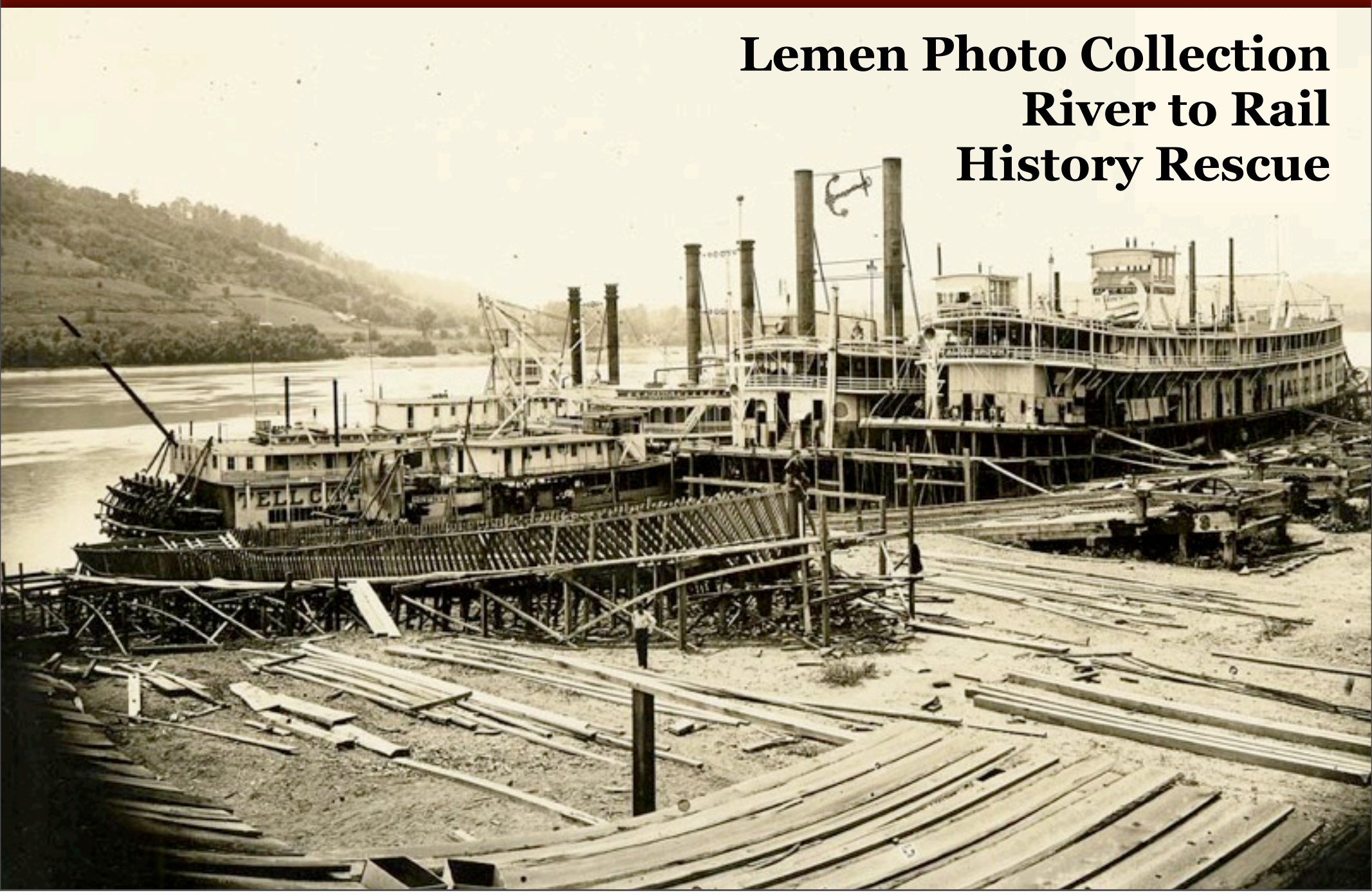
Digital history @ MJCPL

Lessons learned

photos from ***rivertorail.mjcpl.org***
and ***lemen.mjcpl.org***

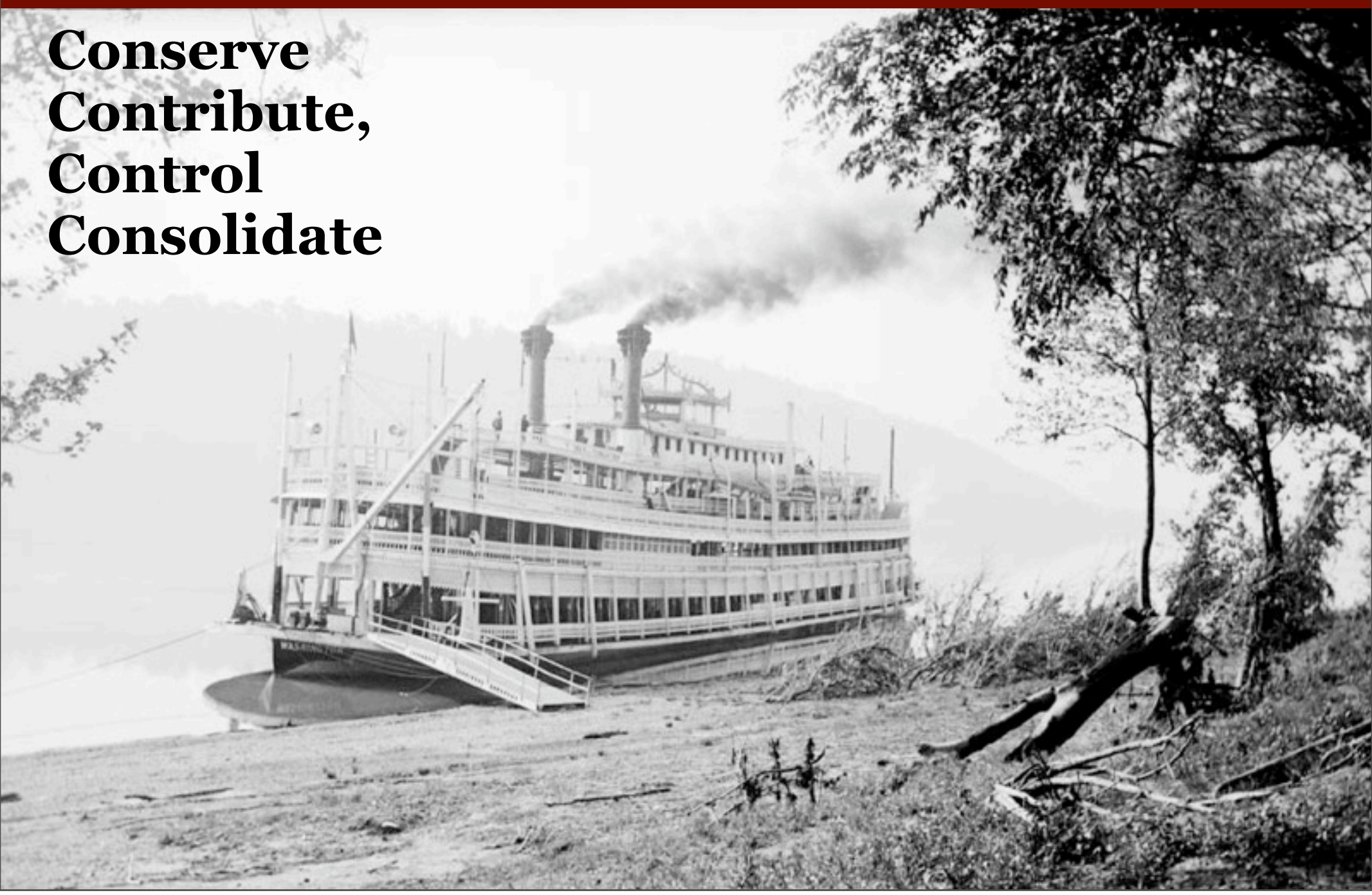
1. Introduce ourselves

What we've built



2. Briefly describe our projects

Why bother?



3A. Conserve: Preserve your valuable, fragile, unstable and rare items.

Speaks for itself. Everyone wants to save the invaluable items in their collection.

3B. Contribute: Make your collection accessible to a wider range of patrons.

Digitizing is a way to reach the vast, surfing public and distribute your collections to a wider range of patrons.

3C. Control: It's a good way to catalog and archive.

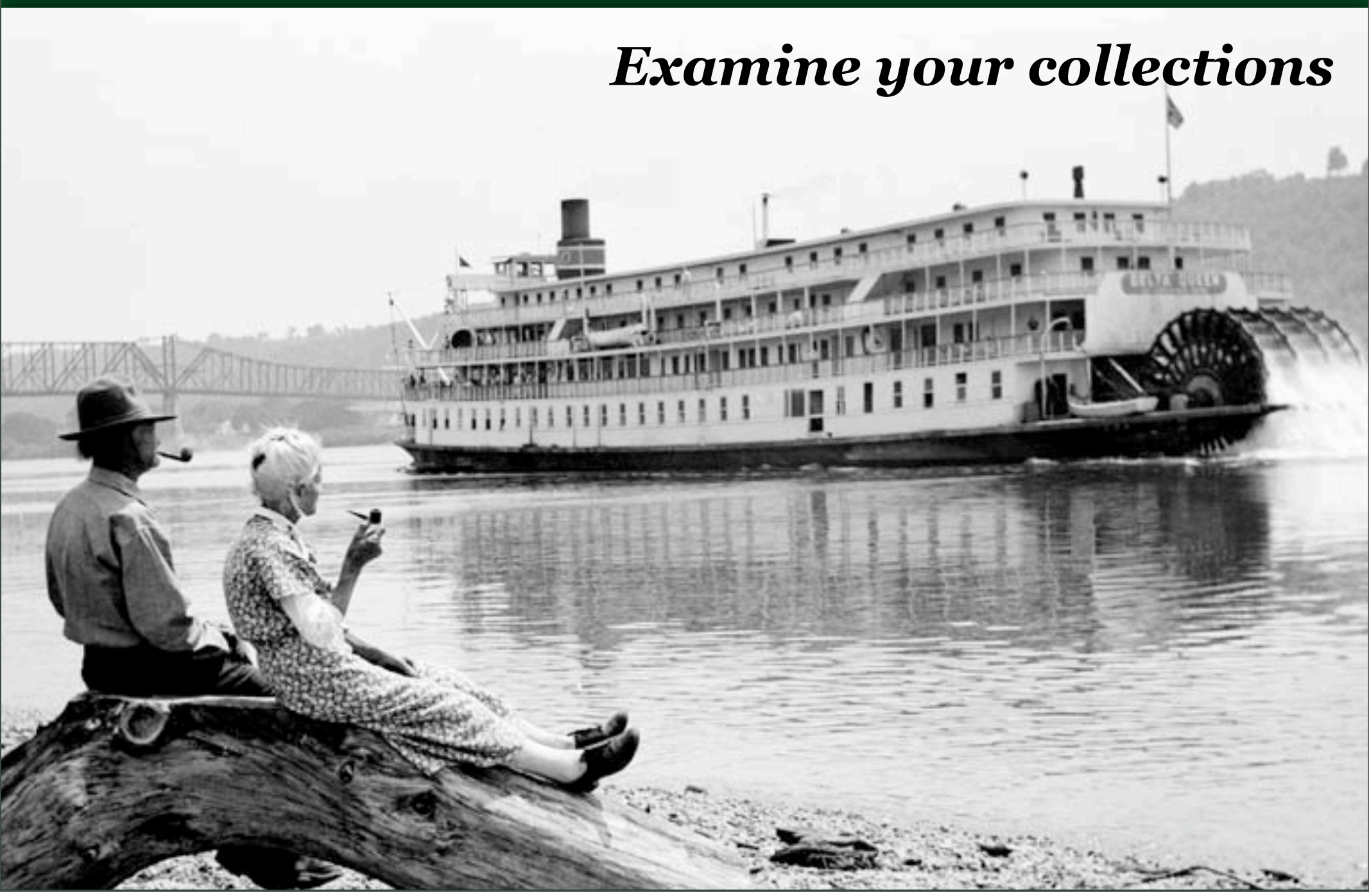
When we decided to digitize our Lemen Collection of Photographs the collection was a disorganized mess. No cataloging, no alphabetizing just envelopes with some dates, addresses and a few cryptic notes. We still have some of the collection to do but we have what is done in good shape now. They are in archival sleeves and because the they are titled and numbered we can find them. We have been able to separate most of into categories and cull out the ones that are not pertinent

3D. Consolidate: Put collections in one place.

When you digitize a collection you may find you can bring more than one collection under the same umbrella. For instance, if you plan a project on transportation can you combine that with occupations, leisure time, the progress of business and industry, etc. Use your imagination. Have fun with it.

Step One

Examine your collections



What do you have?

Are your collections historically significant? unique? useful?

5. WHATCHAGOT? Good Candidates For Digitization.

A. Old Documents that may or may not be in danger.

You have seen them. They are yellowing, crumbling, fading and self-destructing before your very eyes. You cringe when a patron asks to see them. They are exposed to the copy machine and passed from hand to hand. They can't take the wear and tear much longer. On the other hand, why preserve something that you can't give the public access to use? This answers the problem. You digitize it and put the original in archival material and preserve it.

B. Rare books, journals and diaries that are not normally accessible.

You may have some of these. They are too fragile to let the public handle so you horde them away in some locked cabinet. They are, in effect, the two-headed, White Elephant in your collection. Valuable and Useless.

C. Photographs that you don't want handled.

You've tried the white cotton gloves and personal supervision but accidents happen and Murphy's law kicks in sooner or later. You have a digital copy out there that is perfectly fine for genealogical or historical identification so your photos take much less wear and tear.

D. Unique collections that no one else has.

You almost have an obligation to share these types of collections, plus it gives you a good bargaining tool for grants and other money that is out there.

E. Things without any indexing.

If it isn't indexed or in some way searchable it's next to Useless, only one head but still a White Elephant.

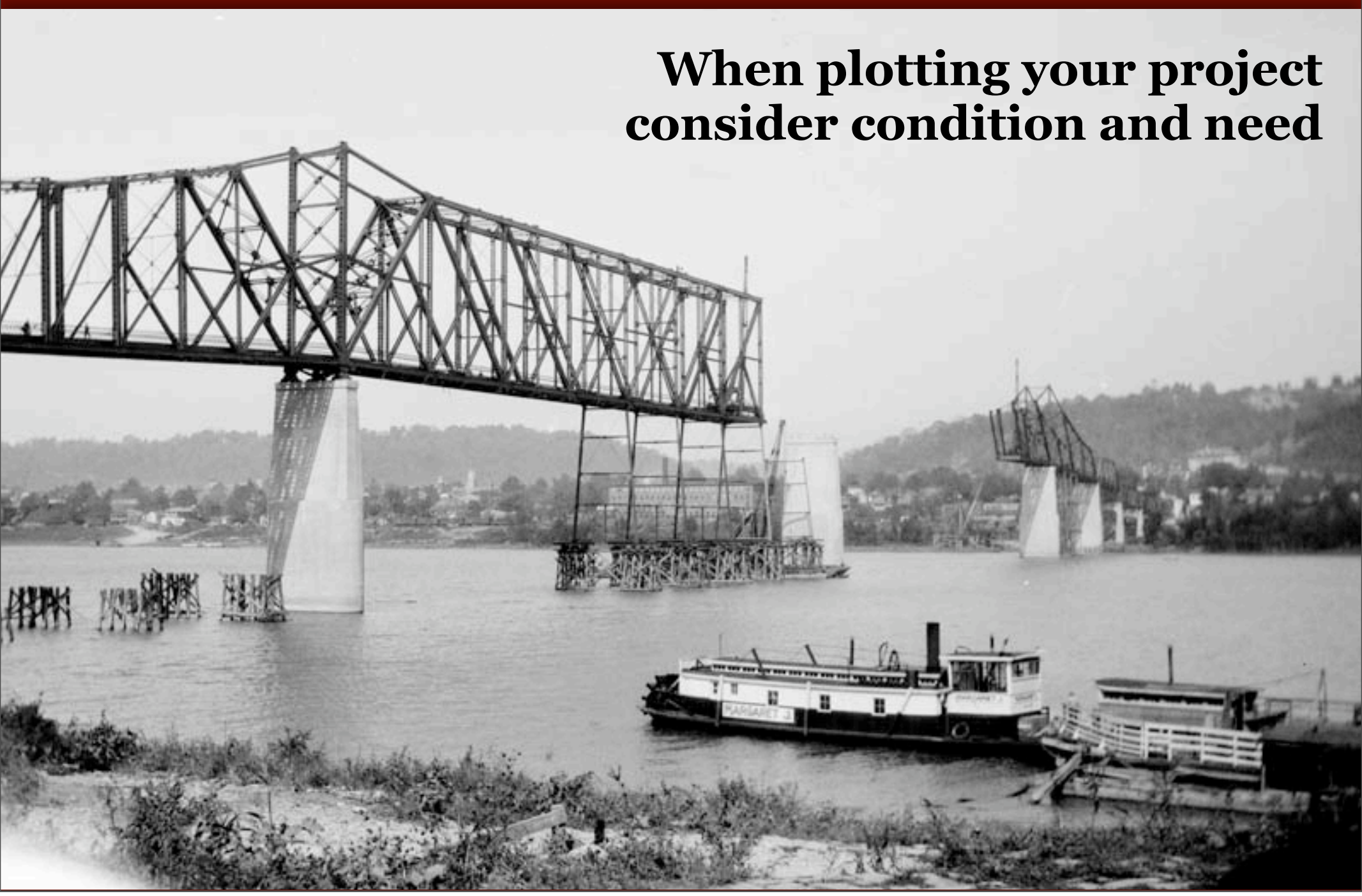
5B. Is it unique?

A. Ideally you will serve not only local, but state and national interests.

B. Thus do you have anything that is historically significant or unique?

C. Would it help fulfill educational needs such as Indiana history and culture for 4th graders?

Prioritize

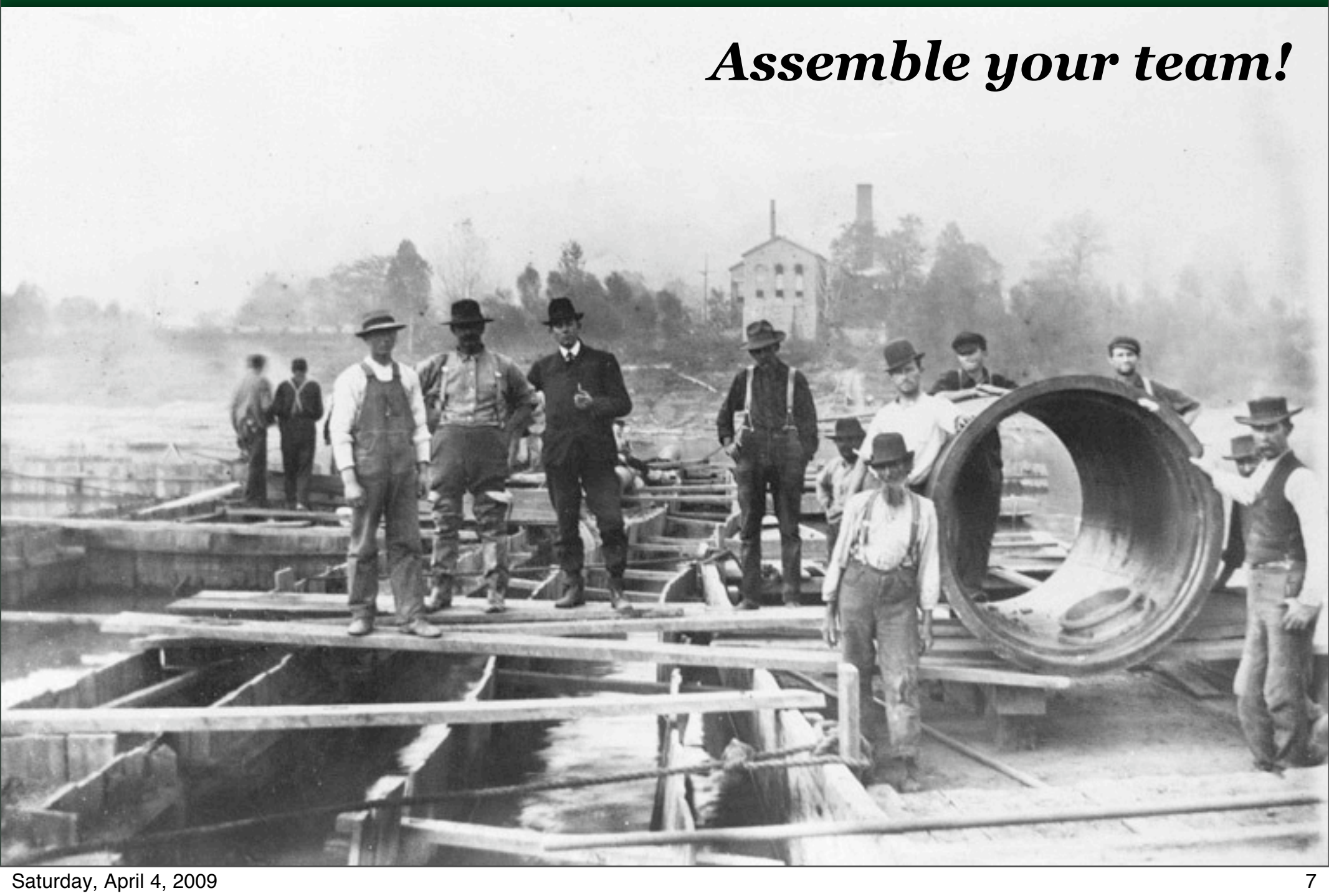


6. PRIORITIZE. First Things First.

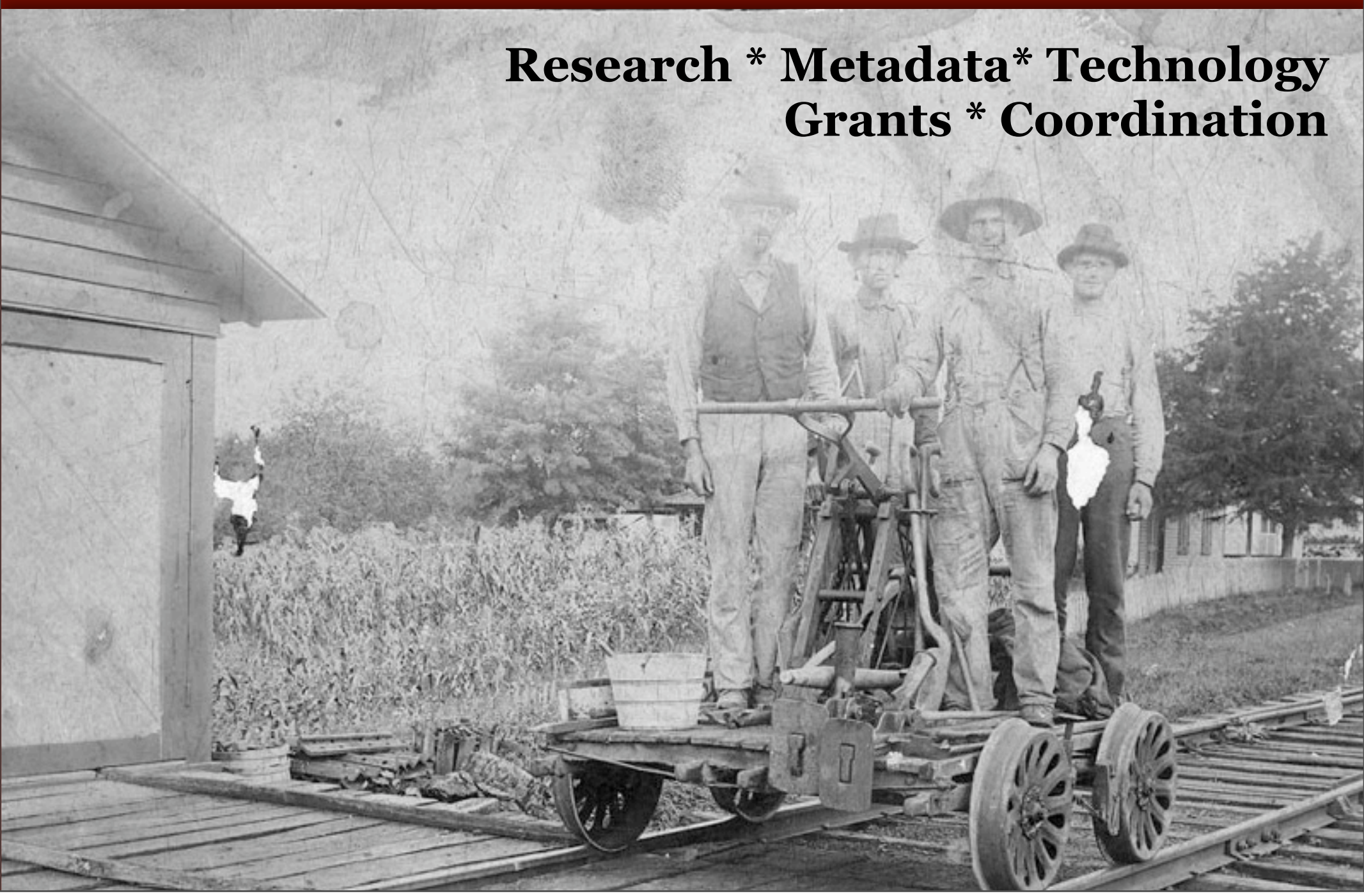
A. Things you might have on a short term basis.
Let's say you have a collection on loan to you for a limited time. This is a good place to start.
B. Collections that are fragile.
No brainer.
C. Collections that are deteriorating.
Another no brainer.
D. What's the most useful?
As the vaudevillian said, "Know your audience. What sells in the Bronx bombs in Poughkeepsie."
What are your patrons interested in, history, photographs, genealogy? Give 'em what they want.

Step Two

Assemble your team!



Who will do the work?



4. WHO WILL DO IT? Be Creative.

A. Your library staff. (You gotta be kidding.)

Library staff is stretched to the limits. It's not likely you can squeeze a project as time consuming as this out of them. The hours just aren't there.

B. Those wonderful volunteers.

What would we do with out volunteers? Our library depends heavily on them and we have a great crew of volunteers here but know that even the most dedicated volunteer will need instruction, encouragement and a big slice of your time. Once you get them trained, though, you'll have a valuable resource.

C. Paid, temporary staff funded by grants, endowments, etc.

This is the best of all worlds but it will still take some of your staff time and labor. You won't get off Scott free. You have to be willing to dedicate some staff time to any project.

D. Clubs, societies and those with a vested interest.

- Historical Societies
- Genealogy Societies
- Local Colleges
- Churches, cemetery boards, senior citizen groups

These are all good sources of talent. Our local genealogy group transcribed marriage records, made funeral record indexes, and surveyed cemeteries for the history/genealogy web site that the library plans to premier soon for the Madison bicentennial year. The local historical society has contributed a transcribed city directory and an enormous county church history for the site. Cultivate these groups.

5B. That team spirit...

A. Ideally have everyone doing tasks they enjoy and let them run.

B. If people are vested and doing interesting work, you'll get better results. Play off passion whenever possible.

Step Three

Start small, then expand

Learn and establish best practices with finite projects.

7A. Start with a finite project that is realistic to accomplish

A. Read up on best practices from Indiana State Library

B. A small project allows time for learning, mistakes and learning from mistakes.

7. WORK SPACE. You Can't Compromise On This.

A. Designate a computer, scanner and a file cabinet.

These are the basics and you need them free at all times for use on the project. If a volunteer drops by that work space has to be free. Even if you kick someone off of the computer so they can work, you run the risk of making them feel uncomfortable and you can lose a good volunteer that way. You may have to work in short shifts, depending on your work force, and the equipment and collection needs to be convenient and on hand at all times.

B. You need a private area.

Some of this work is brain intensive and a little solitude goes a long way. If nothing else, you want the work to be accurate and constant interruptions will foul up a project in no time. The fewer distractions the smoother the project.

C. Get a guard dog if you have to but keep anyone who is not involved away.

This is a PROJECT people. It is separate from everything else that is going on in the library. No. You can't borrow that ruler and the stapler stays in the drawer.

Organization

5. ORGANIZE. Easier Said Than Done.

A. Pull the collection together.

Oh that we had done this on our first project! We kept saying that it would be so nice to get the photos organized before we started but we had a time constraint and we just dove into it and before we knew it, we had used our allotted number of pictures and we still had some that just cried out to be processed but no more money, no more time. Our first project was some five or six years ago and I don't know that many people knew what they were doing, including us. We chalked it
up to "a learning experience" and the project turned out well but I still know there were some great pictures that got lost in the shuffle.

B. Think about what you will need to execute the project.

Manpower and money, most certainly, but beyond that, a physical space in which to do the work, with storage in a safe, secure environment for the collection that you are digitizing.

C. Where will you store it when it's done?

If you already had the collection in archival materials, in a safe environment, you can return it to its original home. If this wasn't the case, now is the time to get it into archival shape and find it a safe home.

D. Decide how detailed you want it.

A picture of a house with no information is a picture you might as well leave alone. A picture that states it is located at 707 West Main Street is more helpful but a picture of a house at 707 West Main Street built by Sam Rea in 1897 and remained in the Abbott family until 1987 when it was bought by Andrew Wilson is much better. We decided early on to research each picture to the best of our ability before we put it on line. It just made sense to furnish information as well as a photograph. It took scads more time and effort but I'm not one little bit sorry we chose to do it. I've looked at sites sponsored by much larger libraries than ours
that didn't research their photos and they are so sorry looking in compareson. If I had a choice of putting up 200 unresearched pictures or 50 researched ones, I'd choose putting up 50.

E. Will it disappear when it's finished?

Will your original still be available to the public or will it go into the vault. It's your choice. I would say if its fragile or rare, retire it if you want to.

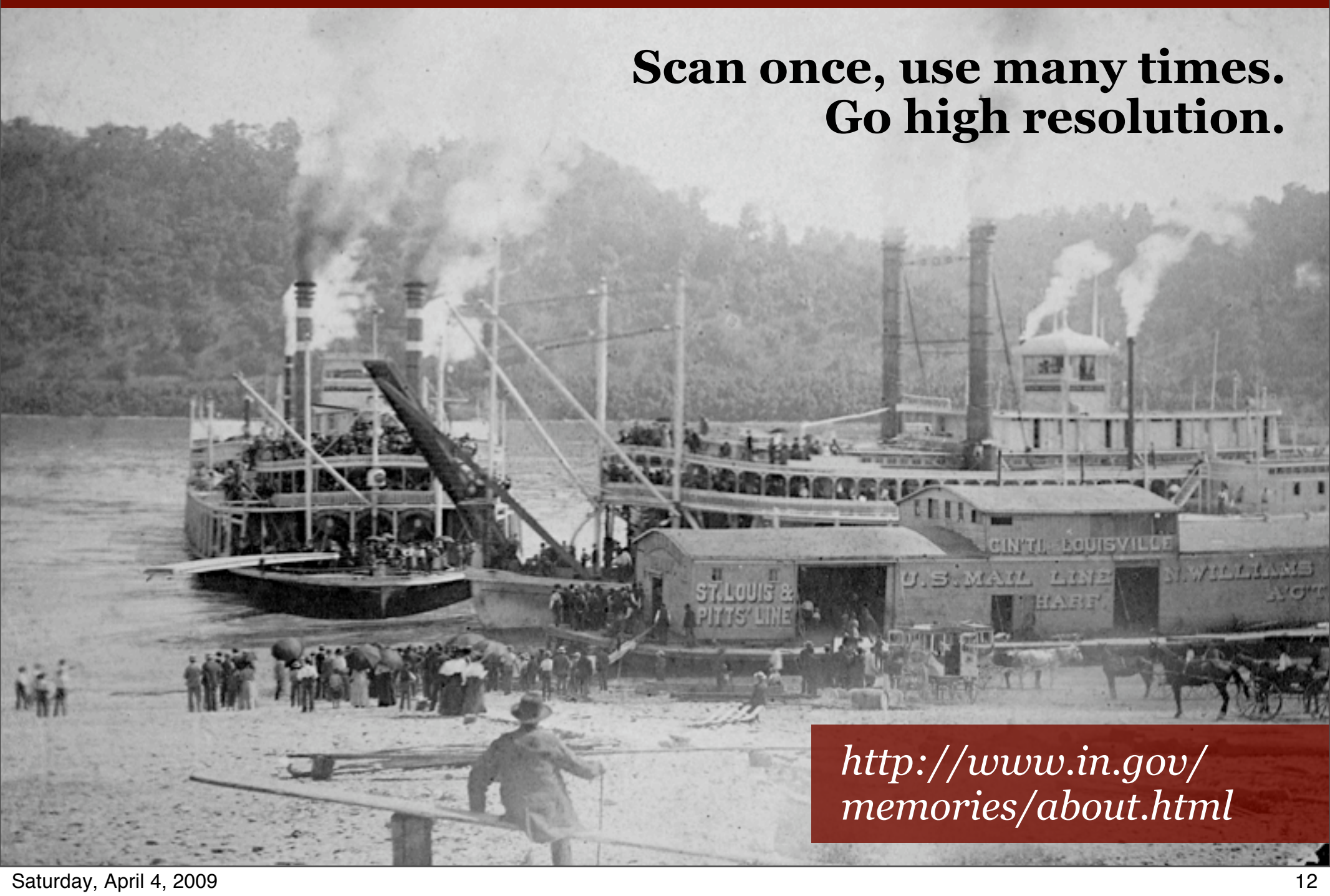
9. GIVE IT A NAME AND A NUMBER. You'll Thank Yourself Later.

A. Give each object, photo or document a title.

Record it on the computer and on the container of the item itself. Match item to item? Get it? We're librarians, let's act like it. Duplicate, Duplicate, Duplicate.

B. Give it a number.

Best Practices



The Indiana State Library has a good set of best practices for collections, scanning and metadata.

When scanning here are a few basic principals

1. Scan your negative, print or item one time. This minimizes the handling required for fragile materials.
    a. Scan the item
    b. Set aside the scan
    c. Create the high-resolution master -- this is the one you can use for print and creating derivatives.
    d. From the master create online access copies.

2. When scanning and creating access copies, the aim is to exactly reproduce the item at hand.

Authenticity is key. If we were to scan a Lincoln letter and muck with it, we'd lose our reputation.

If there is light damage on the negative, if the print has tears, if the color is faded -- leave as is.

3. Sizes

Scanning...

negatives at 1200dpi

prints at 600dpi

Save the master at 600dpi at 5000 pixels on the long side

Online access at 150dpi and 1000 pixels on long side and smaller 72dpi thumbnails as needed.

Indiana's best practices have smaller sizes to optimize storage, but storage has become very cheap and with some images you want to see the details. With something like a printed page, the larger size is not as important.

Challenges with digital materials

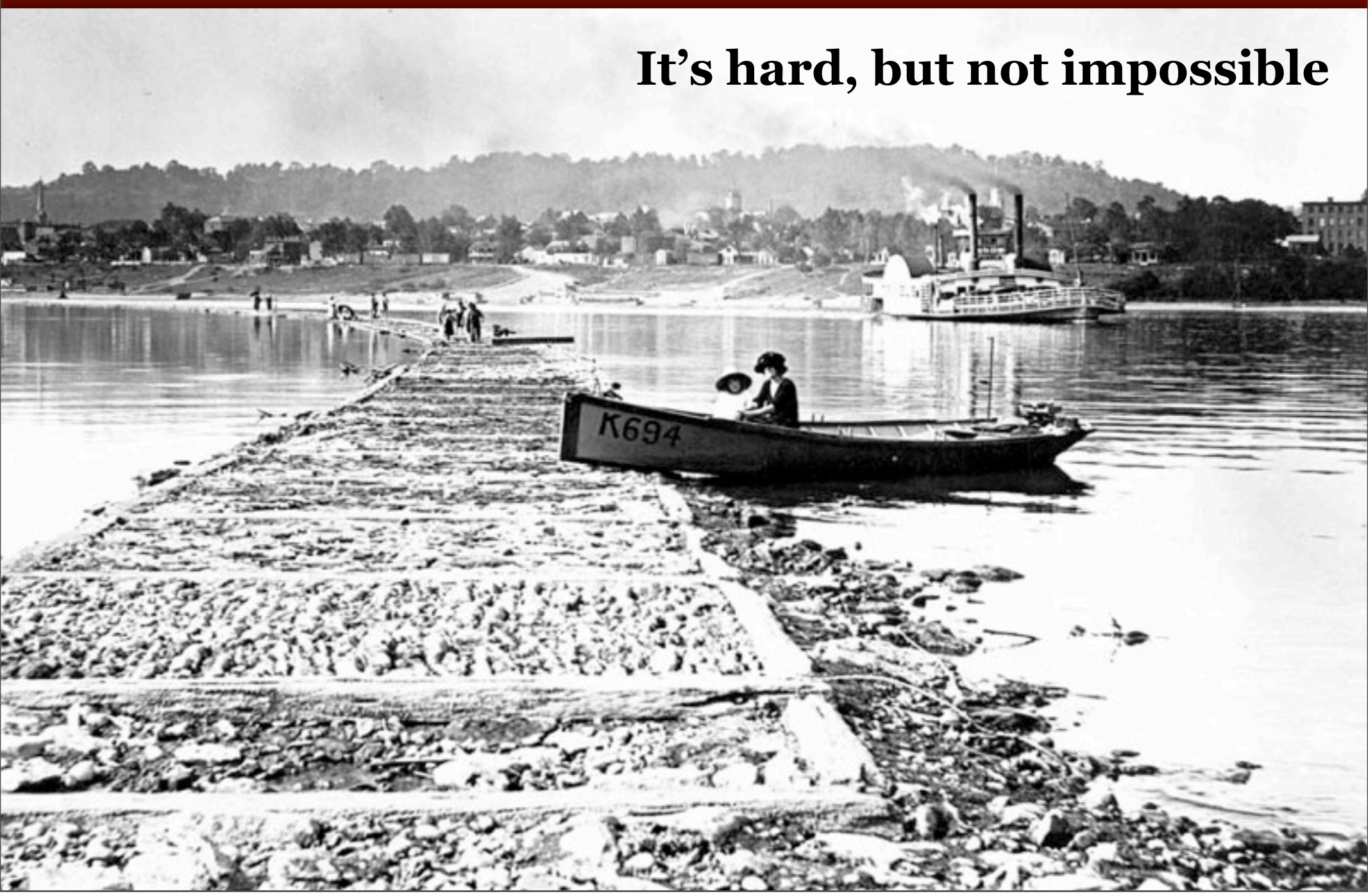
A. Create a system of backing up your data -- multiple copies with some off site is very important

B. Make sure you use good media and use standard file types -- use of standards increases the odds of having your materials translate into the future.

C. Standard types include .tif, .jpg, pdf-A.

Step Four

Finances



6. FINANCING. This Is Hard But Not Impossible.

A. Take it out of your budget. (Get real, right?)

I'm sure you are sweating out every penny you spend right now, just like the rest of us. With budget cuts, an uncertain economy and every nickel being stretched to the limit, there is little, if any, left for a new project so look around.

B. Look for a grant. They are still out there.

There is still money out there in grant form. You may have to dig a little deeper to find them but most grant sources are still in business. We hosted a program sponsored by the in February and we were assured grant money is still available.

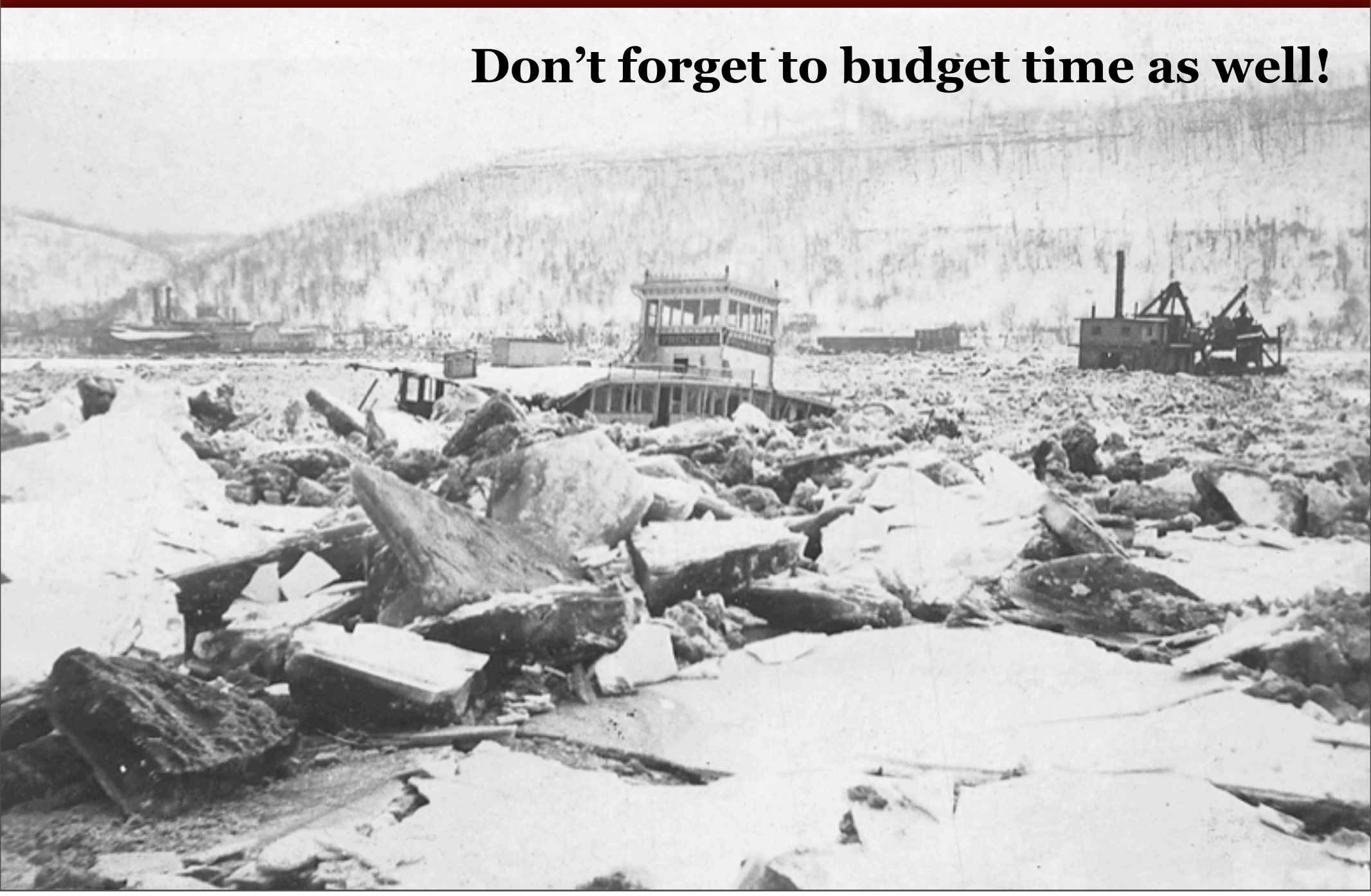
C. Donations and endowments.

Don't be afraid to ask. If you are turned down, you won't be any poorer than you were. Hang a big sign up that blatantly states, "Remember us in will." if you have to.

D. Take advantage of opportunities. Sell it big!

We wanted to set up a web page for genealogy and history using material that we have access to that has not been, up to this point, transcribed by anyone else. Funeral records, obituary indexes, newspaper articles, biographies, church records, etc. We decided that while everyone was in a fever pitch over the bicentennial and open to almost any cock-a-mamie project known to man, it would be a good time to present to our local Community Foundation with a well thought out plan for the digitization, publication and execution of the best darned web page this little town has ever seen. We got the grant and by golly we are going to give this town the best dog gone history and genealogy web page they have ever seen!

Avoid getting stuck



15. Budget Time

A. Select a leader. In the end someone has to have the final say.
The buck has to stop someplace. Decide where.

B. Have regular meetings.
Sounds simple doesn’t it? With the varied schedules kept by most libraries, I dare you set up a meeting that doesn’t conflict with at least half of your committee. But, if you can manage it, you can cut down on potential problems while they are in their infancy. It’s so much better than trying to control a full blown catastrophe.

C. Have a schedule. Set your goals.
Now, you’re never going to keep to the schedule or meet your goals but it’s just one of those things one tries to do when one is on a committee. If you do follow a schedule and you do meet your goals, I can only conclude you are doing something wrong.

D. Keep track of your money and your time.
Have volunteers, staff, whoever keep a timesheet. Designate someone to keep track of the money.

E. Find the problem and fix it.
Hone in on a problem area quickly and nip it in the bud. Mighty oaks from small acorns grow. Solve the small problems to avoid the big ones.

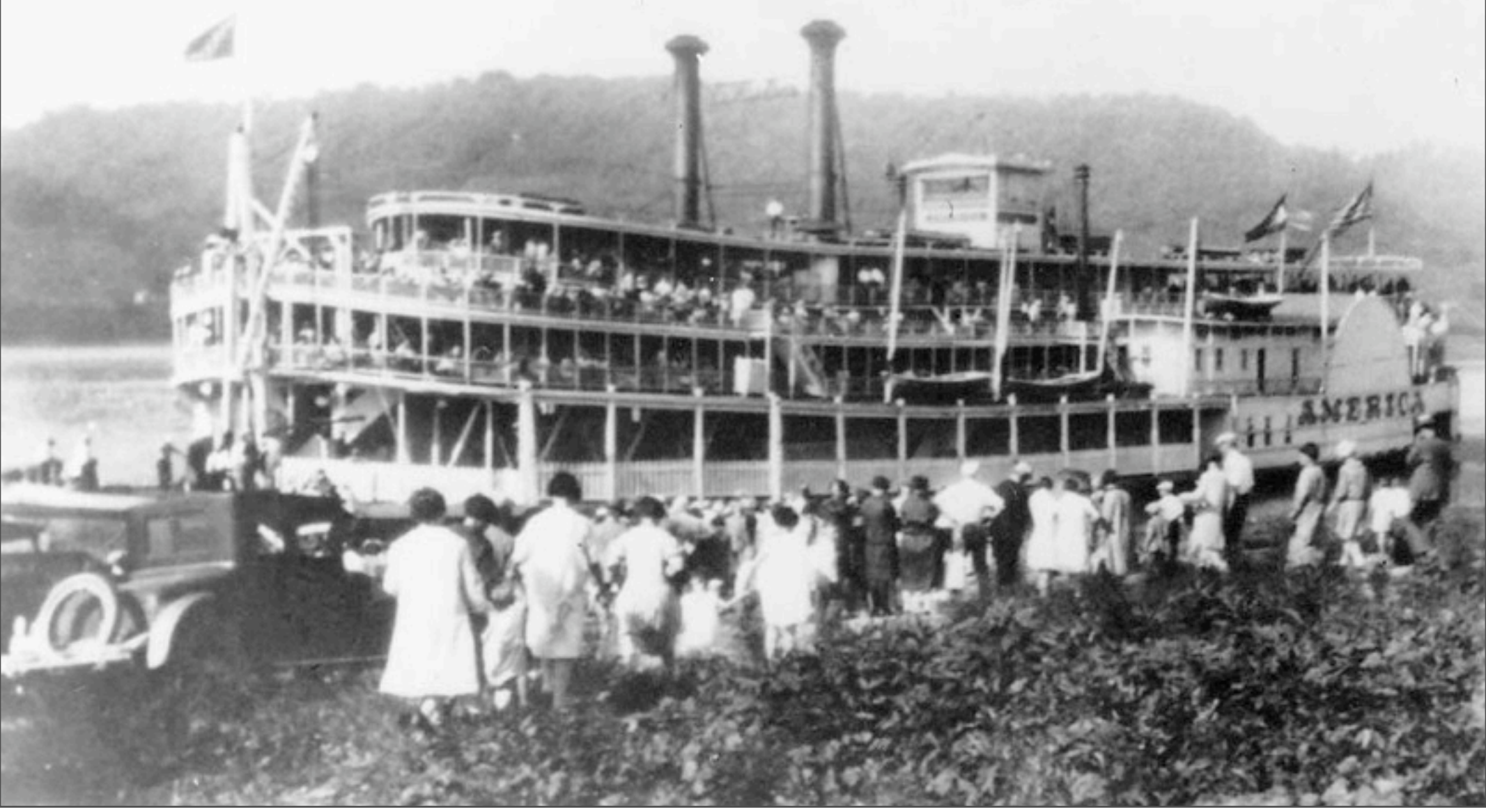
A. Create a timeline with goals over time.

B. Have people report against these goals, but be flexible.

C. Don’t overload your staff, burnout can kill a project.

If you scan it will they come?

You have to promote the collection as well as create it!



11. IF YOU DIGITIZE IT, THEY WILL COME. If You Advertise, That Is.

A. Contact your local newspaper.
If it's a slow news day you might even get your picture in the paper.

B. Have an open house to introduce the project.
Demonstrate how to use the web page. Show people you're proud of the finished product and invite them to participate.

C. Put it in your newsletter.
You gotta fill up the space anyway and your editor is always begging for articles. You were made for each other. It's Kismet.

D. Contact people who would be interested.
- Schools
- Societies
- Senior Citizen Groups

Tailor your target group to the project.

E. A simple e-mail can do the trick.
There are people out there in Computerland interested in anything you can think of so find organizations that specialize in what you are doing and let them know you are on-line. I'll bet that if you digitized pictures of left handed, brass paper clips, there is a group officially fighting for the rights of brass paper clips everywhere.

F. Be Patient. It may take awhile but they will find you.
It may take a little time but sooner or later you too will become popular. We didn't think we were doing so hot until we got notification that we had over 500 thousand hits on our web sites last year. We were stunned.

H. Look at your statistics to give you ideas on what's popular.

Keep notes for the future

12. WRAP IT UP. Make A Summary For The Benefit Of The Next Project Leader.
Chances are you're not going to do this, but let's go through the steps anyway.

A. Review the project.

I know you're sick of it by now. Chances are you want to block it from the memory process but discuss it one last time. You know where you screwed up. Share it with others.

B. Write a summary.

This step is just so darned efficient and official. No one really expects you to do it so do it just to mess with their heads.

C. Put all your records in a safe but accessible place.

Sooner or later you're going to have to come up with the original so make it easy on yourself. This might be a good time to decide how you will handle requests for higher resolution copies from the public. We agonized for two years over how much to charge for such a service or whether to offer it at all. Common sense says that you charge someone less for a picture of the old homestead if they want to hang it in their living room than you would if they want to run off 1500 on placemats for commercial purposes, but how much? You have to decide on some hard and fast rules here.

D. Show off your results to people who supported you. This could be lesson plans, ideally improved test scores and website statistics.

1. Include your suggestions, problems encountered and your successes and……

Congratulations! You're a pro, a veteran. You've run the gauntlet and you're still standing. You, my friend, have digitized!

Finally…

Tell a story!

As you look over your collection, think about the stories they can tell.

Think both macro and micro --

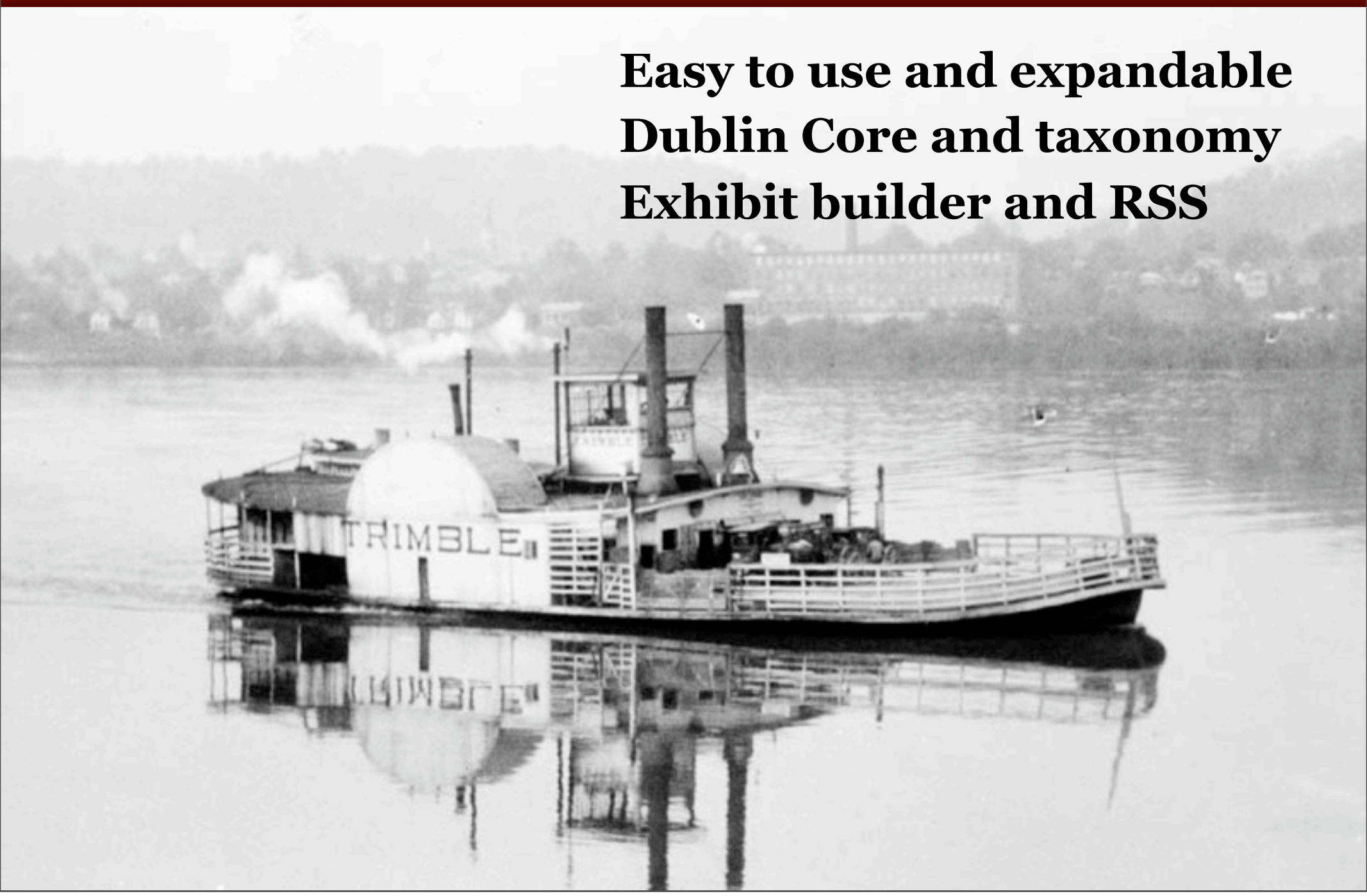
Use the photos to tell the story of your community.
Do research on each image and tell us why it's cool.

Story telling really ramps up the stats -- our river to rail collection has twice the traffic of our more general lemen photo collection

Here are

We're heading to Omeka

Easy to use and expandable
Dublin Core and taxonomy
Exhibit builder and RSS



We have used ContentDM for our projects, but it's a dead end as we are maxed out on the number of images we can place online.
We've looked at numerous packages that were either a pain to install, use or both.
Omeka however instantly made sense to us.
Anyone who has blogged or used a basic content management system such as WordPress, Joomla or Drupal will feel right at home.

Thank You!

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