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FEB 28, 2013

A TRIP TO IRON MOUNTAIN WITH SONIC EDITIONS

By [Russell Blackmore](#) at 2:50pm



All photos by Sean Sullivan

I've visited quite a few large photographic archives in my time at [Sonic Editions](#). They're normally housed in dusty buildings in unloved parts of big cities — with rows of filing cabinets, the acrid vinegar smell of decomposing celluloid, and a brace of archivists who treat the collection like their personal fiefdom and guide you through the myriad corners and walkways like Theseus in the Labyrinth. Our trip to see Corbis's Bettmann collection was different from the very start. Firstly, we had to find it.

Flying into New York a week or two after Sandy had done her best to mangle the Eastern Seaboard, I picked up the last SUV on the Avis lot, picked up my two co-pilots on the mission (Sean Sullivan of [The Impossible Cool](#) and Chris Black of [Done to Death](#)) and we plugged the address into the GPS and set off west.

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The instructions were pretty simple: get out of Manhattan, find the I80, stay on the I80 for about a day. 400 miles of cruise control, empty freeway, occasional juggernauts that warranted a slow down and photo out of the window, and frequent stops for weak coffee and strong donuts. The only notable thing in 10 hours on the road was a sign to Punxsutawney, home of the Groundhog.

We arrived late Sunday night in Slippery Rock, Pennsylvania, past the gas flares from the fracking industry, and hit the town for an hour before we were off to our road-warrior Hampton Inn for the night.

>>> CHECK OUT ALL THE IMPOSSIBLE COOL X SONIC EDITIONS PRINTS

Monday morning, 8:00am, we set off on the last 10 miles to find Iron Mountain — a former Limestone mine that has been converted to an underground archive storage facility — and without the GPS, we'd still be looking for it now. In between the low hills and scrubby woods of rural Pennsylvania, we suddenly came across a parking lot and what looked like the gatehouse of a super-max prison. We walked up to the pedestrian entrance, were allowed through the first set of doors where a man behind a bulletproof glass screen asked to see two forms of photo ID. It all seemed slightly over the top until I glanced the rack of machine guns behind him, and the Baghdad Green-Zone facility for vehicle searches through the other side of the guardhouse window.



IRON MOUNTAIN: 60 MILES FROM PITTSBURGH, 225 FROM COLUMBUS, AND 350 FROM NEW YORK

Luckily our papers were in order, our guide was summoned out to get us, and we were told we were allowed drive down the concrete ramp into the mine. First, we were summoned into the airlock, the barriers came down behind us, and the car was searched from top to bottom. Again, this all seemed like overkill for the chance to look at some rare shots of Marilyn Monroe, but the rack of E-Z grab machine guns suggested that pointing this out wouldn't go down well with the men in bulletproof vests going through the contents of the trunk.

Once Ann, our guide and the head of the Corbis Archive, arrived, we were told to follow her car, and as we drove down, into the mine itself, and the scale of the facility became apparent. Mile after mile of tunnels, the bare rock jagged all around, a real-life Labyrinth. We drove on for ten minutes before we stopped outside a white wall with a sign saying Corbis and a plasma screen showing a loop of iconic images.



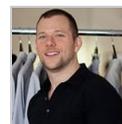
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We entered into what looked like a well-ordered lending library crossed with a modern office space. Antique card catalogues in heavy wooden cases, photos of the moon landings, presidents, and historic moments hung over the walls, which were unmistakable hewn from bare rock and painted white in a Bond-villain-underground-lair-chic type of way.

It was here that Ann explained a little bit more about the facility, and the reason for all that security. It turns out that this former limestone mine doesn't just contain one of the world's largest photo archives. It was set up in the '50s as a bunker for Pittsburgh's heavy industry to move to in the event of nuclear attack. Inside the 1.7 million square feet of archives (not including the other 200 acres of unused space), over 2,000 companies keep archives of everything from the latest server back-ups to the major movie studios' original celluloid of movies like *ET*, *Jaws* and *Back to the Future* (you can't store stuff underground in California due to the earthquake risk); the master recordings of Sinatra, Elvis, and Glen Miller; and Spielberg's Shoah Foundation's video testimony of Holocaust survivors. But the real reason behind the strict no-filming rule, the machine guns, and super-max security is that The United States Office of Personnel Management maintains a highly secure facility that contains all the documents from security clearance proceedings. The United States Patent and Trademark Office stores original records in the facility, as well. The mine has an almost zero percent earthquake risk, and is designed to store all these records for 5,000 years in this temperature and humidity controlled environment.



All in all, over 2,000 people work in this underground world. There are cafes, parking lots — it even has its own power supply and a closed-circuit TV feed so you can see what the weather's doing outside.

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Minds blown, we donned white cotton gloves and went through a real-life airlock into the refrigerated vault that stores the Bettmann collection of photography. Unlike other dusty, rusty, and musty archives, this looked like a pharmaceutical clean room: sparkling white, refrigerated to 4 degrees centigrade. With the air as dry and crisp as a winter morning, we walked in to the Batcave.

When, in the 90s, Bill Gates' Corbis was looking for somewhere to keep its newly acquired Bettmann archive, they decided on Iron Mountain and set about building this state of the art facility. Once every image has finally been catalogued they will seal the room and reduce the temperature down to -4 degrees to preserve the files forever.



The Bettmann collection contains over 20 million images, including iconic shots like Einstein sticking his tongue out, the men sitting on the beam during the building of Rockefeller Center in New York, and Marilyn Monroe singing Happy Birthday to JFK. There are wooden boxes of glass negatives and cans of film, and row upon row of filing cabinets. But we weren't here for the well-known or the much-loved. We were here to find some shots that we'd never seen before, shots that had never been scanned, and there's only one way to do that — start pulling files.

The key to the **Impossible Cool collections** on Sonic Editions is always to find images that surprise and delight — iconic faces in situations you wouldn't normally expect them, with just the right pair of sunglasses, or just the right look on their face. We pulled a trolley's worth of files and headed back to the warmth to

start going through them. This is always the fun part of the trip. Light boxes are switched on, you crouch round the loop as the detail emerges from the negative — Jack Nicholson in the early 80's on a ski trip in Aspen, Muhammad Ali driving a bus, the back of Paul Newman's head as he's sat in his racing car, his blood type clearly labelled on his helmet for the medics in case of an emergency. In an archive this size you don't just come up with a name and pull

a file. JFK has his own filing cabinet, so you've got to choose which files are going to contain the shots you'll be interested in. Hyannis Port and the yacht? Foreign excursions? Family? Campaigns? We left the assassination folder in the cold store — not really a subject for a print collection. Amongst the pile of folders there was ringside shots of every Ali fight, early club shots of Springsteen, and Hemingway at the bullfight.



Once you start going through the files you lose all semblance of time. Lunch was delivered to the door on a golf buggy (this underground kingdom has got it all sorted out), and we broke away from the photos to wolf down our sandwiches before heading back to the avalanche of files. The selects pile grew as the afternoon went on. Back into the cold store for more files, all the while trying to narrow down our selections, whilst struggling not to get caught up on any particular subject, as otherwise you keep going off on tangents as curiosity gets the better of you. By five that evening we were done, the selects whittled down to around 35 shots that we left to be scanned. Then it was back to the SUV, and out through the labyrinth of tunnels to the ramp, through security, and off into the Pennsylvania twilight.

One day in Iron Mountain isn't nearly enough to see a fraction of the stuff contained in the 12 square miles of this former mine, and we didn't even scratch the surface. But our day in Corbis' facility was truly incredible. As we drove back down the I80 the next day, we couldn't stop talking about the shots we'd seen, and the mine in general — 2,000 people working every day to make sure that all these archives, from server back-ups to recordings, celluloid to patents, are protected and saved for eternity.

As for the collection, I love the shot of Air Force One. When you look, you can just see Kennedy's face in the window — it somehow conveys the power and the loneliness of the job. The shot of Muhammad Ali driving the bus is another favorite. He apparently decided he was going to drive the press bus returning reporters from his training camp, so just jumped in and drove off. Not something you'd ever expect today in these controlled-access times.



Check out the whole Impossible Cool x Sonic Editions collection, after the jump...

LAUNCH THE SLIDESHOW →



Tags: Impossible Cool, Corbis, Sean Sullivan, Sonic Editions

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