Access and Context of Digital Photography Collections

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As Terras asserts, "recent developments in Web 2.0 technologies ... means that museums, libraries, and archives are now reconsidering their relationship with users and the general public, both in the use of digital collections and how users can contribute to an increasingly rich digital resource environment."[1] While digital archives can still be said to be in their infancy, with a loose set of isolated attempts to conquer the medium, there is a real and large space for a best-practice standard to be set and disseminated by technologically savvy archivists with an eye to contemporary file-sharing habits. In particular, methods for describing, sharing, and promoting digital archival materials are slowly developing towards monopolies of database formats and uses. I believe that use value and relevance of archives can be increased drastically through optimal management of online resources, and will use digital photography collections to illustrate the current use and future potential.

As archivists make decisions on methods of dissemination, they must take into account current trends and popular arenas, giving them a (possibly undue) weight against their suitability and long-term potential. I would like to analyze Terras's claim that "instead of being viewed as mere digital 'cabinets of curiosities,' the best digital resources created by enthusiasts and hosted on Flickr can inform the library, archive, and cultural heritage community about best practices in constructing online resources and communities, and reaching relevant audiences in the process."[2] I believe the website Flickr, currently losing ground with commercial photographers, will retain its dominance in archival and stock-imagery use. Its public-domain photography project, The Commons, encourages international participation by archives and museums, creating a convenient and potentially comprehensive source for visual research and documentation. The Commons can be said to be the current best-practice method of publishing archival photography for universal access. Photography collections under other terms of use can also be shared via Flickr, while disallowing downloads and restricting users to viewing lower-

1   Melissa Terras, "The Digital Wunderkammer," *Library Trends* 59, no. 4 (2011): 687.
2   Ibid.

resolution versions, as a promotional method for driving traffic back to archives' and museums' independent websites. As Schlosser and Stamper have found, current statistical tracking of digital archival collections online is rudimentary at best, and the potential of online formats such as Flickr in general and The Commons in particular has not yet been fully explored.[3]

The microblogging format Tumblr, meanwhile, is being used as a promotional tool. The potential use for individual curation of digital collections and exhibits is already Tumblr's most common use: while individuals often use their personal blogs to create mishmashes of "inspiration" images in a variety of styles, thematic blogs have taken centre stage, creating a grassroots best-practice and an easy way to source images on themes (early flight, candy, the 1990s, and daguerreotypes of attractive men come quickly to mind).[4] Schlosser and Stamper conclude that access to images, whether on private repositories or on public file-sharing networks, can be irrelevant without proper promotion and awareness of the collections: "The primary takeaway is that promotion is key. If we do not promote our collections to the people who are likely to be interested in them, barring a stroke of luck, it is unlikely that they will be found. Anecdotally, promotional efforts are often an afterthought in digital collections work - a pleasant but unnecessary 'extra' .... As a result, users who would benefit from the collections simply do not know they exist."[5]

It is my belief that, while a large-scale cooperative repository such as The Commons is an important step towards making digital collections truly useful, promotional and social use of archival materials, allowing people to recontextualize and curate from digital repositories, will prove a better use of

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3 Melanie Schlosser and Brian Stamper, "Learning To Share: Measuring Use of a Digitized Collection on Flickr and in the IR," *Information Technology Aand Libraries*, September (2012): 85-93.

4 Located at airshiphangar.tumblr.com, fuckyeahcandy.tumblr.com, fuckyeah1990s.tumblr.com, and mydaguerrotypeboyfriend.tumblr.com, respectively.

5 Melanie Schlosser and Brian Stamper, "Learning To Share: Measuring Use of a Digitized Collection on Flickr and in the IR," *Information Technology And Libraries*, September (2012): 89.

archival resources. It is simply not enough to have a publicly-available collection; it needs to be publicized. I would like to discuss the uses of public file-sharing systems Flickr and Tumblr, and the ways in which the basic format of each has been manipulated for use by various entities. There are benefits and drawbacks to each. Mainly, a system will be seen to have achieved success in the realm of archival preservation if it can instill a sense of context in its holdings – be it the context of provenance or of a different type. We will see the varying extents to which, as Emily Monks-Leeson argues, "an adherence to the concept of provenance, particularly in its postmodern manifestations, is nonetheless apparent in online archives: that despite their apparently free approach to content, context remains a unifying representational principle for online collections."[6] It is unfortunate that, in these early stages of online archives, we will not find statistical data of comparative use, but we will find rates of viewing and a variety of user-generated comments.

It should be noted that statistical information, for Flickr and Tumblr accounts as well as private websites, is not generally available to the public. I can only generate assertions of promotional success and failure through publicly-viewable statistics (see **Appendix 1** for a summary and samples of findings). Requests for privately-held usage statistics and budgetary information are considered to be beyond the scope of this paper, but could conceivably be pursued in a larger study.

Images Online

I have analyzed three Canadian users of The Commons: Library and Archives Canada, the Nova Scotia Archives, and the McCord Museum in Montreal. The Commons was started in 2008, with the participation of the Library of Congress, and states its main aims as sharing the world's photography collections and inviting input on item description from Flickr users.[7] Images are freely downloadable at

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6   Emily Monks-Leeson, "Archives on the Internet: Representing Contexts and Provenance from Repository to Website," *The American Archivist* 74, Spring/Summer (2011): 38.

7   Flickr from Yahoo. "The Commons," *Yahoo*, accessed November 7th, 2012. http://www.flickr.com/commons.

their original uploaded resolution. It mainly operates under the principle of "no known copyright restrictions," wherein participating institutions allow for access to the images in their collections, without asserting ultimate authority over the copyright of those images. Use by researchers or artists comes with no implied warranty that the image is copyright-free, and that independent conclusions must be drawn. Each institution provides a link to its own "Rights Statement," which can vary in scope and terms.

The McCord Museum links to the section of its copyright page that defines the term "no known copyright restriction:" namely, that the Museum is "unaware" of any reasons why the images should not be released for use.[8] The McCord's use of Flickr is both archival and promotional – sets are created to detail specific exhibits from the museum's past and present. For example, the 2011 exhibit "Pieces of Pictures" takes images from the Notman Photographic Collection and enlarges certain details that would otherwise be easy to miss – on Flickr, a set was created featuring the original images, already uploaded to the Notman Collection set, and adding the enlargements, arranged so that browsers can see the pairs in sequence. This set not only promotes its corresponding physical exhibit, but the Notman collection as a whole, and encourages dialogue on and examination of the collection's other holdings. The McCord currently uses a small and unedited set of tags to describe aspects of materials: time period (both by individual years, decade, and century, e.g. "1887" and "1920s" and "20thcentury"), location (using both "bc" and "britishcolumbia," and more ephemeral designations such as "kitchen" and "mountains"), and subject ("hat" and "hats," "horse" and "horses"). Most prominently, the McCord labels each of its uploaded images with "canada," "mccordmuseum" and "museummccord." Many of these tags are user-generated, and should be more thoroughly monitored by museum staff to weed out

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8 McCord Museum, "Content Production and Copyright Notice," McCord Museum, accessed November 15th, 2012. http://www.mccord-museum.qc.ca/en/copyright.html.

mistakes and redundancies.

Library and Archives Canada maintains a comparatively frequent schedule of updates, publishing photography almost every month this year, and at least every third month almost since its Flickr inception in 2008. It collection currently totals 2,106 items, tagged similarly to the McCord Museum: "libraryandarchivescanada," "bibliothequeetarchivescanada," and "canada" appear on each image, but tagging is otherwise sporadic, including time (mostly years during the World Wars, or designations such as "guerrede1812"), location ("ireland" and "irlande"), and subject ("soldats" and "soldiers," with "mustache" and "halloween" among the more ephemeral designations). The "mustache" tag in fact corresponds to a set entitled "Movember," a collection of inspirational portraits featuring a variety of facial-hair styles. LAC-BAC does not maintain sets of their formal exhibits, preferring instead to use sets to showcase images with common themes. Their participation in the cultural theme that is Movember can be taken to signify their interest in claiming pop-culture relevance. Their collections (sets of sets) include themes such as "Ethno-cultural Groups" and "National Identity" (wherein the aforementioned "Movember" set can be found).

LAC has composed its own Rights Statement specifically regarding its use of social media and the implications thereof. It contains a detailed Commenting Policy wherein it designates its intolerance for comments that are "rude in tone, abusive, or offensive."[9] It does not detail the LAC's use of descriptive information that may be submitted in the form of comments, but does state that comments submitted become public domain. It provides links to the copyright act and stresses that use of LAC's provided images is not necessarily free of copyright restrictions: "It is not the role of LAC to interpret the *Copyright Act* ... for users but rather it is up to the users to be aware of copyright issues."[10]

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9 Library and Archives Canada. "Legislative Restrictions: Copyright - Conditions for Access to and Use of Documents - The Public - Library and Archives Canada," *Library and Archives Canada*, created March 29, 2003. http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/the-public/005-6050-e.html
10 Ibid.

The Nova Scotia Archives takes its use of Flickr to a specific end: it solicits "crowd-sourced" identifying information for a small collection of photographs with little to no accompanying detail. About half the photos are organized by photographer, when known; subjects and time periods are mostly unidentified. Despite promoting itself as specifically interested in user input, the Flickr account sees little more attention than the other accounts surveyed here. It has fewer contacts, has joined fewer groups, and sees barely any comment-based feedback on the subjects or sources of its uploads.

On Flickr, it is difficult to see the archival concept of provenance. It is impossible to tell if the accessible images are complete representations of their fonds or series, or simply curated promotional pieces. Many images are without descriptive tags, and institutions do not develop internal vocabularies for metadata. The Commons itself does not publicly recommend tagging practices to its institutions, or offer complementary finding aids for researchers; other than a survey of findings after five months' use by the Library of Congress, there are no best-practice guidelines available.[11] The LOC also announces its development of API tools for use with The Commons, but has not released these tools for institutions' use. The use of The Commons as a finding aid for researchers is reduced drastically without full use of Flickr's metadata capabilities. It does seem that image views increase steadily over time, and that Flickr accounts are being browsed regularly, benefiting from its location in a collaborative public setting. One study has shown that most activities are of the passive type: marking a photo as a "favourite" (often used as a private gallery or bookmarking system) or comments "of the 'great photo' variety."[12] As Schlosser and Stamper point out, more usage statistics are required to reliably determine whether multiple online locations for collections results in higher visibility and use,

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11 Margaret Springer et al. "For the Common Good: The Library of Congress Flickr Pilot Project" Created October 30th, 2008; accessed November 7th, 2012. http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/flickr_report_final.pdf.
12 Jason Vaughan, "Insights Into The Commons on Flickr." *Libraries and the Academy* 10, No. 2, April (2010): 195.

whether hosting archival documents in a collaborative space creates easier cross-collection browsing and aids researchers, or if digital collections on the whole are as beneficial as the effort required to complete them.[13] Some success stories exist. An oft-used example is that of a Confederate soldier whose portrait was identified after the Library of Congress posted his image to The Commons.[14] But even the Library of Congress admits that it ignores the majority of the user feedback it receives, focusing instead on "power commenters" who most likely work in historically-inclined professions and have the inclination to contribute work as citizen-scholars. [15]

Often thematic blogs on Tumblr, as types of curated digital exhibits, hold the benefit of re-describing and re-categorizing items in ways other than their provenance, which creates new understandings of the content, inspiring researchers and artists to sift for unexpected connections. Unfortunately, it is more difficult to establish contemporary uses of Tumblr by archival institutions. No large-scale public-domain project like The Commons has yet been started, and often material on Tumblr is manually re-published from other sources. For example, a search for Library and Archives Canada on Tumblr will bring up many images from the LAC's Flickr account that have been circulated by Tumblr users. We can trace these images to see their recontextualization in various thematic blogs, thereby encountering different concepts of custody and curation, and compare the identified source of the interest (say, in a piece of clothing, or a person of note in the photograph) to the way the LAC has described and categorized the image on Flickr. A search for images on Tumblr tagged with "LAC" or "libraryandarchivescanada" brings up a number of posts crediting either the Collections Canada or the LAC's Flickr account: for example, a Tumblr blog called Indigitizations: Digitizing Indigenous

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13 Melanie Schlosser and Brian Stamper, "Learning To Share: Measuring Use of a Digitized Collection on Flickr and in the IR," *Information Technology And Libraries*, September (2012): 90.
14   Mark Hartsell, "A Name Recovered From History," Library of Congress Information Bulletin 70, 4 (April 2011). Accessed November 24th, 2012.
15 Peggy Garvin, "Photostreams to the People: The Commons on Flickr," *Searcher,* Summer (2009): 49.

Multimedia. It's part of a project aimed at preserving and disseminating materials of Aboriginal culture, including creating digital toolkits for communities to use in their own digitizing projects. Among images sourced from the LAC photostream are links to resources on the topic of Native and Indigenous Studies, as well as examples of projects undertaken by communities using the provided toolkits.

The Nova Scotia Archives has accounts with both Flickr and Tumblr (as well as Pinterest, Youtube, and Facebook), using the Tumblr to essentially drive traffic to the Flickr by posting images of note, and participating in Tumblr's image-sharing culture by re-blogging pertinent content – mostly Victorian images or materials similar to their original uploads. The Nova Scotia Archives Tumblr publishes mostly items with interesting history, including Wanted posters, pieces of political propaganda, and items of morbid or occult fascination.

Tumblr's statistics do not include page views, only direct actions on an item level: "likes," reblogs, and, in some cases, comments. An item's number of "notes" demarcates either a like or a reblog, with or without added commentary. With many of the Nova Scotia Archives's original uploads getting fewer than five notes, it can be concluded that the promotional potential is not being met.

Images in Context

As pointed out by Emily Monks-Leeson, most search functions on digital archival collections return item-level results, rather than show a contextual format for users.[16] Flickr, once an item is selected for individual viewing, will display a page with tags and sets for that item, but cannot display search results by set or tag, for example. And none of the institutions using Flickr attempted to maintain the concepts of provenance or respect de fonds in their uploads, much like Monks-Leeson found in her

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16 Emily Monks-Leeson, "Archives on the Internet: Representing Contexts and Provenance from Repository to Website," *The American Archivist* 74, Spring/Summer (2011): 47.

study of digital archives of written materials, wherein they "more closely match the definition of a collection—a group of materials determined by custodianship and drawn from a variety of sources—as opposed to an archival fonds" and "embrace the more popular concept of the archive as a warehouse of information and materials, rather than a repository with its own traditions of meaning and ordering."[17] On Tumblr, uploads can be identified by tag, and institutions can then establish pre-formed searches via links that will display items with certain tags, but this sort of manual set-creation is cumbersome and unsatisfying. There is no option to sort those search results; default is reverse chronology of upload date. Tumblr's file-sharing format is inherently in support of recontextualization; while tracing images sourced from public collections can be a fascinating exploration into aesthetic philosophy and artistic inspiration, it is unlikely to yield direct answers for institutions looking to source new contextual information about their holdings. It is a better resource for understanding the cultural appeal of our holdings, helping to predict future use and value.

Another drawback to the stable, non-modifiable format of Flickr and the piecemeal, item-based format of Tumblr is the inability to replicate the context of a photography album, a common item in archival collections. The striking aspect of a photo album is often the scrapbook-style arrangement and modification of its contents, and the narratives created by its maker. As Mifflin, in a survey of books reviewing the importance of photo albums in archives, summarizes:

"snap shooters," however, preferred unconventional expressions of creativity instead, sometimes

drawing over images or tearing them into unique configurations. One album of pictures at the beach

contains snapshots torn into jagged shapes representing rocks. The maker of another album obliterated

negative space by overlapping (taping, gluing, and sewing) photos together to cover entire pages.[18]

17 Emily Monks-Leeson, "Archives on the Internet: Representing Contexts and Provenance from Repository to Website," *The American Archivist* 74, Spring/Summer (2011): 52.

18   Jeffrey Mifflin, "'Metaphors for Life Itself': Historical Photograph Albums, Archives, and the Shape of Experience and Memory," *The American Archivist* 75, Spring/Summer (2012): 235.

On Flickr, photographs can be arranged into their original order, with some trouble, and put aside in a "set," but their arrangement by page and juxtaposition in space cannot be captured, unless entire pages are to be scanned and uploaded. Flickr also has the ability to highlight specific parts of images and add notes – by either the uploader or by viewers. This could be used as a stop-gap measure to indicate images-specific metadata on a scanned page, but cannot be seen as a final solution to the context-loss problem. Mifflin argues that "Photograph albums should always be maintained intact if possible .... Metadata should link each component (such as unbound pages, displaced prints, and digital surrogates) back to the original, which must be adequately described in all related cataloging records."[19] Photo albums and scrapbooks must be treated equally as both artistic creations of collage and collections of individual artworks in order to give them due credit. Currently there exists no common method of file-sharing that allows for book-style publishing and contextualization in this way.

Conclusion

It would have taken a project as large in scope and breadth (and as authoritative as to come under the project funding of an institution such as the Library of Congress and a major corporation such as Yahoo) as The Commons to propel individual archives to copy portions of their digital photographic holdings over to the file-sharing site. An overseeing body compelling cooperation from smaller groups may not have resulted in a catch-all solution, nor even a best-practice, to the problems of digital archives and access, but it has created a better perspective from which to view failings and potential improvements, and a lens through which to understand new concepts of digital territory and community engagement – better than blogging, and often more illuminating than independent websites.[20] Other best-practices can be set in similar ways: for example, a partnership between individual institutions and

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19 Ibid., 239.
20 Jason Vaughan, "Insights Into The Commons on Flickr," *Libraries and the Academy* 10, No. 2, April (2010): 194.

the Getty Research Institute to employ Getty Vocabularies in image metadata and complementary finding aids for researchers. The Getty Vocabularies are traditionally crowd-sourced information repositories of terminology for use with pieces of material culture.[21] Genealogy material websites such as Ancestry.ca could also benefit greatly from allowing users to submit their research results in order to correct mistakes in transcription or optical-character-recognition, identify relationships between documents based on contents, and leave clues for future users about successes and failures.

Terras notes the disparity between user activity on institutional Flickr domains and amateur or private groups, and I believe this is telling of the dearth of interest in accessing the vast resources of archives: rather than pursuing excited and passionate researchers and using their audiences to promote collections, archivists have chosen the passive approach.[22] Newer social-networking tools such as Tumblr and other promotional means have yet to be seen as effective tools to drive traffic to digital collections. Active promotion is considered a stark contrast from the neutral custodial position of the archivist in the past, and it can be hard to understand how promotion of some archival materials does not inherently signify neglect of others, or a manipulation of resources rather than a guiding hand in research.

The first step is for archives to devise systems to create return-on-investment assessments. With limited resources, and digital file-sharing practices consisting of a learning curve for archivists and information professionals, it is essential that people understand the difference between simply increasing the locations where files can be found and doing effective promotions. If, as Schlosser and Stamper concluded, "email lists and social media should drive larger numbers of users to a collection than

21 Getty Research Institute. "Getty Vocabularies (Getty Research Institute)," Getty Research Institute, accessed November 15th, 2012. http://www.getty.edu/research/tools/vocabularies/index.html.
22 Melissa Terras, "The Digital Wunderkammer," *Library Trends* 59, no. 4 (2011): 697.

happenstance," and "the power of link curation by trusted friends via informal communication channels is ... the only significant use pattern in evidence," then archivists should be concentrating more on building public perception of their institutions as welcoming and personable – something worth hearing about.[23]

We are on the precipice of major changes in digital access to archival materials. By keeping an eye on contemporary uses of technologies and platforms for promotion and dissemination, we can intuit the common desires of archivists and try to design new systems that satisfy the main needs: open access and high searchability of low-resolution images; a simple, modifiable display of collections and search results; the ability to assign unlimited metadata and descriptions, as well as potential for geo-tagging and other relational information (as well as the use of a controlled vocabulary to associate images across collections); the ability to deliver content in a variety of formats and process payments if required; the ability for public feedback and information submission to help add context to images; and portability, for the inevitable migration to new systems and communities. As Brandhorst points out effectively, we must also be open-minded about future intertextual connections, technology- and user-dependent, for example between photographs, virtual maps, narratives, video, and other electronic documents, as well as references to physical materials.[24] Most importantly, we need to recognize that we cannot intuit the common desires of archives users, and solicit narratives and assessments of their research experiences in order to improve our overall system design. Ideally, the abilities to search multiple archives' collections simultaneously, to identify connections from outside perspectives, and to offer feedback on the usefulness of materials in personal and professional research would create a new

23 Melanie Schlosser and Brian Stamper, "Learning To Share: Measuring Use of a Digitized Collection on Flickr and in the IR," *Information Technology And Libraries*, September (2012): 89.

24 Hans Brandhorst, "The Iconography of the Pleasures and Problems of Drink: Thoughts on the Opportunities and Challenges for Access and Collaboration in the Digital Age," *Visual Resources: An International Journal of Documentation* 28, 4 (2012): 390.

standard in digital archival collections, and archival use in general.

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Appendix 1: Data Observed about Libraries, Archives, and Museums on Flickr

Images on Flickr were chosen to be representative: no more than one per set, and with intent to choose images from different years. Otherwise, selection was arbitrary.
Information derived from: http://www.flickr.com/photos/lac-bac/,
http://www.flickr.com/people/mccordmuseum/, http://www.flickr.com/people/nsarchives/

Table 1: Libraries, Archives, and Museums on Flickr

	Library and Archives Canada	**Nova Scotia Archives**	**McCord Museum**
Date of inception	June 2008	March 2011	April 2008
Number of uploads	2106	191	689
Number of sets	56	13	14
Rights Statement	On website	No	On website
Most common tags	libraryandarchivescanada bibliothequeetarchivescanada, canada	Archives, nova, scotia	mccordmuseum, museummccord, canada
Number of groups joined	2	0	15
Number of contacts	40	3	1689
Uses geo-tagging	Yes	No	No
Uses sets for corresponding exhibits	No	No	Yes
Uses sets for corresponding archival fonds	No	No	Yes
Gives accession information	Yes	Yes	Yes
Gives links to image on website	Yes	No	Yes

Table 2: McCord Museum Images on Flickr

Flickr Image Code	Views	Comments	Largest dimensions	Tags
2862732368	5047	1	768 x 618	MuséeMcCord, McCordMuseum, Canada
3294711699	2208	0	551 x 768	McCord Museum, Musée McCord Canada, womensday, Woman, baby, mother, child, 1891, whitedress
5263692448	1321	1	554 x 768	MuséeMcCord, McCordMuseum, Canada
5346699501	1054	4	743 x 574	none
7598812048	242	0	768 x 560	MuséeMcCord, McCordMuseum, Canada

Table 3: Nova Scotia Archives Images on Flickr

Flickr Image Code	Views	Comments	Largest dimensions	Tags
6189627470	518	0	1020 x 612	Nova, scotia, archives, nova scotia archives, George Walker MacKay
6189635454	626	0	1030 x 612	Nova, scotia, archives, nova scotia archives
6189111981	588	2	1032 x 612	Nova, scotia, archives, nova scotia archives
7976752994	21	0	2552 x 3803	Wanted, reward, criminal, poster, vintage, history, archives, museums, 19th century, police, detective, criminals, crime, posters, letterpress, printing, old, paper
8076815040	99	2	1640 x 2292	Criminals, crime, wanted, history, posters, letterpress, printing, 19th century, vintage, old, paper, archives, police, detective

Table 4: Library and Archives Canada Images on Flickr

Flickr Image Code	Views	Comments	Largest dimensions	Tags
2695693919	513	0	760 x 523	Library and Archives Canada, Bibliothèque et Archives Canada, LAC-BAC, Wallaceburg, Ontario, Canada, 1890-1901
4056221994	2205	1	640 x 463	LAC, BAC, Library and Archives Canada, Bibliothèque et Archives Canada, World War One, WWI, First World War, Great War, war, Première Guerre mondiale, Canada, LACBAC, 1914-1919, 1914, 1915, 1916, 1917, 1918, 1919, Lt-Col. John McCrae, Lieutenant-colonel John McCrae, dog, chien, Bonneau, John McCrae
4666289763	475	0	640 x 457	Canada, Library and Archives Canada, Bibliothèque et Archives Canada, aboriginal, autochtone, Plains Indian, indiens des Plaines, Alberta, 1911, A. Rafton-Canning
6347746521	147	0	320 x 480	Library and Archives Canada, Bibliothèque et Archives Canada, LAC, BAC, Canada, Prime Minister, Premier Ministre, government, gouvernement, parliament, parlement, William Lyon Mackenzie King, dog, chien, Pat II, 1947, Kingsmere, Quebec, Québec
7165908948	87	0	470 x 631	LAC, BAC, Library and Archives Canada, Bibliothèque et Archives, Canada, Canada, Prime Minister, Premier Ministre, Arthur Meighen, 1920-1930