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The Stimson Studio Photograph Collection, Iredell County Public Library

—Thanks to Joel Reese, Local History Librarian, Iredell County Public Library

This is a digitization success story—the generation and rapid growth of a local history photograph collection at the Iredell County Public Library, in Statesville, North Carolina. In 2002 the Iredell County Public Library received an NC ECHO Digitization Starter grant of \$6,000 for the purchase of equipment.¹ At that time, according to Local History Librarian Joel Reese, the library's photograph collection consisted of eighteen photos in a shoe box. Since then, Iredell County Public Library has acquired the image collections of well-known Iredell County photographers William Jasper Stimson and his son Benjamin. The Library's Friends group has provided significant support in the digitization of the Stimson Collection, enabling its preservation, digitization, and sharing online. A decade after their initial grant, the Iredell County Public Library was able to mount a large online collection to Flickr from their Stimson Studio Photograph Collection, garnering more than 600,000 site visits in the first nine months online. It is that Stimson Studio Photograph Collection that is at the heart of this success story.

According to the Iredell County Public Library's website, William Jasper Stimson moved to Statesville

from Lenoir to open the Stimson Photography Studio in 1890.² William Stimson (Nov. 27, 1860–Oct. 26, 1929) had studied photography at the Van Ness Studio in Charlotte before opening his own studio in a gallery space that had been occupied by another early Statesville photographer, Rockwell L. Steele. Stimson moved his studio to the Lewis Building on East Broad Street (near his home), and when his son



Detail from Ben Stimson Pictorials 19, available online at <http://www.flickr.com/photos/icplphotos/8739861150/in/set-72157638796968105>

Ben began working with his father in 1923, the studio was moved to its final home at 113 ½ West Broad Street (around the corner from the current Iredell Museums, Inc.).³ Ben

Stimson learned photography from his father and studied further at the Eastman School of Photography in Rochester, New York. After returning from service in France during World War I, Ben began working with his father, taking on the studio himself after his father's death in 1929. The Stimson Photography Studio served Iredell County until Ben's death in 1969.⁴

Now, fast forward to 2002, the same year that the Iredell County Public Library received an EZ-LSTA NC ECHO Digitization Starter Grant for \$5,850. A man named Jimmy Alley came in the Local History Room to show Local History Librarian Joel Reese a CD with black and white photographs that had been taken by the local Stimson Photography Studio.⁵ Mr. Alley, a local historian who had written a book on the history of Troutman, North Carolina, was interested in trying to identify some of the people in the photographs. He told Mr. Reese that he had thousands of photographs like these at his house. Mr. Reese thought about how the library's collection of eighteen photographs was so puny by comparison, and wished that his library had such a collection.⁶

Mr. Alley's story of how he procured the photographs began some years earlier, when he visited Lester's



Images from Adams, C. M., Iredell County Public Library, <http://www.flickr.com/photos/icpl/photos/sets/72157631097479400>

Bookstore in the bottom part of a building at 118 W. Broad Street, under what had been the Stimson Photography Studio. Bookstore owner Lester Chambers showed him a stack of oversize photographs that someone had set out to be picked up with the trash. Mr. Chambers had brought them into his store to save them and ended up brokering their sale to the Library through Mr. Alley. Together, the two men discovered that

it was Ben Stimson's widow Elizabeth who had begun throwing out the images after a leak damaged some of them. On February 21, 1995, Jimmy Alley purchased the entire collection including negatives, photographs, and other paper documents in the studio for \$1,200.00. After talking with the Local History Librarian about preserving and sharing them, Mr. Alley agreed to sell the photography collection to the Library.

Librarian Joel Reese conducted the purchase in May 2008 and secured the rights to the images.⁷ Over the last few years, library staff have worked at separating, identifying, indexing, and preserving the images digitally. Each photograph and negative is placed in archival grade sleeves and envelopes and housed in metal filing cabinets. Originally, staff made 600-dpi TIFF masters, 300-dpi access copies, and 72-dpi thumbnails of all images, but

the library has since changed its procedures to make only the 600-dpi masters. The Friends of the Iredell County Public Library has made significant contributions to this project, with donations of more than \$10,000 going to equipment and supplies.⁸

To share the photographs with the public, Iredell Public Library created a Flickr account and now have close to 40,000 of the Stimson Photos scanned and available for viewing at <http://www.flickr.com/photos/icplphotos/collections/72157631320621564/>.⁹ They were able to stop making the lower-resolution copies since Flickr will ingest the 600-dpi TIFF, convert it to JPEG, and display at appropriate sizes. Iredell County Public Library's Flickr collections went live in March of 2013, and quickly gained an audience. As of December 19, 2013, the Stimson Studio Photograph Collection had garnered 606,522 views. The Library will continue to expand its online photograph collections, too: by early February 2014, they plan to upload some 31,000 photographs from another prominent Iredell County photographer, Max Tharpe.

The Stimson Collection at ICPL is complemented by the William

Jasper Stimson and Benjamin Alston Stimson photographic collection at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, including some of Stimson's famous photos of the Bostian Bridge Train Wreck.¹⁰

Opportunities to see loved ones throughout their lives are wonderful indeed. For instance, Mr. C. M. Adams is the subject of forty-two photos, ranging from a smiling young man in a letter sweater, to his days in uniform, and from photos some years later with his wife and young son, to pictures of a distinguished older Mr. Adams in suit. See some examples of Mr. C. M. Adams' photographs accompanying this article. There remain, however, many other images of people who are not identified. Please contact Joel Reese at the Iredell County Public Library (jreese@iredell.lib.nc.us) to help identify any of these people or provide background on the subjects in the photos.

References

¹ "Local History Happenings Fall 2013," Iredell County Public Library. <http://iredell.lib.nc.us/history/happenings/fall2013/localhistoryhappeningsfall2013.html> (accessed December 20, 2013).

² "The Stimson Collection," Iredell County Public Library. <http://www.iredell.lib.nc.us/history/archives/stimson/stimson.htm> (accessed December 20, 2013).

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Joel Reese, email to author, December 19, 2013.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Joel Reese, email to author, December 19, 2013.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Iredell County Public Library, "Stimson Studio Photograph Collection," Flickr. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/icplphotos/collections/72157631320621564/> (accessed January 6, 2014).

¹⁰ William Jasper Stimson and Benjamin Alston Stimson Photographic Collection, circa 1890s-1960s, Collection Number: P0049, North Carolina Collection Photographic Archives, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. <http://www2.lib.unc.edu/ncc/pcoll/inv/P0049/P0049.html>.

Looking for help with collection development?

If you want to expand your library's collection of novels set in North Carolina, you should visit the Read North Carolina Novels blog hosted by the North Carolina Collection at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (<http://blogs.lib.unc.edu/ncnovels/>).

If your interest in North Caroliniana is more general, the North Carolina Collection at UNC-Chapel Hill regularly posts lists of new additions to their collection at this address: <http://blogs.lib.unc.edu/ncm/index.php/whats-new-in-the-north-carolina-collection/>.