

## Bringing Circus History into the Digital World

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### Summary

*No library or museum in the world was curating a growing online exhibit of circus images when Milner Library at Illinois State University began such an exhibit in the spring of 2010. Images were first hosted locally and then nationally, but each time the platform used was the Online Computer Library Center's (OCLC) collection management software, CONTENTdm. To date, the collection has grown to include over 5000 digitized preserved images culled from both Kodachrome slides and black and white 35mm negatives. This paper will demonstrate how CONTENTdm enhances the digital curation and preservation of the online exhibit known as "Passion for Circus," ensuring this truly interdisciplinary art form's existence well into the future.*

**Keywords:** Digital curation, online exhibit, CONTENTdm, circus

### Introduction

In 2008, Taschen Press released a magnificent book called *Circus, 1870-1950*. Weighing 15.5 pounds, this gigantic book was printed in English, French and German and was illustrated by more than 1,000 images. A reviewer for the *New York Times Book Review* commented, "This is a gee-whiz spectacle of a book, a three-ring extravaganza as bright as a pinball machine." The book's reception was equally vivid, garnering four more printings in the five years since it was first published. The central feature of the book are its many photographs, roughly one-third of which came from the photographs of Sverre O. Braathen, a significant portion of the Circus & Allied Arts Collection found within Special Collections at Milner Library, Illinois State University, Normal, Illinois.

The publication of the first edition of this book coincided with an annual convention of the Circus Historical Society, held in Normal. The coalescence of all these events gave the idea to digitize of the circus photography of Sverre O. Braathen the momentum it had never previously had. The software chosen to make this rich primary source material available on the internet was Online Computer Library Center's (OCLC) product named CONTENTdm. This software has ably preserved the images from a significant cultural and demographic entity, one that in many ways defines interdisciplinary studies. (Another sentence, maybe, to that effect?...something like: From the study of the artistic

composition of the photographs, to the discovery of socioeconomic indicators revealed in them, to the analysis of gender roles in mid-twentieth century performance arts, these digitized images offer rich insights from a spectrum of academic and cultural perspectives—or something.)

### **How the software works – a user’s perspective**

OCLC’s digital collection management software, CONTENTdm, provides many benefits to the user. A look at “Passion for Circus” – the name for the aforementioned collection of photographs – highlights many of those benefits. If someone wanted to do some research on this collection, he or she might open a web browser and search for the collection title, Passion for Circus, using a search engine such as Google. That sort of scenario reveals the primary benefit of using CONTENTdm: the collection is easily retrieved—across many platforms and search engines. The front page for “Passion for Circus” would be displayed, having the same look and feel as the rest of the webpages for Milner Library, maintaining the branding of our institutional web presence with the seal of Illinois State University displayed next to the name of our library, followed by the title of this digitized collection. Under the red banner which helps to serve as the university brand, is a simple search box, wherein a user could search for images related to his or her research need. One of the Braathen images fills the middle of the screen, then toward the bottom of the page, the user can choose to search the collection by a variety of means: Circus, Performer, Stage Name, Location and Subject. The right-most side of the screen offers a link users can follow to get a Really Simple Syndication (RSS) feed, providing an alert when any new content is added to the collection. Finally, thumbnails of the most recently added images to the project are displayed at the bottom of the page. All of these components illustrate some of the benefits of using CONTENTdm.

An example helps to illustrate the functionality. Recently, a researcher was looking for images of the air conditioning units which the Ringling Brothers & Barnum and Bailey Circus used in the middle of the last century. By typing “air conditioning” into the search statement box, 37 results were produced. Upon first glance, many – like the “Old King Cole Spectacle Entering the Big Top” - do not appear to relate to the concept.

This gives the opportunity to display one of the greatest technical features of CONTENTdm: the ability to “zoom in” on the photo. Doing that while moving the mouse to highlight the top third of the image shows a flattened tube with the upside-down letters that read, “AIR COND.” These first few letters alert us to the fact that this flattened tube was part of the air conditioning apparatus used by that circus.

Photo 1



Source: <http://digital.library.illinoisstate.edu/cdm/singleitem/collection/circus/id/535/rec/12>

But what year was this tube used? A look at the record which accompanies the image gives us the data we need to ascertain this vital piece of information - and so much more.

Screen shot 1

Description	
Title	Old King Cole Spectacle Entering Big Top
Photographer's Note	Calliope and Old King Cole spectacle going into the big top, North Street Lot August 17, 1941.
Circus	Ringling Barnum Circus
Date of Original	1941-08-17
Location	Madison (Wis.)
Subject (AAT)	air conditioning
Subject (LUXV)	big top circus performers spectacles wardrobe
Subject (LCTGH)	calliopes
Project	Braathen Slide Project
Repository Collection	Miner Library Special Collections
Resource Medium	color slide
Resource Type	still image
Digital File Format	image/jpeg
Digital ID	85FO110
Original Medium	Digital reproduction of original 35 mm color slide from the Circus & Allied Arts collection held in Special Collections at Miner Library, Illinois State University. Photographer: Sverre O. Braathen (1895-1974)
Tags	(0)
Comments	(0)

The record for the photo above detailing all the metadata for it.  
<http://digital.library.illinoisstate.edu/cdm/singleitem/collection/circus/id/535/rec/12>

The date - August 17, 1941 – is provided along with the title of the image, the location where it was filmed (Madison, Wisconsin), the subject fields (air conditioning, big top, circus performers, spectacles, wardrobe), and all the ownership information can all be found in that record. Librarians call these things the metadata, but users likely refer to them as the details about each item. Regardless of what they are called, they are the priceless specifics which help define each image. They also provide the context for them. Finally, links provided at the bottom of the screen allow users to tag items, add commentary, and/or offer corrections if mistakes were made in identifying people or objects.

### **Additional Benefits**

Beyond ease of use and searchability across many platforms and search engines, CONTENTdm provides additional benefits. For instance, the software delivers the means for a library to digitally store and thus preserve unique and valuable images. It also is customizable on the back-end which in our case means that the initial search fields can be designed to reflect the unique vocabulary of the circus.

Internet users are a diverse lot. Many enjoy using social media; CONTENTdm allows for image-sharing via Facebook, Twitter, Flickr and more. Those searching the web also sometimes desire to purchase or use for research images they find there. An exciting feature has just been released by OCLC and their partner, Atlas Systems which addresses this issue. Atlas Systems' Aeon software works with CONTENTdm to allow users to do two things: to request that materials to be pulled for them before physically arriving at a Special Collections depository, and it also enables people to not only identify which images they would like to have reproduced for publication or personal use, but also to pay for the reproduction services online via a credit card. The press release for this feature was disseminated in January, 2013. As yet, Milner Library has not implemented this service.

### **Conclusion**

In the span of a few short years Milner Library has introduced the world to an online photo exhibit of circus images that documents American circus shows from several decades of the twentieth century. This has been accomplished by first digitizing the slides, negatives, and photographs from the Circus & Allied Arts Collection found within the Special Collections department, and then uploading them into OCLC's online collection management software, CONTENTdm. Images from this collection can be found in wildly diverse websites, from camera and film fan sites, to sites whose supporters love Jeeps, to model builders who want detailed images of Caterpillar tractors from the 1940s. Just like the circus itself, the study of digitized circus images attracts diverse crowds from academics, to independent scholars, as well as circus fans. The digitization of this collection of photographs ensures that more people are able to access these wonderful images, in effect bringing a page from American cultural history to life once again. We look forward to expanding the offerings of images and services in the future so that the more people may be able to access these wonderful images from days gone by, in effect bringing a segment of American cultural history to life once again.