

Grandma Nellie's Scrapbook: Identifying & Interpreting Old Photographs

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Identifying and Dating Your Photographs:

- What large features are in the photo, e.g. buildings, scenery, vehicles?



- Are there street signs or business names?
- Does the photo have a photographer's name or address listed?
- What type of material is the photo?
 - Tin Type, Cart de Visite, Color Print...
- What style of clothing are people wearing?
- Tax stamps were used during the Civil War 1863-1865.
- Once you have narrowed down a time period & location you can begin to identify the subjects in the photo.

Themes and Trends in Photography:

- Clothing styles change by decade:
 - Full skirts and button-down jackets in the 1860s
 - White button-down shirts and puffy sleeves in the 1910s
 - Straight skirts and long strands of beads in the 1920s
- Examine hats, bonnets and jewelry

Props and Backgrounds:

- Photographer's backgrounds & props are a great way to tie photos together or to a particular time and studio.
- Look for identical items: chairs, tables, cloth, curtains, backgrounds



Eras:



- Tin Types 1855-1885
- Diamonds were popular @ 1895
- Carte de Visite (Cabinet Cards) 1860s-1910s
- Picture Postcards 1900-1920s
- Rectangular portraits were a popular style @ 1910-1925
- Art Deco revival cardboard enclosures @ 1940-1950s
- Polaroid 1948-1962 1963- (3 distinct eras)

Active Seeing:

- What type of photographic medium do you have?
- What type of photo is it? Studio portrait or candid?
- What is the physical condition?
- What do you see in the background?
- How many people are in the picture?
- Indoors or outdoors? What time of year?



Age Regressions/Progressions

- Look for similarities in appearance, e.g. glasses, pierced ears, cleft chin, detached earlobes
- Examine mannerisms:
 - Do they tilt their head in a certain way?
 - Do they use the same smile in every photo?

Family Resemblances

- Trust your gut! If a person looks like Uncle Bob, then use that as a possible ID
- Ask your family? If you suspect someone is related on Mom's side, ask relatives.

Online Resources:

- Chronicling America Newspapers <https://archive.org/details/catalogs>
- Dead Fred: www.deadfred.com
- Digital Public Library of America <https://dp.la>
- FamilySearch www.familysearch.org
- Family Tree Magazine guide to Digital Photo Archives
<https://familytreemagazine.com/photos/online-historical-photo-databases>
- Flickr: www.flickr.com
- Fold3 City Directory Collection <https://www.fold3.com/collection/city-directories>
- Google News Archive <https://news.google.com/newspapers>
- Illinois Digital Library www.idaillinois.org
- Internet Archive Catalog Collection <https://archive.org/details/catalogs>
- Internet Archive City Directories <https://archive.org/search?query=City+directories>
- Library of Congress www.loc.gov
- NYPL Photo Collection <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/collections/lane/photographs>
- Plainfield Enterprise <https://plainfieldpublic.advantage-preservation.com>
- Plainfield Library <https://papl.info/resources/local-history-genealogy-collection>
- Shorpy Historic Photo Archive: www.shorpy.com
- U.S. National Archives www.archives.gov/research/alic/reference/photography.html

Print Resources

- Eakle, Arlene H. Photograph Analysis. Family History World. Salt Lake City. 1976.
- Eastman Kodak Co. Conservation of Photographs. Eastman Kodak Co. Rochester. 1985.
- Frisch-Ripley, Karen. Unlocking the Secrets in Old Photographs. Ancestry. Salt Lake City. 2001.
- Langford, Martha. Suspended Conversations: the afterlife of memory in photographic albums. McGill-Queen's University Press. Montreal. 2008
- May-Levenick, Denise. How to Archive Family Photos. Family Tree Books. Cincinnati. 2015
- Niemetzky, Gerard. Photo Retouching with Photoshop. O'Reilly Press. 2005.
- Romer, Grant. Young America: the daguerreotypes of Southworth and Hawes. George Eastman House. Rochester. 2005
- Sturdevant, Katherine Scott. Organizing & Preserving Your Family Heirlooms. Better Way Books. Cincinnati. 2002.
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