



QUESTIONS

for Rachel Wetzel

CCAHA Photograph Conservator / Education: Postgraduate Certificate in Photograph Conservation, Andrew W. Mellon Advanced Residency Program, George Eastman House / Rochester Institute of Technology; M.A., Art Conservation, SUNY Buffalo State; B.A., History of Art and Architecture and Studio Arts, University of Pittsburgh / **Years at CCAHA:** 9

What led you to conservation?

While I was in college, majoring in pharmacy, I took an art history class. My teacher pulled me aside one day and asked what my major was, and when I told her, she almost fell on the floor! She had been teaching at the school for 20 years and had never had a pharmacy student come through. She asked me why I was in pharmacy, and I told her that I really liked science. The next day, she came to class with a pile of magazine articles about art conservation. I had one look at them and that was it: I quit pharmacy school and went right into art conservation.

What's the best thing about being a photograph conservator?

I like when I treat someone's family photograph—the only one they have of that family member—and see that they're overwhelmed with joy when they come to pick it up.

Is being a professional photographer a prerequisite?

No. I've never exhibited a photograph anywhere—but I certainly take a lot of pictures. Before I went to graduate school, I took photography classes while I was working as a technician at CCAHA. I used to make pinhole cameras and sit in Fitler Square at lunchtime to try to make experimental photographs. I loved the chemistry of photography, and it meshed with conservation into one larger interest.

Which photographic process do you find most fascinating?

The parallax stereogram. It was the first lenticular process, invented by Frederic Eugene Ives here in Philadelphia in 1903. It's made in a special camera, and the resulting image is either three-dimensional, or changes as you move it back and forth. I've seen only four of them in my lifetime.

Do you have a favorite treatment from your nine years at CCAHA?

While I was working with the Robert W. Woodruff Library of the Atlanta University Center [as part of the Historically Black Colleges & Universities Photographic Preservation Project], we found an Abraham Lincoln campaign button from 1860 in their collection. It had been appraised as a tintype, but when it arrived for treatment at CCAHA in 2009, I realized that it was actually a rare ambrotype. It was like finding a diamond in the rough. I got to do research about where it came from, and I ended up speaking to several Lincoln scholars. So few of these buttons remain intact today that even they hadn't seen one before.

You've been a regular speaker at CCAHA's long-running *Focusing on Photographs: Identification & Preservation* program. What do you like about the education side of preservation?

Information about photographs and how to preserve them isn't really covered anywhere else, even at schools for archival management or library science. [CCAHA

Senior Photograph Conservator] Barbara Lemmen and I have been teaching this program for a long time, so we've streamlined a practical teaching method to make the topic simple. My favorite part is that I start with a room of people who don't know what to do with their photographs, and at the end, they leave with an incredible amount of knowledge. Photographs aren't going to last unless people take care of them, so I feel I'm helping not only the people at my workshops, but generations to come.

One of your outside-of-CCAHA artistic pursuits is working with *dreambook*, your band. Have you always been into music, or is it a more recent interest?

I've always been into listening to music. My grandma would buy me records when I was a kid, and I started collecting them at age four or five and haven't stopped. Then a couple years ago, my boyfriend, Jim, built an electric guitar for my birthday. I figured that since he spent so much time making me this custom guitar, I should probably learn how to play it. And I picked it up very fast! Within six months, I was in *dreambook*. I'm still learning as we move into recording our second record.

—KATHERINE MAGAZINER