

## **YODA: The Yerkes Observatory Digital Archive**

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### **Abstract.**

The Yerkes Observatory Digital Archives (YODA) project began as an in-house project for the Yerkes Observatory centennial in 1997 along with the Yerkes Observatory Virtual Museum:

<http://astro.uchicago.edu/yerkes/virtualmuseum/YOVMuseum.html>

Currently, a Filemaker Pro database of nearly 600 images exists with over 1000 images remaining to be scanned. The development and organization of the database will be discussed.

## **1. Introduction**

The Yerkes Observatory Digital Archives project (YODA) began with the realization that our centennial anniversary was approaching and it would be great to have our historical photographic archives organized in a manner which would be useful to ourselves, historians, and the general public. The Observatory has a Photographic Services Department, separate from the Library, which had produced a catalog and had been selling black and white images for reproduction in textbooks, magazine articles, etc. for years. Many of these photographs are of astronomical objects, but there are many historical photographs as well. Historical photographs from the catalog include portraits of astronomers and physicists, the buildings and instruments at Yerkes and McDonald Observatories, and some images of instruments at other observatories. We also have a large collection of photos that were never in the catalog from various eclipse expeditions, group summer staff photographs, building construction, and informal activities. So we have large collection of historical photographs. We wanted to share this, but more importantly, get it organized.

## **2. Background**

As plans were emerging for the centennial events of 1997, it was decided that exhibits for display in the hallways as well as a historical web site would be prepared, concentrating on the construction of the Observatory, and George Ellery Hale's attempts to cajole ever-increasing sums of money from C. T. Yerkes, the Chicago transit tycoon who financed the Observatory. See:

<http://astro.uchicago.edu/yerkes/virtualmuseum/YOVMtimeline.html>

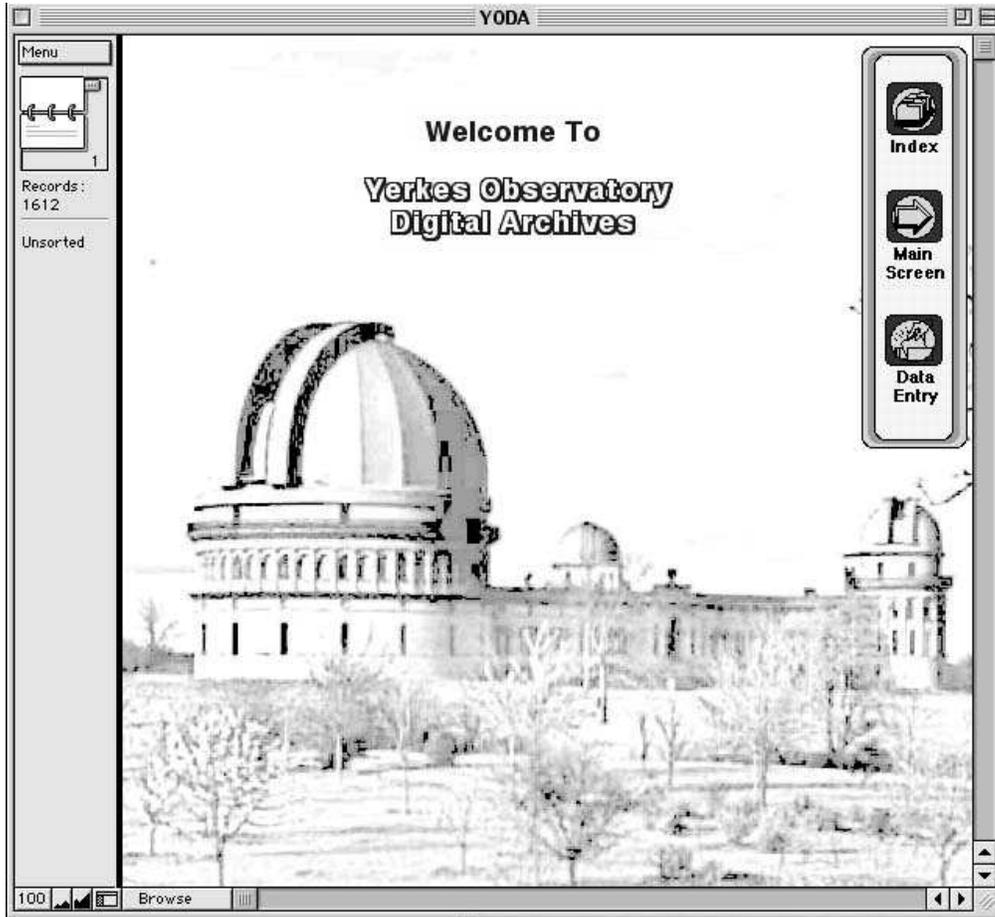


Figure 1. The welcome screen. Click on “main screen” to get into the database.

Local community volunteers did the research for the timelines and wrote histories about individual astronomers. Separate from this, but sanctioned by the Observatory, a local group established a museum in one of the hallways which focused on the contributions astronomers made to the community — as village presidents and trustees, members of school boards, founders of the local library, etc. This group collected photographs and mementos from the community — furniture, paintings, and other artifacts. The organization called “Questers” is an international study group headquartered in Philadelphia which supports preservation and restoration projects in the US and Canada. We believe that the Williams Bay Chapter is the only one of over 900 chapters that has ever established a museum and the local chapter is quite proud of their accomplishments. They provide a docent to talk about the museum when the Observatory is open for public tours.

**Yerkes Observatory Digital Archives**

40-inch Refractor  
Great Dome

**Name**  
1896 - 1896    Sept 3-5 1896  
Date Range    Actual Date

**LOCATION**  
Yerkes Observatory  
Locale  
Williams Bay  
City  
Wisconsin  
State/Prov  
USA  
Country

Hoisting the first half of the foot of the pier of the 40-inch telescope (Accession Book entry)

**Description**

**Researcher's Notes**  
Yerkes Observatory;

**Subject Index**

Album    Yerkes Observatory  
Copyright    Unknown  
Collection    Photographer/Studio

0394  
Accession No

If you have information that could be added to the Researcher's Notes, please tell us.

Figure 2. Data screen. Here is where information about the photograph can be entered. Whatever is known is entered here: Name, Date Range, Actual Date, Location: City, State/Province, Country; Description, Researcher's Notes, Subject Index (see below), Album, Copyright, Collection, Photographer/Studio, Accession Number (from early accession books). Sometimes this information is included in an accession book or a note on a photograph in hand.

Our centennial events that summer were primarily some public receptions and tours for the local community as well as tours and a reception following the American Astronomical Society Meeting in Chicago that June. Don Osterbrock's book about the Observatory's first 60 years was being published (Osterbrock, Donald E.: *Yerkes Observatory 1892-1950; The Birth, Near Death, and Resurrection of a Scientific Research Institution*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1997); a lot of interest in the Observatory was generated.

So work began. The Observatory systems administrator at that time, Mary Reed, took charge, recruited some volunteers, and went to work, sometime around 1996. A committee was formed within the Observatory and the database template was created. A staff spouse, Trish Roussel, was working on a degree

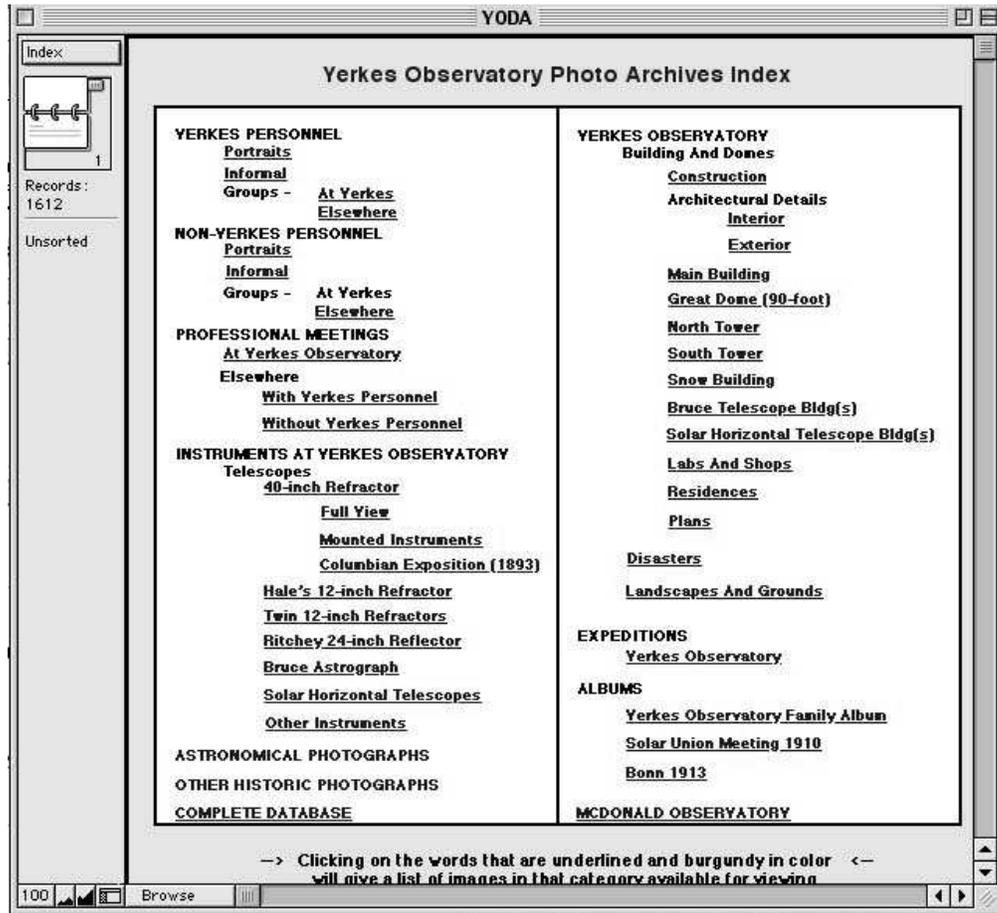


Figure 3. Subject index. Most of our photographs fall clearly into one or more of these subject headings.

in computer science, and she needed a project for a class she was taking so she designed the Filemaker Pro interface. Because the database was originally intended to be for in-house use only and because our computer of choice at Yerkes is the Macintosh, we designed the data base system with Filemaker Pro for Mac and dedicated a computer to it. We wanted to have a searchable database ready for centennial events during the summer of 1997.

The photographic archives are technically not a part of the library. The Observatory has a separate Photo Services Department, so the librarian was not directly involved at this point except to provide minimal input on the design of the database. Excellent hallway displays and web pages were created. (See web pages mentioned above.) A volunteer from the local technical school Graphics Department designed the displays and wrote up the captions, under the direction of the project coordinator. We had a reasonable database of scanned photographs for in-house use that summer; approximately 500 photos were scanned and entered into the database. After the summer of 1997, however, the project



Figure 4. Report screen. This shows the same information as from the main screen but in a slightly different format.

languished. Many more photos were waiting to be scanned, but our volunteers and project organizers had all left the building.

### 3. Current Status

The database today consists of approximately 600 scanned photos with about 1100 remaining to be scanned. Much editing work remains to be done along with the scanning. Early data entry personnel were not familiar with astronomical terms and mistakes were made. However, a searchable database has been developed and is usable for our needs. Below is a description of the database.

### 4. Future Plans

It is hoped that someday soon the contents of the database will be available and searchable on the World Wide Web. A lot of work remains to be done in the

meantime — scanning, editing, and formatting. It is hoped that some models of other observatories, such as USNO and Lowell Observatory, may be followed.