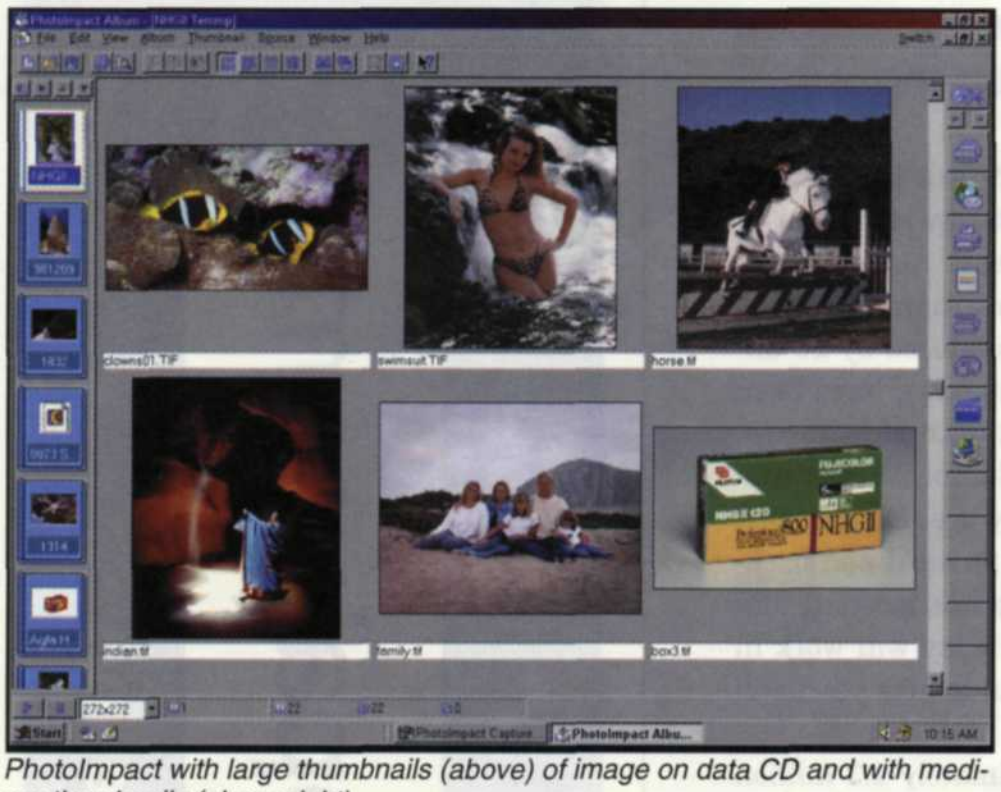
DIGITAL DIRECTIONS



PhotoImpact with large thumbnails (above) of image on data CD and with medium thumbnails (above right)

MGI PhotoSuite II showing photo album database function

Photo Recall photo album using preview function of the select image

DIGITAL

Keeping things in order is the name of the game. It's everyone's goal, because no one likes disorganization or clutter. This is especially true when it comes to organizing your negatives and slides. It's a never ending battle as there are always new images to file before you have gotten a handle on the first group. That's why the digital database is now a part of the Drafahl's imaging life!

Photo Recall photo album using medium thumbnails in filmstrip mode in corkboard mode.

Photo Recall photo album using film strip mode (small thumbnails)

PHOTO DATABASES

Jack & Sue Drafahl

WHEN WE FIRST started filing our negatives and slides, we decided to sit down and develop a system. First, we designed the Drafahl numbering system that allowed us to identify a specific subject and the number of images filed under that subject heading. Secondly, we decided to individually number our vast collection of images. Then reality hit. There was no way the two of us could catalog all the images before it was time for us to retire!

So, then came plan "B". We would only number images as they were sent out for potential stock photo sales or to accompany an article. No, not all the images would be numbered in our lifetime, but the valuable ones would have a number and be sent out over and over. We would now have some semblance of order and still have a life.

When computers became popular, everyone caonvinced us that our filing system was antiquated and we should re-enter all the data into a computer filing database. Being open-minded folks, we gave it try. We found it very labor intensive and all we ended up with was information specific to a particular image. If we actually wanted to see the image, we still had to open the file drawer and look for the image.

In time, computer programs became more sophisticated and many types of photo database programs were available to catalog digital image files. Inexpensive scanners made it possible to enter traditional slides and negatives into the digital world. As digital photography entered the arena, photographers started using digital cameras to record those special moments in time.

Photographers and photo labs longed for the promise of having all their files in one photo tracking system. Enthusiastically they tackled the project of converting their entire file of traditional negatives and slides into a digital photo database. Very quickly they realized that to scan a thumbnail image and enter the data would take 4-6 times longer than their manual method. If they wanted one system, they would have to dedicate time and manpower to finish the project.

Although digital databases are not always efficient for traditional photography, they are critical to cataloging digital photos. Without them you're working blind, and the thumbnail images make finding any photo a breeze. The speed and quality of these programs has made them invaluable tools for maintaining order. We researched software companies to see just what digital photo database software was available. We found that many of the editing software programs had sub-programs called albums.

These albums collected digital files and made thumbnail images for review, but we finally chose a standalone database program from Ulead Systems, called PhotoImpact version 4.2. With this program you give a name to the database and then tell it to collect all files from a specific storage device such as a hard disk, cartridge, or CD. After all the images have been collected and thumbnail images made, you can edit and add extra information about each image. Anytime you perform an image search, you will be able to see the image on the screen in seconds.

We also downloaded more than a dozen demo database programs off the Web and looked at the speed and versatility of each. One program, Advanced Disk Catalog, from Elcom Ltd., impressed us so much that we paid a whole $20 for a full version, and now use it as a quick find digital file program. We still use the Photo Impact program as our main photo database, but find this super fast database program can cut our search time by more than half. It does not use the thumbnail function, but it

catalogs data CDs very quickly.

Since CDs already have a table of contents, the ADC program merely picks up the data in the table of contents and adds it to the database. Our ADC database looks much like Windows Explorer and loads over 300 CDs that represent about 180 GB of data in only 5 seconds. Most data searches take less than 8–10 seconds to find a file. Although it takes extra time to add images to both databases, the time is well spent when you need a specific file in a hurry.

When we need a digital file of an image from our traditional files, we pull it from the file drawer, scan it into the computer and add it to the digital database. Before we returned the negative or slide to the traditional file drawer, we mark two dots on the slide mount or negative edge to indicate that it is now in the digital database. We use a two-dot system, because a single dot might be mistaken as an artifact on the slide or negative. When we pull that specific image from the filing cabinet in the future, we quickly see that it has already been scanned into our digital database. We can then access the digital image via a thumbnail in the photo database.

This way we only enter the images that need to leave the office, just like we did with our manual filing system. We can cross reference the digital scan using the same number as the original image which is safely stored away in the file drawer. Digital images for the photo database can be stored on a variety of media, but we have found the most reliable and cost effective to be the write once CD.

We prefer this device over all others because there is no chance that the files can be deleted. If you change the file in any way, just copy a new version to another CD. The cost of these CDs is below $2 each for 650 megabytes of compact data storage. That makes for some pretty inexpensive safe file storage.

For cataloging digital files, a thumbnail database is absolutely necessary to keep order and organization. Once you have the data input, you will have your images at your fingertips in seconds. If you are still dead set on bringing all your images into one digital database, we suggest that you continue using your traditional system and slowly convert. This will ensure that all your images are available for easy access. Remember that lost images could mean lost money.

For further information about PhotoImpact, contact Ulead Systems at www.ulead.com. Advanced Disk Catalog is available from Elcom Ltd. at www.elcomsoft.com.

Jack and Sue Drafahl own and operate a custom lab in Oregon. They are also professional photographers, specializing in underwater photography.

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