in the form of mounted paper stereographs, which are the end product marketed by these companies. Several thousand paper stereographs by Underwood & Underwood are located elsewhere in this Museum. Contact the Division of Photographic History, telephone 357-2059. Collection available by appointment.

Processing Information
Collection processed by David Haberstich, 1986
Preferred Citation


Restrictions

Researchers should view the positive videodisc image first or locate the image in SIRIS on the World Wide Web. The original glass plate is available for inspection if necessary in the Archives Center.

A limited number of fragile glass negatives and positives in the collection can be viewed directly in the Archives Center by prior appointment. Contact David Haberstich, 633-3721.

Digital image files linked to item-level records in SIRIS Webpac.

Conditions Governing Use

Collection items available for reproduction, but the Archives Center makes no guarantees concerning copyright restrictions. Other intellectual property rights may apply. Archives Center cost-recovery and use fees may apply when requesting reproductions.

Biographical / Historical

Underwood & Underwood was established at Ottawa, Kansas, by the young brothers Elmer and Bert Underwood in 1882. They initially operated as distributors for eastern photographers' stereographs to new markets in the West. Their activities included door to door canvassing with views by Charles Bierstadt, J. F. Jarvis, and Littleton View Co.(1) Underwood & Underwood, Publishers, opened a branch office in Baltimore in 1887.(2)

Soon Underwood & Underwood and other large stereograph publishers began recruiting college students to work as salesmen during summer months (1890). Underwood and Underwood claimed that their organization alone sent out as many as 3,000 college students in one Summer [sic]. With the other ... big companies each employing more than 1,000, it is easy to understand how the countryside of the Nation literally swarmed with stereograph salesmen throughout the summer months! ... The competition between the salesmen themselves was likewise aggressive, with no holds barred. Many successful business and professional men of today relate with considerable pride that they got their start on their careers in this practical and very effective school of salesmanship.(3)

The company moved its main office from Ottawa, Kansas to New York City (1891),(4) and gradually began to publish its own stereographs. Bert Underwood finally took photography lessons from M. Abel in Mentone, France during the same year.(5) B. L. Singley, erstwhile salesman for the Underwood & Underwood and James M. Davis & Co. firms, in 1892 formed the Keystone View Company of Meadville, Pennsylvania, which was to become Underwood & Underwood's chief competitor and imitator.(6)

Underwood & Underwood entered the education market (1895) by producing packaged sets of 100 or more stereographs with descriptive texts.(7) From 1897 the firm employed full time staff photographers as well as free lancers. By 1901 the Underwoods were publishing 25,000 stereographs per day (i.e., total number of cards). Increasing production levels led them to gain control of the Jarvis, Bierstadt, and William H. Rau photoprinting facilities in 1897-1898.(8)
The Keystone view Company created its own Educational Department in 1898. This division sustained the Keystone View Company past the period of the stereograph's popularity. In this year Underwood & Underwood reprinted Oliver Wendell Holmes's series on the stereograph and stereoscope which originally appeared in The Atlantic Monthly between 1859 and 1863. This eighty page booklet included testimonials from eminent scholars on the value of the stereograph in education. The company had been test marketing what it later called "The Underwood Travel System." This consisted of a boxed set of stereo views of a country or region, a guide book describing the significance of the places shown, and a map showing their location and the viewpoints from which the stereographs were taken. Captions on the backs of the stereographs were sometimes printed in six languages. As stereographs began to be used in schools as visual aids, the firm promoted its Travel System with endorsements from prominent educators, citing the usage of the system by various schools and universities.

The H. C. White Company, which had manufactured stereoscopes for several decades, entered the stereo publication field in 1899. Much of its production seemed to imitate Underwood & Underwood cards, including typography and the color of mount stock. Underwood & Underwood expanded into news photography by 1910 and gradually decreased its stereographic work. Few new stereo negatives were added to the file after 1912 except for a flurry of activity during the early war years, 1914-1916. The total number of Underwood & Underwood "titles" in stereo were from 30,000 to 40,000 (there might be a substantially larger number of actual negatives, since the files frequently were updated with newer views for old catalog numbers).

Underwood & Underwood sold a portion of its negative file to the educational division of Keystone View Company in 1912, and between 1921-1923 conveyed to this competitor their remaining stereo stock (presumably both cards and negatives) and rights. In addition to its involvement as a news photographic agency, the company eventually opened portrait studios which flourished during the World war II years. A former Smithsonian employee, Vince Connolly, worked for Underwood & Underwood, which competed with Harris & Ewing in general portrait work during that period: he did portraiture and other photography, but says he was unaware of his employer's earlier stereo publishing activities.

Underwood & Underwood donated approximately 6000 negatives to the Section of Photography of the Division of Graphic Arts (1964). These photographs are primarily 4" x 5", captioned glass plate and film negatives. The subjects are news events and theatrical, sports, and political subjects of the early 20th century. In a letter to the Smithsonian of March 25, 1966 (in accession number 270586), Mrs. John M. Stratton described another collection of Underwood & Underwood photographs, stating that her husband had been a partner in Underwood & Underwood Illustrations and owned Underwood & Underwood News Photos. In November of the same year Mr. and Mrs. Stratton donated this collection of glass plates by Underwood & Underwood and other publishers to the Division of Photographic History (then the Section of Photography of the Division of Graphic Arts). This material consists of both negative and positive stereographic plates, as well as non stereoscopic plates, chiefly copies made from the stereographs, with some catalogs, stereoscopes, and other material. The donor estimated 12,900 plates, but in 1983 the Smithsonian Institution inventory yielded a total of approximately 28,000 plates.

The Keystone View Company's stereoscopic production continued much later than Underwood & Underwood's. It was not until 1939 when declining interest in stereography led the firm to discontinue stereograph production and enter the field of visual optometrics. The stereoscopic negative collection, including material obtained from Underwood & Underwood and other firms, was placed in storage in concrete vaults. The Mast family of Davenport, Iowa, eventually purchased the collection in 1963, and in 1977 donated the collection to the University of California for its California Museum of Photography in Riverside. The University took physical possession of this vast collection in 1979.

Many of the Underwood & Underwood plates donated by the Strattons (which were transferred to the Archives Center in 1983), in effect have been cancelled by having diagonal lines (double "X" marks) scratched into the emulsion of either the left or right image of each stereo pair (never both sides). These
cancellation marks do not appear on the Underwood & Underwood plates in the Keystone Mast Collection in Riverside. This leads to several theories: (a) that these cancellations were in fact the reason that the Smithsonian plates were not purchased by Keystone in either 1912 or 1921, since Keystone clearly intended to use the Underwood material for stereograph production and the defaced plates would be of no value to them for this purpose; or (b), as stereo collector John Waldsmith suggests, that the cancellations were part of an agreement between Underwood & Underwood and Keystone: Keystone may have asked Underwood & Underwood to cancel one side of each stereoscopic plate not being sold to Keystone so that Underwood & Underwood would no longer be able to compete with Keystone in the stereo market. The defaced plates, as well as other material which Keystone did not purchase, apparently remained in Underwood custody and eventually were acquired by Mr. and Mrs. Stratton. The cancellation marks in the Smithsonian's collection are the subject of further conjecture. Edward Earle at Riverside feels that, since Underwood & Underwood sought to abandon stereograph production much earlier than Keystone's departure from the field in order to enter the non stereoscopic lantern slide market, the cancellation may have served to indicate which side of each stereoscopic pair should be converted to lantern slide production use; the existence of the 4" x 5" copy negatives and positives from stereographs in this collection seem to corroborate this. The Underwood & Underwood conversion from stereograph to lantern slide materials seems to coincide with the ascendance of lantern slide projection as visual aids in schools. The company apparently modified the type of photographic product which they published at least partially in recognition of this new educational trend.

NOTES

2. Ibid., p. 62.
4. Points of View., p. 66.
5. Darrah, p. 47.
6. points of View, p. 66.
7. Ibid., p. 68.
8. Darrah, p. 47.
9. Points of View, p. 70.
13. Darrah, p. 48, quoted in Points of View, P. 82.
Scope and Contents

The major part of the collection, series 1-4, contains nearly 28,000 glass plates, including original stereoscopic negatives, interpositives, and both negative and positive non-stereoscopic plates used to produce lantern slides and paper prints. The photographs were taken all over the world. The majority are from the Underwood & Underwood active files, but plates from other publishers are also included. Series 5 is a small collection of paper stereographs. Series 6 contains 4 Underwood & Underwood descriptive sales catalogs and 1 H. C. White & Co. catalog (numbers on the Underwood plates correspond to the numbers on catalog captions). Series 7 is apparatus--four stereoscopes.

The approximately 28,000 glass plates in this collection have not been completely inspected at this point due to handling problems associated with asbestos contamination of the collection. A preliminary survey, however, indicated that the selections of images cover the full range of subject matter encompassed by the "Underwood Travel System." The subject matter is most easily comprehended by consulting one of the Underwood sales catalogs which accompany the collection. The catalog captions are arranged geographically, for the most part, and generally represent an organized "tour" which could be purchased as a boxed set, complete with maps and guide book, although individual images could be purchased separately. The catalogs indicate that the Underwood files were continually updated, for extensive modifications in some of the sets can be seen from edition to edition, and actual inspection of published stereographs shows that alternate views with identical Underwood catalog numbers were substituted from time to time, and that new subjects (with new catalog numbers) were sometimes introduced into the sets and old subjects were retired. There are glass plate negatives as well as positives in this collection. The positive images were probably interpositives used for the production of duplicate negatives. Some of the original stereo negatives were cut apart and the images transposed; they were then bound with an additional glass support (in many cases the tape has deteriorated). Half stereo positives also appear in the collection: these probably were intended for use in lantern slide production. Frequently a drawer of plates contains several incarnations of a single image, including the original negative, a copy negative, an interpositive, and a positive lantern slide. In other cases a drawer may contain only a single mode, e.g., original negatives, while corresponding positives and/or lantern slides appear in separate drawers.

A small quantity of the Underwood & Underwood plates are not from the Travel System, but represent humorous and genre subjects which were cataloged and marketed separately. The work of several other publishers, usually without Underwood catalog numbers, is also represented, including H. C. White, American Stereoscopic Company, and J. J. Killela.

The arrangement of the collection seems to reflect a combination of permanent reference storage as well as active use files. The apparent anomalies or inconsistencies probably indicate the pulling of plates from permanent files into temporary work files, and the collection may consist of a combination of permanent storage and temporary working files. As the drawers do not appear to have been renumbered according to any easily discernible pattern, they have become intermixed and rearranged in storage. The contents of each drawer usually have been found in good order, however, and the plates were nearly always arranged numerically, usually with the low numbers at the rear of the drawer and the highest number at the front. As the plates have been rehoused, the reverse numerical order has been corrected. when all the plates have been rehoused and inventoried, consideration will be given to general collection rearrangement and renumbering of the containers, either strictly in numerical order or topically and/or geographically with a numerical sequence within each group.

The collection is in good condition for the most part, although conservation attention will be required. There is a certain amount of emulsion peeling or frilling at the edges of some plates, but this is a condition to which emulsions on glass frequently are prone. A few plates, bound in a sandwich arrangement between cover glass and acetate facing the emulsion, have suffered severe damage, peeling, and image losses through the apparent ferrotyping and sticking of emulsion to the plastic, probably under conditions of high humidity at some stage. There is surprisingly little glass breakage within the collection.
Most of the stereoscopic negatives and many of the positives are defaced with a double "XI' scratched into the emulsion of either the left or right side, as described above in the historical note. Of particular interest and presumed rarity are cards found interfiled with plates in many of the drawers. These cards, filed by Underwood lla(tolive” (i.e., catalog) numbers, bear printing’or production dates and notes, along with the unique, chronological accession numbers which the company assigned to each plate, regardless of the "active" number which it might eventually receive. A check mark on a card usually refers to a plate actually in the collection and with which the card is found physically associated; additional accession numbers without check marks listed on the cards possibly refer to variant views which were discarded or may in fact be in the Keystone Mast Collection (pending further research). For ease of handling and in the interest of conservation, the cards have been separated from the plates within each drawer and are arranged as a group at the rear, but can still be located easily. Frequently when a plate and/or its original envelope does not bear both the "active" and accession numbers, the missing number can be located on one of these cards.

Photographers represented include Herbert G. Ponting and Clarence W. White. A photographer and/or publisher named J. J. Killela is also represented.

Arrangement

This collection is arranged in seven series. Series 1, 2, and 3 are each divided into negative and positive subseries. Plates are arranged numerically in groups based on geographical and subject content. Controlled at the series level in the finding aid and at the item level in a computer database.

Series 1, H. C. White glass plates
Series 2, American Stereoscpopic Co. glass plates
Series 3, Underwood & Underwood glass plates
Series 4, Broken glass plates
Series 5, Original company catalogs
Series 6, Paper stereographs
Series 7, stereoscopes (viewers)

Names and Subject Terms

This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:

Subjects:
  Travel photography -- 1890-1930
  Traveling sales personnel

Types of Materials:
  Lantern slides
  Photographs -- 1890-1900
  Photographs -- 1900-1950
  Photographs -- Black-and-white negatives -- Glass -- 1890-1930
Photographs -- Interpositives -- Glass -- 1890-1930
Stereographs -- 1890-1930
Stereoscopic photographs -- Glass -- 1890-1930

Names:
American Stereoscopic Co.
H. C. White Co.
Killela, J.J.
Ponting, Herbert George, 1870-1935
Underwood, Bert, 1862-1943
Underwood, Bert, 1862-1943
Underwood, Elmer, 1859-1947
Underwood, Elmer, 1859-1947
White, Clarence W.
## Container Listing

**Series 1: H. C. White glass plates**

**Subseries 1.1: H.C. White Negatives**

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Box 17  RSN Numbers 1519-1614
Image(s)

Box 18  RSN Numbers 1615-1705
Image(s)

Box 19  RSN Numbers 1706-1775
Image(s)

Box 20  RSN Numbers 1776-1876
Image(s)

Box 21  RSN Numbers 1877-1973
Image(s)

Box 22  RSN Numbers 1974-2082
Image(s)

Box 23  RSN Numbers 2083-3069
Image(s)

Box 24  RSN Numbers 3070-3165
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Box 25  RSN Numbers 3166-3257
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Box 27  RSN Numbers 3363-3468
Image(s)

Box 28  RSN Numbers 3469-3560
Image(s)

Box 29  RSN Numbers 3561-3653
Image(s)

Box 30  RSN Numbers 3654-3756
Image(s)

Box 31  RSN Numbers 3757-3863
Image(s)

Box 32  RSN Numbers 3864-3974
Series 1: H. C. White glass plates

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Image(s)

Box 33  RSN Numbers 3975-4087
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Box 34  RSN Numbers 4088-4200
        Image(s)

Box 35  RSN Numbers 4201-4304
        Image(s)

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Box 43  RSN Numbers 4945-5044
        Image(s)

Box 44  RSN Numbers 5045-5136
        Image(s)

Box 45  RSN Numbers 5137-5241
        Image(s)

Box 46  RSN Numbers 5242-5348
        Image(s)

Box 47  RSN Numbers 5349-5434
        Image(s)

Box 48  RSN Numbers 5436-5533
        Image(s)

Box 49  RSN Numbers 5534-5631
Subseries 1.2: H.C. White Interpositives

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        Image(s)

Box 56  RSN Numbers 6255-6347
        Image(s)

Box 57  RSN Numbers 6348-6439
        Image(s)

Box 58  RSN Numbers 6440-6529
        Image(s)

Box 59  RSN Numbers 6530-6632
        Image(s)

Box 60  RSN Numbers 6632-6739
        Image(s)

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        Image(s)

Box 62  RSN Numbers 6840-6945
        Image(s)

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        Image(s)

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        Image(s)

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Series 2: American Stereoscopic Co. glass plates

Subseries 2.1: American Stereoscopic Negatives

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Box 88  RSN Numbers 9213-9285, Cards AS 174-AS 231
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