

# Howard Watkins aims to preserve Fresno history with photographs

By Carmen George  
cgeorge@fresnobee.com

Spend any sizable chunk of time with Howard K. Watkins and a discussion about family history is bound to bubble up.

While touring an exhibition displaying dozens of his favorite photos at Fresno State's [Henry Madden Library](#) — a snapshot of thousands of photos he has taken for free over the years at Fresno events — the 68-year-old spends a long while talking about his ancestors.

He says historic records indicate his Jewish ancestors could have been related to the House of David, which means “Jesus is a distant cousin,” he says with a laugh. “But I don’t make a point of that, typically.”

Later, he asks, “So, how are you related to Chief Justice Ron George?”

I’m not related to Ron George, I tell him, or any other George in the central San Joaquin Valley.

“No,” Watkins insists, in a stern, sure voice. “No, no. You do not know *how* you are related because, literally, we’re all related.”

This idea — that we are all related — is at the heart of Watkins passion for photography. He loves people, he says, and wants to preserve their images for history, but most importantly, for their descendants to come.

Genealogy is my hobby. Photography used to be, but it became an obsession.

Howard K. Watkins

To help with that, he is donating [his collection](#) to Fresno State, but is still in the process of raising money to cover the costs for scanning photos, staff work, digital storage space and licensing fees in perpetuity. So far, he has raised about \$30,000 of a needed \$200,000. None of the money goes to Watkins for his time to do this work.

Since the 1970s, Watkins has spent hundreds of hours taking nearly 300,000 photographs at countless Fresno events.

The retired senior deputy county counsel, recently named Fresno’s photo laureate by the City Council, has his photos on display at the Henry Madden Library, where they can be viewed weekdays for free through Aug. 14. The collection includes elected officials, civic leaders, prosecutors and judges, award recipients, artists, athletes, celebrities, faith leaders, veterans and some skylines. Almost all the photos are of Fresno people and places.

There is a lot that Fresno offers. There’s cultural diversity, restaurant diversity and the downtown is still fairly historic. I’m glad to see the revitalization.

Howard K. Watkins

Walking through Watkins’ exhibit last week, Kathy Ogle was blown away by the breadth of the collection.

“I thought this was his full-time job, I didn’t realize it was his hobby. My!” Ogle says. “It’s such an amazing amount of work for a hobby. ... He’s at everything.”

Unlike many professional photographers, Watkins says he loves to take large group photographs — what he started

to do increasingly after photographing Fresno State's softball team in 1998 after they won the NCAA Women's National Championship.

That got him thinking, "Hey Howard, you can pull together a large group photo, just ask."

Also admiring Watkins' photos last week was Pat Ogle, former executive director of Fresno State's Bulldog Foundation, who is now semi-retired.

"What an amazing gift for our community and for the future community to be able to have archived this kind of history," Pat Ogle says. "You think about your family, our family, we take pictures and what happens with them? Do they ever really get archived in terms of a history?"

Fresno State is certainly appreciative of him making such a wonderful donation of his collection.

Pat Ogle

Watkins admits many photos don't have captions, but at the least, he says, his goal is to have all the photos categorized by name of event and date.

He says he expects to be archiving his photographs until his death. He wants this to be his legacy.

In the gallery at Fresno State, there is a wall he has dedicated just for photos of his family. Beaming, he points out photos of his daughter to the Ogles — snapshots from when she was born, when she graduated from school and when she was married.

"Beautiful," Kathy Ogle says.

Gazing at the images with a warm smile, Watkins responds, "Yeah."

Carmen George: [559-441-6386](tel:559-441-6386), [@CarmenGeorge](https://www.instagram.com/CarmenGeorge)

To donate to the Howard K. Watkins Photographic Archive Project

Tax-deductible donations can be sent to the nonprofit Fresno Regional Foundation, with a note that the donation is for the "Howard K. Watkins Photo Archive Fund." Donations can be made [online](#) or by mail and sent to 5260 N. Palm Ave., Suite 122.