

Making Sense of Pictures: Interpreting Iowa Family Snapshots through a Traveling Lecture Series, Photo Exhibition and Wheat Paste Art

Applicant organization, planning committee and project director

The University of Northern Iowa (UNI) is home to the “Fortepan Iowa” public photo archive project (fortepan.us), which showcases curated Iowa family snapshots taken between 1860-2000, situates them along an easily searchable, image-centered timeline, and makes these high-resolution images downloadable for public use and interpretation. Because Fortepan Iowa is based at UNI, this institution is well suited to carry out this Fortepan Iowa-related statewide public outreach project. Having partnered with five Iowa public libraries, we are seeking funding for a series of traveling lectures, photo exhibitions, and wheat paste art initiatives to promote and interpret the many rich photographs in the online collection. Fortepan Iowa is the product of UNI’s esteemed and growing Interactive Digital Studies (IDS) program; it is housed at UNI’s Rod Library, which models our library-focused outreach plan across the state; and it is an Iowa Regents institution with exceptional faculty in Interactive Digital Studies, History, Performance Studies, Library Studies, and Art who have a strong commitment to the archive’s value as a tool for historical thinking, creativity, learning, and public engagement.

Project Director Bettina Fabos, Ph.D. will coordinate the traveling lecture series, photo exhibition, and wheat paste art community outreach initiatives associated with this grant proposal. She is a professor of Interactive Digital Studies (IDS) and Visual Communication at UNI who specializes in nonprofit digital archives and public memory. After a 2013 research Fulbright fellowship in Budapest, Dr. Fabos created a partnership with the original Fortepan archive in Hungary (fortepan.hu) and built a team at UNI to co-found Fortepan Iowa. Since Fortepan Iowa’s launch in 2015, Dr. Fabos has organized UNI faculty, staff, donors and volunteers to expand the collection; promoted the project throughout the state (at conferences, libraries, community centers, retirement homes, historical societies, Board of Regents meetings, other Regents institutions, and education workshops); presented “The Fortepan Concept” internationally; and nurtured partnerships with five Iowa public libraries and the State Historical Society of Iowa. The five public libraries--in Anamosa, Cedar Falls, Ottumwa, Sumner, and Webster City--are our collaborating organizations in this grant request: their directors have established scanning hubs and will each sponsor and promote the traveling lecture series, house the photo exhibition, and participate in the billboard-sized wheat pasting of Fortepan Iowa photos in their towns.

Our planning committee consists of Project Director Bettina Fabos, five public library directors/assistant directors, three UNI scholars, and a wheat paste artist.

- The five public library committee members are the library directors of their respective libraries: Rebecca Vernon (Anamosa Library and Learning Center); Kelly Stern (Cedar Falls Public Library); Ronald Houk (Ottumwa Public Library); Denise Hoins (Sumner Public Library); and Ketta Lubbestedt-Arjes (Kendall Young Public Library in Webster City). Their role in this project is to promote their libraries’ new Fortepan Iowa scanning hubs, identify local historians to participate in the **Traveling Lecture Series**, host the lecture series and the **Photo Exhibitions** of Fortepan Iowa photographs in their libraries, and foster communication between public art committees and town officials towards the **Wheat Paste Initiative** in their towns.

The four UNI scholars include:

- Fernando Calderon, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Department of History at UNI, who will work with each local historian selected for the **Traveling Lecture Series** (in Anamosa, Cedar Falls, Ottumwa,

Sumner, and Webster City) to hone their historical thinking and provide resources for them to ground their presentation in current humanities scholarship.

- Josh Hamzahee, Ph.D., Instructor of Performance Studies at UNI, whose research and creative work revolves around community performance and outreach. He will train our identified local historians selected for the **Traveling Lecture Series** in presentation performance and audience engagement.
- Noah Doely, Associate Professor of Digital Photography, Department of Art at UNI, a co-founder and lead curator of Fortepan Iowa and an established, award-winning digital photographic artist. He will curate the five **Photo Exhibitions** for each library.

The wheat paste artist is Isaac Campbell, a UNI graduate student in Communication Studies and a digital media specialist who trained with the legendary French wheat paste artist JR in Paris, used public wheatpaste art to promote the Fortepan exhibit at the National Gallery in Budapest as a Fulbright recipient (2018-2019), and actively promotes community photo archiving and community engagement in his work. Mr. Campbell will lead the **Wheat Paste Initiative** in Anamosa, Cedar Falls, Ottumwa, Sumner, and Webster City.

Project Description

The UNI-based Fortepan Iowa photo archive was funded by Humanities Iowa (\$5,000) and a UNI Capacity Building grant (\$16,000), both awarded in 2014. We launched the Beta site in 2015 with 2,000 curated, high resolution archival photographs. Since then, our team has scanned the collections of 465 donors, curated 15,000 images into the archive, worked with 450 UNI students, given over 20 presentations at retirement homes, library and museum associations, and digital humanities conferences throughout Iowa and as far as Canada, Malta, Finland, Hungary and Portugal; and spearheaded a Fortepan Summit in Budapest with our sister sites in Hungary, Malta, Israel, and Romania. We launched the redesigned archive in the fall of 2019 with a beautiful new interface, tagging and commenting capabilities, invigorated metadata, an administrative backend, and a speedier and more easily duplicated coding framework. Through these efforts, we are busily increasing Fortepan Iowa's visibility and community participation possibilities.

Our goal in this grant request is to help Iowans make sense of the many themes emerging from this expanding image collection. We are proposing a **Traveling Lecture Series** (2020-2021) between five public libraries to begin interpreting themes within the Fortepan Iowa archive. We will promote the lecture series through public library **Photo Exhibitions** and a public **Wheat Paste Initiative**: billboard-scale Fortepan Iowa photos wheat pasted on local buildings in our five participating towns.

Over the last six months, we have partnered with five public library directors (and their staff) in Anamosa, Cedar Falls, Ottumwa, Sumner, and Webster City to expand Fortepan Iowa's visibility and community participation. We are currently building fully equipped, clearly referenced **Fortepan Iowa Scanning Hubs** in each library, and are at the beginning stages of fostering an active and dedicated group of volunteers who teach community members how to scan and document family photos to include in the public Fortepan Iowa archive. These scanning hubs will play a vital role in engaging rural communities and building a support network of donors and volunteers to collect, scan, and curate photos for Fortepan Iowa. Most importantly, the hubs will serve as community outreach portals, allowing us to work and collaborate directly with local archivists, librarians, teachers, volunteers, and historians from within their communities. We have intentionally chosen libraries that are located in different regions of the state and that represent a wide range of city/state revenues, facility/program

offerings, and population sizes. Cedar Falls and Ottumwa serve larger populations (41,000 and 35,000 respectively); Kendall Young in Webster City serves approximately 8,000 citizens; Anamosa serves approximately 5,500; and Sumner is just over 2,000. We are interested in these libraries as prototypes for other library partnerships across the state.

We seek funds to plan and execute a Fortepan Iowa photo-driven **Traveling Lecture Series**, a **Photo Exhibition** of selected photos for each partnering library, and a **Wheat Paste Initiative** in these five Iowa towns.

A. **Traveling Lecture Series (Fall 2020-Spring 2021)**. We plan to identify and organize five local historians, each of whom will perform a themed lecture, in rotation, at our five partnering libraries. The traveling lecture series will produce twenty-five heavily-promoted public lectures across the state. We will:

1. Identify five local/amateur historians. Each partnering library will seek and identify a local historian to plan and execute a presentation on Iowa history anchored and driven by a selection of photographs from the Fortepan Iowa archive and organized around a cohesive theme.
2. Ground the presentations in historical scholarship. Each local historian will work with UNI Associate Professor of History, Dr. Fernando Calderon to select a broad theme from which to develop thoughtful, humanities focused, image-driven and story-based presentations on carefully chosen themes (e.g., Iowa transportation; Iowa immigration; Iowa farm women; Iowa Native Americans--we will aim for a broad thematic range with no duplication among historians) that can be easily visualized through Fortepan Iowa photographs. Dr. Calderon will help each historian with scholarly resources to enunciate each theme; work to create a nuanced understanding of the topic and a sense of critical inquiry; and join them in selecting a range of fascinating photographs from Fortepan Iowa to visualize the presentation.
3. Perfect the presentations. We will also pair our local historians with UNI speech faculty member Dr. Josh Hamzahee to create a riveting public lecture combining Fortepan Iowa photographs into a well-crafted visual presentation. Dr. Hamzahee's expertise is in community-driven performance, and he will coach our local historians in presentation organization, style, projection/delivery, pacing, and audience engagement. We call this initiative a "Traveling Lecture Series" because we want each of our local historians to present their themed lecture at each of our five partnering libraries. Every library will cross-promote the five-part series, and each library will host five lectures throughout a given year, creating twenty-five presentations throughout Iowa.
4. Promote, perform, and disseminate. Each public library will create a shared poster design and a series of timely press releases to promote the rotating presentations in each geographic location (the lectures will be scheduled throughout 2020-21). To further promote the **Traveling Lecture Series**, our partnering public libraries will also host a **Photo Exhibition** of regionally-specific Fortepan Iowa photographs, and help assemble volunteers towards our **Wheat Paste Initiative** (more below). We will also videotape the lectures and make them available online.

The Traveling Lecture Series will help Iowans interpret the photographs and enter discussions about Iowa history that are novel and invigorating. Significantly, these highly-researched, well-honed presentations will also form the basis for digital storytelling projects aimed at K-12 instruction that we foresee building for the Teaching Iowa History initiative established by the Iowa Museum Association (Fortepan Iowa is a participating museum).

B. Photo Exhibition (Spring 2020). Noah Doely, Professor of Digital Photography at the University of Northern Iowa, will curate and mount a regionally-specific set of 10-20 printed archival photos from the archive at each partnering library. To this end, he will:

1. Identify photographs. As co-founder of Fortepan Iowa, Professor Doely will curate the photos for each of the five library exhibitions; photos will be region-specific to each library (i.e., the Anamosa Library and Learning Center will feature photos from the Anamosa area.)
2. Print and mount photographs. We have searched and identified an affordable solution for printing and mounting selected photographs. Partnering libraries will hang the photographs with an accompanying caption. Fortepan Iowa photographs will be printed on Heirloom Crystal Archival paper and mounted using acid free white or cream matting and substrate.

These semi-permanent exhibitions will excite Iowans of all ages, bring in library visitors and create a draw for the new scanning hubs and the **Traveling Lecture Series**. Overall, the photo exhibitions will promote the library community's public participation in the archive, encourage historical thinking, and prioritize collective memory among town citizens.

C. Wheat Paste Initiative (May-June 2020). We aim to take Fortepan Iowa project "to the streets" of each participating town/city. Inspired by the work of [French wheatpasting artist JR](#), we will wheat paste large, region-specific Fortepan Iowa photo cut-outs on buildings and underpasses, which we will independently identify for Anamosa, Cedar Falls, Ottumwa, Sumner, and Webster City. Wheat pasting uses flour, water, and paper to create non-destructive, biodegradable, large format art pieces. These pastings will range in size and design -- from a few feet in height to multiple stories tall. Our hope is to repurpose old buildings that might otherwise represent rural industrial decay and use these artfully wheat pasted local photographs as a public visual to 1) encourage citizen engagement with the Fortepan Iowa project, 2) interest communities in their local history, and 3) warm up, beautify, and humanize these select buildings. We will aim for a minimum of five per town, printing historical photographic cut-outs on large paper rolls and using a scissor lift for the tallest projects.

Stimulating an interest in history

We feel strongly that this three-pronged humanities project will energize communities about their local and state history; enrich the roles of the librarians as innovators of library practice, and expand our role as community catalysts through creative collaboration. Most people typically think of history as a survey of famous people and major events, ignoring the "history from below." Our project avidly attempts to understand the course of human history through the everyday lives of the common man. Fortepan Iowa, and all our associated outreach projects, embrace local history by highlighting the daily routines, traditions, and events of everyday Iowa life.

We have already begun tracking amazing themes within the archive: Iowa picnics, recorded from the turn of the century onward; transportation pitfalls and advancements, from horrific train crashes, mud roads, and roadside breakdowns to proud moments with new cars; extreme weather events like snowstorms, tornadoes and floods; the evolution of Iowa portraiture; changing farming techniques; neighborhood sporting events; race and gender relations (such as photos of boys and men in drag or images of Iowans in blackface); the stubborn tradition to pose outside with one's birthday cake (even in the coldest winters, as flash cameras were not widely used until the 1950s). How can we explain and interpret this history of everyday Iowa life? The **Traveling Lecture Series** will be grounded in historical thinking. Our historian-scholar, Dr. Fernando Calderon, will coach our local historians to ask critical questions, steer them towards texts that rely on the most recent historical scholarship, and ask

them to complicate common assumptions about Iowa and Iowa history. We will convey nuance, contextualize Iowa within regional, U.S., and world events, and open our partnering communities to new ways of thinking about their local history. Beyond the scope of this grant, we intend to repurpose the lecture series into digital Iowa history projects that will be used in K-12 schools in conjunction with the Teaching Iowa History initiative supported by NEH and the Iowa Museum Foundation.

In working with public libraries, our mission is to teach individuals to scan and share Iowa family photographs, crowd-source the public memory of everyday Iowa life, and foster a robust, shared, collective history of Iowa. The overall project has everything to do with local identity, and the photo archive platform specifically encourages community engagement through public tagging capabilities, a discussion forum for each photograph, and immediate image downloading. Our **Traveling Lecture Series** will specifically address themes that tackle difficult conversations about Iowa life and include hard-hitting issues related to gender, race and ethnicity. For example, we can take a broad theme like *immigration* and visualize stories about Iowans from all parts of the country and the world, leading to conversations about Iowa, land of opportunity, past and present. Our presentations will be built around good storytelling and personal narrative, but connect to larger important social themes. We expect a wide general audience, from young people to older generations. Our time-frame is May 2020-December 2021.

Publicity Plan

Our local **Photo Exhibitions** and **Wheat Paste Initiatives** will promote the **Traveling Lecture Series** and the Fortepan Iowa project overall (including the new library scanning hubs). We anticipate immediate public attention from local media outlets--the *Waterloo-Cedar Falls Courier*, *Journal-Eureka* (Anamosa/Jones County), *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, *Ottumwa Courier*, *Messenger News* (Webster City and Fort Dodge), and the *Sumner Gazette*--as they cover the wheat pasting approval process at city and town council meetings. We also anticipate local media coverage as each wheat paste is installed; each wheat pasted image will include image attribution and hashtags, so we can track and spur public social media engagement. We will use library publicity channels--newsletter mailing lists, electronic listservs, posters, and library websites--to promote the photo exhibitions and lecture series, which will be part of the library's annual programming. Since this project initiative touches so many corners of Iowa, we will also contact Iowa Public Radio (*Talk of Iowa* with Charity Nebbe or *River to River* with Ben Kieffer), and larger newspaper outlets (*Cedar Rapids Gazette* and *The Des Moines Register*).

Evaluation Plan

We will evaluate our success through the number of people attending the lecture series and the kind of comments they offer (we will give attendees exit surveys), the number of articles published about our efforts, the number of new volunteers signing up for Fortepan Iowa scanning hubs, the increased number of visits to Fortepan Iowa (fortepan.us), increased involvement in tagging and commenting on Fortepan Iowa photos, the number of new photo donors, and the number of social media comments, likes and shares, which we will track through social media analytics. Our Humanities Scholar Evaluator, Professor Nick Yablon, Professor of History at the University of Iowa and expert on early twentieth-century US cultural history, has agreed to participate in the evaluation process. He will review multiple videos of the lectures and write a report assessing the achievement of our objectives.