The Morgan Photographic Collection is one of the cornerstone collections of the Western Michigan University Archives and Regional History Collections with its nearly 27,000 4x6 black and white photographic negatives. The Ward Morgan Photograph Collection reflects the people, industries, built environment, and commercial activities that resulted in Kalamazoo's being called the "Window City of America" in the 1950s. While the ordinary has been broken by some events, such as the unprecedented decision to construct the first pedestrian mall in the heart of Kalamazoo's business district in 1959, more often than not, Kalamazoo was celebrated for its typical qualities. In 1958, the United States Information Agency selected Kalamazoo as a typical American City. A pictorial exhibit, "Kalamazoo—And How It Grew," was shown in Manchester, London, Birmingham, Sheffield, Coventry, and Hull, England; and Cardiff, Wales, and Edinburgh, Scotland. The United States Information Agency also selected Kalamazoo to represent the United States as the major American contribution to the Berlin Free Fair in 1958.

Although Kalamazoo was at times known for its paper and later for pharmaceuticals, the community always depended on a multitude of middle-sized and small businesses. Kalamazoo's working class labored at paper, sheet metal, and within the service sectors of the community. The Ward Morgan Collection documents the people, processes, and products of the community from the 1940s through the 1980s.

Ward Morgan was himself a product of Kalamazoo. Born June 23, 1907 in Kalamazoo, Morgan spent all of his adult life in the community. His father, Ernest Morgan, worked for a variety of attorneys over his career. Morgan operated the photography studio for the next fifty years, working primarily for local companies. His 27,000 Kalamazoo images include commercial work, streets, buildings, people, advertising, architecture and span 1939-1987. Morgan died in 1997 and donated his lifetime collection of photographic work and copyright privileges to the Western Michigan University Archives and Regional History Collections.

Despite the importance of the collection, it remained inaccessible to all but the most determined researchers. Researchers had to travel to the Archives to use it under careful supervision because of the vulnerable nature of photographic negatives. The Collection was researched and images appeared in the Kalamazoo Historic Preservation Commission's publication, Kalamazoo: Lost & Found (2001). Other researchers throughout the United States contacted the Archives relative to historical product and industry information about Kalamazoo Stoves, Shakespeare Rod and Reels, and the numerous paper industries that were in Kalamazoo during the 1950s and 1960s.

In 2002, a decision was made to use the Ward Morgan Collection as a pilot project to begin digitizing some of the collections at the Archives. The Ward Morgan Collection was chosen because of its research value and also because copyright had been transferred with the collection. Lou Ann Morgan, who later became coordinator of the WMU Regional Digitization Center, began the process of determining the research value of the collection. A decision was made to retain the chronological order imposed by the creator. Also, preliminary steps were taken to insure the long-term preservation of the collection, which included transferring the negatives from their original acidic sleeves to archival sleeves and transferring the collection into appropriate acid-neutral boxes.

During the preliminary appraisal of the Collection, Western Michigan University became involved as a Regional Digitization Center in The Making of Modern Michigan. The Making of Modern Michigan is a statewide collaborative project aimed at libraries throughout the state to contribute to a digital collection about the state's history. The digitization of the Ward Morgan Collection was a perfect fit. (The last two issues of Gatherings include detailed articles on the Center.)

Because of the size of the Ward Morgan Collection, it was decided to create categories to assist researchers using the digital collection. The categories of Advertising, Business Products, Business Scenes, Education, Events, Industrial Products, Industrial Scenes, Insurance, People - Daily Life, People Working, Religious, Residential Scenes, Societies, and Street Scenes were selected to address the types of resources requested by patrons using photographic collections at the Archives and Regional History Collections. Digital collections are often organized around themes without changing the original order of the physical collection, and thereby provide unique opportunities to assist users.

Within these categories, the wealth of the Ward Morgan Collection reflects the economic mix of small to large manufacturing processes as well as numerous service industries providing employment to the majority of Kalamazoo's citizens. The collection has proven to be a good source of scenes from paper manufacturing and related industries, such as printing, publishing, binding, and box manufacture. Other photos include commercial laundries, repair shops, and retail establishments. The collection also depicts the leisure interests and activities of the working class, including employee groups and organizations. Images depict a cooking school sponsored by a local appliance sales company, community dances, and housing within the community. Perhaps one of the most interesting categories is that of "Insurance." Morgan worked for a variety of attorneys over his career. Much of this section includes photos of roads and damaged automobiles.

The Ward Morgan Collection as part of The Making of Modern Michigan will benefit scholars, students learning about Michigan history, and free-choice learners of all ages. To date, 500 images have been prepared. To preview the Collection, see the web site at http://mmm.lib.msu.edu/search. Although The Making of Modern Michigan project has been completed, the regional center is actively seeking additional funding from other sources to continue the preservation and digitization project associated with the Ward Morgan Collection. The breadth and depth of this collection, as well as a myriad of other digitization projects in southwestern Michigan, are a strong justification for the Regional Digitization Center at WMU. And, for Ward Morgan, the digitized collection will provide a permanent archive of a unique individual's view of a "typical" midwestern community.