Southern California Edison is one of those entities so large that we almost can't see it, or imagine its reach. The largest utility in the state employs 18,000 people and brings power to 14 million throughout the Southland. Like Melville's whale, if you knew everything about SCE, you would know everything about the world.

Its current troubles -- including what to do with the dangerous white elephant of San Onofre and why its workers took so long to bring power back after the windstorms of 18 months ago -- somehow seem more manageable when viewed in the grand scope of its history over more than a century.

And studying that history got more accessible to us all when Edison donated its entire photographic archive of 70,000 images from 1887 through 1975 to the Huntington Library and lent employees who over two years digitized the entire collection for all to view online at hdl.huntington.org.

How fitting the donation is, considering that Henry Huntington's Pacific Light and Power was one of the precursor companies that eventually became SCE in 1908.

Corporate photography by definition can be excruciatingly dull when it simply serves its business masters. But size matters. With this many images, created for hundreds of different reasons, the collection becomes rather Pynchonesque in scope. And its big take on the world of Southern California as it developed is incredibly enhanced because it turns out that four of the principal full-time photographers, G. Haven Bishop (active ca. 1905-1939), Doug White (active 1940-1954), and Joe Fadler and Art Adams (1950s-early 1970s) were skilled artisans. Sent out to shoot a power pole hit by a careening car as evidence in a legal case, they returned with noirish images of people and places now vanished in the "Chinatown" of our past.

Thursday night, USC history professor Bill Deverell gathered other scholars at the Pasadena Library as part of the Getty's Pacific Standard Time project to discuss the Edison collection as "A Laboratory for Modernity" in the Southland. UCLA's Eric Avila saw the collection as evidence of the rise of a new kind of "republic of consumption" in Southern California as for the first time the American economy shifted from one oriented to production to one based on buying stuff. The post-war explosion of home buying and freeway construction was built on all those years of orange-crate art advertising, not just the citrus it promoted but the magical place where it was grown. And Hollywood, he said, created images that "promoted the affluence and success" immigrants imagined they would find here -- and that they sometimes did. Avila put up on the screen one of those better-living-through electricity Edison photos from the '50s that showed a housewife ecstatically, erotically holding a blanket she had just pulled hot from her new dryer, so in love with what the modern world had wrought in her laundry room.

Sarah Schrank of Cal State Long Beach discussed both how electrification and consumer culture created, "to counter Communism, vacuum cleaners that were lightweight" and the equal and opposite reaction that was the bohemianism of the late '60s: "to put a little dirt back in your life." She noted how "Los Angeles has always had a conflicted attitude toward nature: We naved it over, but it was marketed as an Edenic
The Edison collection is so vast its depths have yet to be plumbed. Yet, as UNLV professor Greg Hines said, it's available around the clock to anyone with a computer or a smartphone: "Everyone is trying to condense it or distill it, but the intent is just the opposite. Follow the bread crumbs in and just rummage around."

You, too, can be a contemporary scholar of Southern California. Drop me a note and tell me what you have found.

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