

Worth a thousand words: Photo negatives preserving history  
Cassandra Colson | Jackson County Chronicle

Les and Katy Nortman had one wedding photo taken the day they were married on Oct. 21, 1967.

The couple, like many in the Black River Falls area, solicited the services of admired photographer Jim Speltz who operated a studio on Main Street.

The newly married Nortmans ventured to the business after opening presents at the church, paid the sitting fee and had the photo snapped.

But that was the last they saw the photo until earlier this year.

The young couple, who had graduated from high school a few months earlier, still was working to save money and didn't have the funds to pay for a print.

But, just recently, Katy had heard the negatives from the Speltz and Anderson collection were being housed at the Jackson County History Room at Black River Falls Public Library.

"They would be there, so I thought, well, I wonder if we could get any reprints of them because we didn't have a lot of money – we just couldn't afford them at the time," Katy said.

Mary Woods, historian with the history room, couldn't wait to help.

She took down the date and looked through the thousands of envelopes that house the negatives and found the Nortmans' that read "Mr. & Mrs. Les Nortman" and "No order placed-saved/negative."

Woods had some prints made, the Nortmans paid the small fee, which serves as small donation to the history room, and the couple finally had their photo.

"I thought it was a perfect example of why I wanted these negatives here," Woods said.

"Because I knew that there were people out there that would appreciate them being here."

The negatives traveled many miles and were almost discarded before being housed at the history room in late 2013. Volunteers have indexed more than 8,200 negative envelopes – about half of the collection – and have made the search for photos ranging from graduations and weddings to school and church activities in the area easier for those who want copies.

"I think they add a lot (to the history room), and I think we're very unique in that we have the negatives," Woods said. "To be able to retrieve them – it was like people were at the right place at the right time."

Jim and Betty Speltz came to Black River Falls in early 1948 when they purchased the Main Street studio, and Jim began his wide-ranging photography work that included in-studio time and events in the community, including activities and sports of the Black River Falls School District.

Jim, named the state's top photographer in 1963, died unexpectedly in May 1969, and Betty managed the studio until she formed a partnership with Jack Anderson, a well-known photographer from Minnesota, in 1971. The two were married that year, eventually moved to North Dakota in 1986 and took the studio's negatives with them and continued the photography business.

Woods had long hoped the negatives wouldn't be thrown away because of their vast historical significance in the area and frequent inquiries about how to get copies of photos taken at the Speltz studio. She had talked with Anderson in 2000 and told him that she would welcome the

more than 40,000 files of negatives if he wanted a safe place for them after he no longer was going to keep them.

Betty died four years later and some of the negatives were discarded until a family member intervened and the collection eventually made its way to Canby, Ore. That family member began a searchable index of the negatives over the next few years, detailing the content of each envelope that has a date, name of the subject and the order placed.

Eventually a connection Woods made at the history with the owner of a contracting company, who also happened to be from Canby, Ore., became the link for eventually getting the negatives to the history room. The family member who had the negatives told Woods she was interested in getting rid of them and asked about a way to get them to Black River Falls.

Woods contacted the contractor and the 630 pounds of boxed negatives arrived Dec. 17, 2013, and have been assisting history room visitors ever since.

The group of history room volunteers – Dia Holseth, Sarah Larkin, Pat McGowan and Grace Nordahl – remains in the midst of indexing the negatives, and its work that’s especially meaningful for Holseth, who is one of Betty’s nieces.

Holseth moved to the Melrose area when she was 10 years old had many of her milestones photographed by Jim Speltz, including her baby and senior photos, and she also remembers him visiting school to take photos of her and her band mates with their instruments.

“(Indexing) has been fun because I’ve seen lots of relatives’ pictures – names that I recognize,” said Holseth, who lives in the town of Farmington. “It’s just the history that would have been lost if they wouldn’t have been brought back to Black River.

“I was really excited when the decision was made (to bring them back).”

Donations allowed the history room to acquire a special scanner needed for processing the negatives to allow prints to be made, and Woods said she’s excited about the resources the history room now can keep providing because of the negatives.

Requests have ranged from finding a photo of a rabbit taken at the Jackson County Fair to an award a student received when they were in sixth grade decades ago.

“It’s just an interesting thing as people know that we have them,” Woods said.

Katy now can give prints of her wedding photos to family members, and she also wants people to know about and utilize the history room project.

“That, I think, was one of the best things the Speltz kids did was to turn that over to (Woods),” Katy said. “I think it’s awesome. I’ve been telling people, by word of mouth, talk to Mary. If you want copies of anything taken before that you don’t have – she’ll be glad to do it for you.”

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