

Incite

Reliving the Past — at the touch of a button

The NSW Government Printing Office is solving the problem of conserving and giving access to its large collection of historic photos in a new and innovative way. The solution involves up-to-the-minute videodisc technology, a new piece of software called 'Just imagine' and the skills of a few librarians.

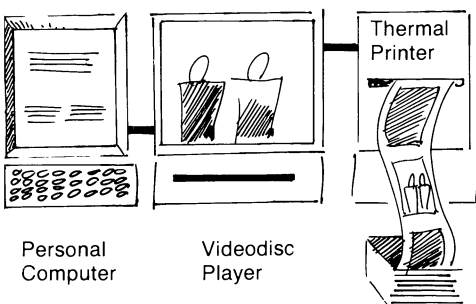
The GPO's collection

The NSW Government Printing Office has over 200,000 negatives (including almost 10,000 glass plate negatives) in its collection. The photographs, taken mostly by state government photographers, date from the late 19th century and cover most of NSW. The collection is particularly strong in photographs of Sydney. Subjects include buildings, street scenes, transport, industry and scenic views. Many negatives are very fragile and in danger of deteriorating.

In the past access to the collection has been cumbersome and time-consuming process. However with the injection of funds and expertise under the auspices of the Bicentennial Archive Project all this will give way to an automated system where images are held on videodisc and accessed by computer thus saving time, giving easier more thorough access and saving wear-and-tear on this valuable collection. The project is being coordinated by Mr Granville May.



Photos: (clockwise) Icecream's up! Early icecream vendor; part of the project team at work — Granville May (standing at rear) and Alan Walker (seated at front); Sydney Harbour Bridge, July 1938; and the Queen Victoria Markets, York Street, back in the 1890s before the construction of the QV building.



How the system works

The system consists of a personal computer, videodisc player and screen, and a thermal printer. The LP size videodisc holds the images of around 54,000 photos. The 'Just imagine' software is loaded onto the personal computer, the videodisc is inserted into the videodisc player, then the fun begins. The software finds the appropriate image on the videodisc and displays it on the videodisc player's screen. It's essentially like online information retrieval.

For example the command *FIND Sailing Ships AND Sydney Cove AND 1985* produces a statement on the computer screen listing the number of records (ie the number of

images held on the disc which fit this description) which have been found on the videodisc. These images can then be brought up onto the screen of the videodisc player for viewing and a description of the photo comes up on the computer screen. Later these two will be merged so that the description comes up on the videodisc player screen with the image itself.

An instant reproduction of the image can be received by merely pressing the button of the thermal copier. This copy has a code embedded at the top which is the key for accessing a print quality copy from the GPO if required.

Librarians' input

The information which appears on the computer screen describing each photo has been compiled by a team of indexers led by Indexing Consultant, Alan Walker. A major part of putting the information together involved the compilation of two thesauri — a subject and name/place thesaurus. Each now have around 3,000 headings. Place and date details for each photo were gleaned from the GPO's original registers but needed to be standardised and reworked. Assigning subject descriptors has meant that indexers have had to examine each image in the collection.

The laser studio

The GPO has established its own laser studio so it can do all its own preproduction work (the actual laser disc is produced overseas) as well as take on work from other institutions. The heart of the studio consists of a slide animation camera which can produce colour and black-and-white images from originals of different sizes. Clients can get 33mm 'working copy' prints of their collection, archivally processed 35mm film for conservation and videodiscs. According to Granville May libraries can offset the cost of putting their collections onto disc by selling copy prints, selling discs, selling the publication rights for prints and merchandising. Libraries can share space on discs and there may even be the time when the laser studio goes mobile, visiting institutions and converting collections on the spot.

Deadline 88

The general public will have a chance to get to grips with the new technology in a display of the GPO's holdings, during January in the spanking new Darling Harbour Exhibition Centre. Thirteen screens will be in action displaying images of early Sydney. They will be operated by keypads which will take on-lookers through a structured menu of options.

LAA members in NSW will be able to hear more about the project on 26 August when Granville May will be speaking at Bankstown City Library. To book for the meeting contact Diana Oliver on (02) 521 0355. Or if you can't wait till then contact Granville May at the NSW Government Printing Office on (02) 692 1647.