The story of the lost and then found collection of over 500,000 photographs of Boone Countians between 1886 and 1970 is a compelling tale that consists of detective work, near disasters, mysteries, lies, heroism, passion and dedication. The saga is told in these nine chapters. It’s a phenomenal story worth documenting and sharing. Like the remarkable treasure trove of photographs themselves, the story is significant in our community’s history. The adventure begins under an old, wooden staircase at the site of the soon-to-be-closing Westhoff Studio at 1106 E. Broadway in Columbia, Missouri.

The Eugene Benedict family, including wife Etta May, and sons Jerry and Norman, agreed to purchase the Westhoff Portrait Studio, as well as Westhoff Gifts, at 1106 E. Broadway from J. Francis and Iris Westhoff. It was 1970, and Westhoff, who had been in the portrait photography business since 1936 wanted to retire and move west. He informed the Benedict family that the east half of what was popularly known as the Central Dairy Building was to be sold, “lock, stock and barrel”. In other words, in addition to all of the business’ inventory, the buyer also be required to take possession of dozens and dozens of boxes and crates under the staircase. Jerry Benedict remembers it well. Westhoff informed him the crates contained a collection of photography negatives from several portrait studios, dating back to the 1800s. Benedict knew it was a collection that needed to be in a museum.

Soon after the family began to set up their new shoe store in the downstairs portion of the property and The Central Brace company in the upstairs portion – where the photography studio was located since Westhoff had moved in approximately 1954 – Benedict decided to see what images were on a few of the 5” x 7” and 8” x 10” pieces of glass. He carefully removed six, dry glass plate negatives and brought them to John Keller, a friend who worked for Eddie Gibbons and Francis Griffin, owners of Julie’s Studio, a portrait studio that developed its own prints at 23 South 10th Street. Julie’s Studio shared that block of 10st Street just south of Broadway with the popular Alexander’s Steakhouse at Cherry and 10th Streets.

The Collection Timeline

Chapter One
On January 31, 1971, after shop hours and with Benedict at his side, Keller made six prints from the glass plates and they revealed images so clear and fine that Jerry said, “they looked as if they had been taken just moments earlier”. One was of Broadway, in the center of a street populated with horses and buggies and looking east from near Short Street. Another looked to be of a Studebaker dealership taken some years into the 20th century. Jerry asked John to keep the negatives temporarily, as Jerry wanted to bring more to him so that large prints could be created to hang in their new shoe store at 1106 E. Broadway, to create a turn-of-the-century décor to accentuate the store’s name, The Shoe Emporium. On that very night, and just after midnight on February 1, one of Columbia’s worst fires in history broke out and nearly that entire block of 10th street burned down. The fire started in the back of Alexander’s Steakhouse and burned several nearby businesses, including the Hofbrau Restaurant on 9th Street, the Ledo Beauty Salon and Julie’s Studio. The images on those six glass plates and the prints made from them were gone forever. At that moment, Jerry Benedict fully realized he had a tremendous responsibility to keep the rest of the collection out of harm’s way, and moreover, to find a curator for the collection.

Soon after the devastating fire Benedict contacted Col. A. R. Troxell, the president of the Boone County Historical Society. Col. Troxell visited the collection, still under the staircase at 1106 E. Broadway, and indicated though interested, he had no place to store the collection (The Boone County History & Culture Center would not be built until 1990). Benedict also contacted the State Historical Society of Missouri, located in the east ground floor of Ellis Library on the University of Missouri campus. They were also unable to accept the collection for lack of space. Then Benedict contacted several local photographers, but all indicated they couldn’t take on the transportation and storage costs, much less afford the time and expense of cataloguing the entire collection. Benedict then met a young photographer with a new camera shop on Broadway. Mac McCown was from Mexico, Missouri, and had traveled quite widely, but returned to central Missouri and had opened The Chroma Studio at 713 E. Broadway. McCown is fascinated with the massive collection that Benedict has introduced him to and recognizes it’s historic value.
In 1971, Benedict believed McCown would be a good custodian of the collection and he gives it to McCown for its care and protection. With a handshake deal, McCown promises to someday get all of it to the Boone County Historical Society, where Benedict believes the collection should find its permanent home. McCown took possession of the collection and over the next few years had already twice moved it in Columbia, before finding he needed to move it for a third time. He considered moving it to a new property he had purchased on north 9th Street, behind the First Christian Church called the Marketplace Building. It’s yet another miracle in this longer story that he didn’t. The Marketplace Building would soon burn down. If he had moved the collection there, it all would have been lost forever.

McCown hired a recent Stephens College graduate in 1977. Her name was Laura Prince and she would play an important and pivotal role for the next twenty years. She was a photographer and archivist, and like McCown, she was enamored with the historic Westhoff Collection.

Soon Mac McCown was ready to let go of the responsibility for the collection and he found a couple in Moberly, Missouri with storage in their storefront – the Randolph County Abstract Company. The proprietors, James and Frances Stone, were in their 60s at the time and were known to be “great accumulators of things”. The Stones recognized that some of the people photographed in the collection were from Randolph County, as many people from counties surrounding Boone County would go into Columbia for portraits in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It’s unclear whether the collection was sold to the Stones or was a gift or loan, but the collection, all of it - 500,000 primary negatives from 7 different Columbia photographers and over 100 years of handwritten studio logs - would remain in Moberly with the Stone family for nearly twenty years.

In the late-1970s Laura Prince knew where the collection was now kept, and she couldn’t stop thinking about how to get it back to Columbia. Chroma Studio had since closed, and Mac McCown had moved on. She contacted the Stones in Moberly on a couple of occasions – just to find out if they would return the collection to its natural home, in Columbia. She was rebuffed each time.

Prince was friends, however, with a young photo chemist in Columbia named Kim Schafermeyer. Schafermeyer heard about this vast collection from Prince in the late 70s, before leaving Columbia for travels near and far. He came back to Columbia in 1981 to open a photography studio at 320 E. Broadway. Not having forgotten about this almost mythical collection of 100 years’ worth of photography, Schafermeyer became obsessed with locating it and returning it to Columbia. Over the next several years, Schafermeyer’s diligence, passion and dedication would prove to be the deciding factor. The winding road of this collection’s journey, with its share of mystery and near disasters was about to take another turn.

Chapter Three

Old Photos Kept in Basement

By Florence Crighton
Missourian Staff Writer

Faces of Columbia — several thousand of them — are put away in a dark basement downtown, for the time being anyway. The oldest and most complete collection of studio photography in Columbia is not readily available to those who could use it — local historians, publishers, students of fashion and photography, and interested local residents.

The collection belongs to Columbia’s newest studio photographer, R.L. McCowan who got it from Frances Westhoff. It dates back to 1886. McCowan said, and includes the files of Columbia’s earliest studio photographers Joe Douglas (ca. 1917-1921), Wesley Blackmer (ca. 1921-1928), Paul Purcell (ca. 1921-1947), Champoux (ca. 1946-1947) and Francis Cowan.

McCowan, of Chroma Studios, would like to see the collection properly housed and indexed so students could use it. “You never know what you might find in there,” McCowan said the collection is in good condition. McCowan enjoys bringing faces to life by making contact prints from glass dry plate negatives. But McCowan said he does not have room to keep the collection much longer.

“There are more than 38,000 negatives and prints from glass dry plate negatives,” McCowan said. He estimates it would cost $1800 to move the collection.

McCowan said he would be willing to give it away if the recipient would keep the collection intact and allow him access to it. Although the collection is indexed on cards under photographer and subject names, much work is needed to make it useful to historians and other interested citizens. Pictures of early Columbia streets and businesses are in there but are not filed by any logical system. A number of local historical societies have expressed interest in the collection but cited problems of editing and indexing.

A collection such as this is valuable not only in the illumination of books on history and fashion, but for over scores ambitious projects. A history student at Rutgers State University used a comparable collection of a Black River Falls, Wis. studio photographer as the basis for a “social history” of the community at the turn of the century, in a book titled “Wisconsin Death Trip.” McCowan hopes to find a new home for the photographer plates and negatives by January next year.
Schafermeyer traveled to Moberly to introduce himself to the Stone family at the Randolph County Abstract Company in 1981. He found the Stone’s to be “very decent people” and every bit the collectors of “stuff” he had heard they were. But he was quite surprised when the Stones denied having possession of the collection. He thought he knew better. But the Stones took a liking to Schafermeyer and invited him to come back anytime to visit, but suggested he always bring Burger King cheeseburgers. Not deterred, he travelled to Moberly to visit the Stones every other Saturday for over 10 years. All the while the Stones played coy about their knowledge of the collection’s whereabouts. One day, and out of the blue, James and Frances Stone asked Schafermeyer if he would like to see the collection. It turned out the entire collection was just a few feet away from where they always sat down for burgers – just on the other side of a wall inside their offices.

Schafermeyer didn’t waste any time in doing what needed to be done next. He convinced the Stones to sell the collection to the Boone County Historical Society. He realized that after 10 years, all the Stones really wanted was to make sure the collection was cared for. James and Frances Stone accepted a modest sale price of $750. They asked that their family name somehow always be attached to the collection. That fact has been lost to the many people involved with the collection in the years since.
Schafermeyer then had the smarts to go to a probable willing partner and obtain funds to make the move happen. Money would be required for transport, new sleeves and storage boxes, cleaning, cataloging, some sort of facility storage and the unexpected. He approached Albert Price of Boone County National Bank and of the Boone County Community Trust. Schafermeyer also told Price the National Archives had informed him that if Boone County was not prepared to handle accepting the collection, they would bring it to Washington, D.C. Price and the other trustees, hearing about the goldmine that had been found and could be salvaged for the sake of history, quickly agreed and not only provided $25,000, but reached out to the Boone County Historical Society and Hank Waters III, publisher of The Columbia Daily Tribune. At this point, the Boone County Historical Society had a brand-new building, but still not the knowledge that an estate gift from Tracy and Pierre Montminy – one that would build the addition with the underground vaults – was only a year away. In 1991 the Boone County Historical Society, even with their new museum building, had very little storage space and was not able to accept the collection. But thanks to Hank Waters, The Columbia Daily Tribune was able to do just that. The paper had just moved its printing operation to their new building across the street and now had adequate climate-controlled space in their building on 4th street.

And so, in the late summer of 1991, while arrangements were being made to transport the collection to the Tribune building, Schafermeyer called his old friend, Laura Prince, who was by this time, living in Washington D.C. According to Prince, he excitedly told her of the news about the collections imminent return to Columbia and said, “You have to come back. I can’t do this anymore. You have to take over.”

But before the Stone collection of about 500,000 negatives would make their way to Columbia, something astonishing takes place in October of 1991. A jaw-dropping discovery in the crawl space beneath the flooring of a very old home on Switzler Street. The incredible story of 100 years of Columbia photography was taking another turn.
In mid-October 1991, a contractor named Dale Andrews was looking for termite damage in one of his rental properties. He was in the crawl space of the house on 107 Switzer Street, under the wooden slats of the living room floor with a flashlight, when he saw several wooden crates. Inside the crates he found hundreds of glass plates. He had discovered another vast collection of early Columbia photography. In this instance, it was all the work of Joseph Douglass. Douglass had a studio in Columbia between 1886 and 1911.

The home at 107 Switzer had once belonged to famed and prize-winning African American horticulturist, Henry Kirklin. Kirklin was the first (though unofficial) African American to teach at the University of Missouri. The university understood his unique genius for botany and horticulture and hired him, but because of Kirklin’s race would not allow him a classroom. He taught his students on the steps of an Agricultural School building.

It’s said that because the crates discovered under the Kirklin/Andrews house were produce crates from the early 20th century, that Kirklin might have agreed to store the plates for Douglass. It’s historical fact that Douglass and Kirklin did have a decades-long relationship and were likely friends. Kirklin, who was born into slavery in 1858, was a gardener in the Columbia nursery of Douglass’ father, also named Joseph and a former Boone County Sheriff and a Brigadier General in the Civil War. Douglass was six years Kirklin’s junior, but he died in 1911 at age 47. Kirklin likely already had the crates of photographs at that time, but when he died in 1938 at the age of 80, perhaps he didn’t leave word of the existence of the glass plates underneath his living room floor. Had the old home ever been demolished before Dale Andrews made his discovery, tens of thousands of glass plate negatives would have never been preserved for history.
In late 1991, Kim Schafermeyer enlisted Rosalind Kimball Moulton, still the photography instructor at Stephens College, and her students to help move the 500,000 negatives donated by the Stone family from Moberly to the basement of the Columbia Daily Tribune. Schafermeyer also contacted Laura Prince, then living in Washington, D.C., and told her she needed to return to be the curator of the collection, supervising the cleaning and cataloging process. Schafermeyer then requested of Al Price and the Boone County Community Trust that Prince remain the curator and archivist after the collection eventually moves to the Boone County Historical Society.

In 1992, the Boone County Historical Society received an estate gift left by Tracy and Pierre Montminy. Tracy was the famed artist and University of Missouri art professor, and her husband, also an acclaimed artist, was a professor of art at Stephens College. Their gift would pave the way for finally moving the vast collection to its permanent home. Together the Montmins left $200,000 for the society with a request to build an art gallery and a space for collections. They also left the historical society their artwork and personal papers. A talented painter, Tracy Montminy received critical acclaim creating murals in New England for the Works Progress Administration in the 1930s before she moved to Columbia to work at the University.

The Montminy gift initiated the Boone County Historical Society’s facility expansion, and after the society raised the necessary matching funds for the full construction project, the new Montminy Art Gallery was built and dedicated in April 1993. Beneath the new 5,000 square feet gallery and attached veranda was another 5,000 square feet of climate-controlled space underground. This basement level consisted of ten, individual vaults for storing various collections, including the Montminy art collection. Kim Schafermeyer was immensely helpful in the design and construction of the collection vaults. He knew the proper standards for storing the photography collection, particularly the nitrate negatives, and he consulted the architect on the necessary size of the rooms, the doors, and the materials to be used. The massive photography collection was stored in vaults #3 and #4. In vault #2 a photographic dark room was installed by Laura Prince, and the society took over the work of cataloguing the priceless photography collection, which had begun months earlier in the basement of the Tribune.

Laura Prince continued her work as the photography collections curator. She was the only salaried staff member for the collection, and her wages were paid by the Boone County Community Trust in support of the historical society. Prince also produced photography shows that consisted of the newly-discovered images, and installed exhibits in the new Montminy Art Gallery, at the Columbia Art League, and occasionally in downtown Columbia store windows.
The years went by and Laura Prince found it necessary to find work elsewhere, but her time with the collection was truly a labor of love. A few new directors of the Boone County Historical Society also came and went, but thankfully through the efforts of countless volunteers the work to clean and catalogue the collection continued.

In 2007 the society, then under the direction of Deborah Thompson, obtained a $4,000 grant from MOBIUS (Missouri Bibliographic Information User System) to put 785 of the photographs online. It became known and can still be found online as the Westhoff Collection. The name is derived from the last photographer to have maintained the collection before it’s sale to the Benedict family, but of the 785 photos only about 60 were taken by Francis Westhoff.

The grant funds supported dedicating a new staff member to the project. David Gold of Rocheport, a member of the historical society and a retired commercial photographer, was hired to select, index, research and make the photographs available to be scanned for online display.

The society continued to produce prints through 2008 while seeking the necessary funding to begin a digitalization project. Between 2009 and 2014, the dark room closed, the equipment went unused and the dream of digitizing the collection remained unrealized for the lack of a patron or sponsor. The collection, however, continued to be protected and secured.

In 2015, a new management team and the board of directors chose to make finding funds to create a digital lab a priority. In spring 2016, the society’s Endowment Trust Board chose Hank Waters III, the owner and publisher emeritus of the Columbia Daily Tribune to be one of that year’s Boone County Hall of Fame inductees. Months before the induction event, Karen Miller, chair of the Endowment Trust, approached Waters’ wife, Vicki Russell, publisher of the Tribune, and asked if Russell had any suggestions about what project the Society might pursue to honor her husband on his induction into the Hall of Fame. Russell indicated she was open to any project if it was a serious, important and worthwhile goal. Together, Miller, Russell and Boone County Historical Society executive director Chris Campbell arrived at the idea of pursuing a state-of-the-art digital lab for the photography collection and naming it the Hank Waters III Digital Photo Lab. It was a perfect fit. Hank had played an important role in preserving the collection in the early 1990s and he would appreciate the importance of making the photographs available to future generations.

Russell asked that the project be kept a secret from her husband until the evening of his Hall of Fame induction. On October 6, 2016, Karen Miller announced the new Hank Waters III Digital Photo Lab to the more than 200 people gathered at the Hall of Fame induction ceremony. Those in attendance were receptive and happy to make contributions that evening to initiate the purchase of the necessary equipment. Waters was successfully surprised and moved by the gesture, which was front page news the next day in the Columbia Daily Tribune.
In January 2017 additional funding for the new lab was provided by the Boone County Commissioners Office, and with the advice and consultation of the photography curators at the Missouri State Archives, a Metis Gamma scanner was purchased for $24,000 that April. From May through September, four core volunteers trained on its use and developed overall best practices, and in October the digitizing work began in earnest.

Those first volunteers - Karen Miller, an Endowment Trustee; Mary Waters, Hank Waters’ daughter and retired vice president of the Columbia Daily Tribune; Sarah Buchanan, University of Missouri Library Science associate professor; and Katie Wibbenmeyer, a MU graduate assistant, championed the project in numerous lasting ways. They not only trained others on how to operate the complicated hardware and software, but they also developed policies and procedures that are still in use today.

By October 2017 the digitizing of original Boone County record books dating to 1823 and a relatively small collection of Henry Holborn photos had begun. Since then, with a crew of about five regular volunteers, over 2,000 photographs and nearly 5,000 pages of Boone County records have been digitized.

In May 2018 the society received a phone call. The family of Dale Andrews, the man who found the Douglass photos under the floorboards of the old Henry Kirklin home at 107 Switzler Street, telephoned to say that Dale had recently passed away. They wished to donate all his cherished glass plate negatives to the Boone County Historical Society. Of the estimated 4,000 plates thought to be in the old, rotting produce crates found in 1991 under Henry Kirklin’s former home, only 2,000 or so were salvageable for digitizing by 2018.

The critical work of the lab continues and to more accurately represent the scope of materials being preserved in this space, including documents and manuscripts, the lab is now named the Hank Waters III Digital Imaging Lab. Located in Vault #2 underneath the Montminy Art Gallery, the lab will continue to digitally scan the hundreds of thousands of images that remain to be done, for years to come. Faces Found is likely to be the first exhibition of many to showcase these exceptional photographs, which the community is incredibly fortunate to still have today.

The Boone County Historical Society wishes to thank all the heroes who at one time or another, rescued and preserved this massive collection. It is a precious piece of our community’s history.