



The Ferrell Collection: Cataloging and Photography Video Podcast Transcript Minnesota Historical Society

Matt Anderson: In 2007, the Minnesota Historical Society acquired the Richard Ferrell Flour Milling Industry History Collection. Assembled over 40 years, the collection consists of more than 3,200 manuscript items, 260 books, 1,200 photographs, and 3,000 three-dimensional objects. While it took two-and-a-half days to pack the collection for the trip north from Kansas City, the real work didn't start until the material arrived here in St. Paul.

Before it could be made accessible to the public, every item in the Ferrell Collection had to be unpacked, tagged with a unique accession number, cataloged in our database, and photographed. Jane Wong handled the first part of the work.

Jane Wong: When I was cataloging, I would first unwrap all the items in a box, check to make sure they were all there, arrange them by type so if there were primarily flour sacks in the box I'd make sure that I separated any items that weren't flour sacks from the flour sacks, and then I would catalog the flour sacks by entering information on any dates I found on them, location – location of the product, the manufacturer of the product as well as the manufacturer of the bag.

The collection was very interesting. Working on the flour sacks, was almost like walking through time, seeing the mills built and being consolidated. A flour brand may start out in a very small local mill and then later be consolidated into a Minneapolis mill. And most of the mills that I worked on eventually became associated with a Minneapolis mill.

Matt Anderson: John Fulton then photographed every item inside.

John Fulton: So my typical workflow would be get the box in the studio, unpack the box and keep a list of what I was about to photograph, set up the lights, set up the camera, take the photograph, check the photograph to make sure it looked okay, and then move on to the next item.

So photographing the flour sacks was one of my biggest challenges. I had to get the camera up as high as I possibly could on the light stand, and then I would lay out the

flour sack, and then I'd have to stand up on a ladder and – even as tall as I am – it was hard to see through the viewfinder what I was seeing – if the flour sack was set up.

There were a number of things that were challenging to photograph. There was a doll whose bathing suit had shifted so that it wouldn't cover its breasts and it was just an odd thing to take a photograph of. You wonder how people were going to look at it later, so we had to re-shoot that one.

You know, I found this collection really interesting visually. There's so much advertising, there are so many objects used to promote the different brands that were so visually engaging. And there were so many different ideas about what was going to be interesting through the different time periods that made the collection very interesting to work with.

Matt Anderson: The Ferrell Flour Milling Collection documents one of Minnesota's most important industries, from the late 1800s right into the 1990s. And thanks to the dedicated efforts of Jane Wong and John Fulton, the Ferrell Collection will survive as a resource accessible to scholars the world over. I'm Matt Anderson for the Minnesota Historical Society.