

Today's images are tomorrow's history

When I was at school, we were told the thing we most wanted to study in history was out of bounds because it wasn't old enough.

World War II, the history teacher said, was too recent (he'd fought in it); things had to wait at least half a century before analysis rendered them suitable for education. We learned about stuff from the 19th century, whose battles were interesting but whose weapons weren't as fascinating as those we used in military drill, and drew endlessly on our pads to while away maths classes.

The other day I was reminded of the same conundrum – when does history start becoming history, and more importantly at what point should we begin preserving its relics? I was prompted by an incident at the Puke Ariki research centre, a place I frequent when researching articles and books, and where I find the staff unfailingly helpful.

I was sitting at a table poring over a photo album of black and white photographs depicting the history of a topic I'm writing about, and marvelling at the presence of mind of the man who recognised their significance and saved them.

Then I found I was sharing the table with something equally striking (to my mind, anyway). Pat Greenfield - a photographer renowned for risking tidal vicissitudes to record the births and deaths of coastal phenomena like the Three Sisters (their numbers vary) in North Taranaki – had arrived to show research staff photos she'd taken of one of the latest whale strandings in South Taranaki, events that have environmentalists and others concerned about the effects of offshore seismic surveys.

She laid out seven stunning prints. Even as a veteran of journalism (including several years as a photo editor) I was moved by their power. Pat had taken the pictures a couple of weeks before, but was still struggling to contain the emotional impact of having recorded something so visceral and sad.

What was odd was what followed. Pat was offering her pictures free to the museum-library's image collection (they already have some of her coastal erosion prints). However, the photo department expressed little enthusiasm, saying they might take one or two but only after they were assessed according to the museum's criteria. It was suggested Pat could offer them to the South Taranaki museum.

When I expressed the view that Pat's photos ought to be eagerly accepted, I was asked by what criteria did I make that judgement? Fair question. But let's turn it back on Puke Ariki – what are its criteria? Here's what NPDC later provided:

“Accepting any item into the Heritage Collection is a long term commitment. All items are carefully assessed before a decision is made. Information supplied by the donor contributes significantly to making that decision. The relevant curator examines the object's possible historical, cultural, social or research potential.

“These criteria are considered along with any relationship the item has to existing collections, its interpretative potential and any conservation or storage requirements. All these factors are then discussed by the curatorial team and a decision to accept or decline the offer is made.”

In my view, Pat's whale photos met all those criteria, especially for members of the local iwi who welcomed her efforts to record what happened. As a researcher, I can't help thinking of the delight someone would feel 100 years from now if they were piecing together the story of Taranaki's whales and came across those images - available from our public resource.

23.06.2018 JT column – saving our history

The council also had this to say: “Photographs from other Taranaki photographers will not be added to the Swainson/Woods collection.”

We hear a lot about the 110,000 Swainson/Woods photographs bequeathed to the museum. Unfortunately, many of the people in them are unidentified, which diminishes the collection’s value. One a week is published in the Daily News in the hope somebody will recognise the subjects - so in another couple of millennia we might have all the names.

There are a number of accomplished photographers operating in Taranaki today, producing records of our daily lives...with captions that specify dates, names, locations, and so on. Much of their output is in digital form, so storage ought to be easier than having to accommodate prints and negatives.

What will happen to that work? Will it be left to chance and the interest of relatives, or will someone at Puke Ariki wake up one day and realise that history actually started a minute ago?