

FINDING THE STORY IN HISTORICAL PHOTOGRAPHS

Lyn Gesch, 2/27/2019

Questions to ask when looking at a photo:

- Where did this come from, i.e., where and when did you find it?
- What type of photograph is it? (tintype, cabinet, etc.) *Read about these types at <https://www.olivetreegenealogy.com/photos/photo-types.shtml>*
- Is there any identifying information on it, front or back? Consider any information as tentative until you investigate its accuracy.
- Do you recognize anyone in it? How would you describe those you can't identify?
- What are people wearing? Describe in detail, then go to sources that can help place them in a particular period. (See References on the reverse side.)
- Is anyone in the photo wearing jewelry? High-resolution digital images may be zoomable enough so that a detailed description is possible.
- If a group photo, how are people positioned in relation to each other? Can you feel or see any emotions from the subjects?
- What's in the background? Is this a studio portrait or an informal outside shot? Can you identify the location, either by the photographer's information or by analyzing the surroundings (either inside or out)? Architectural details can lead to research in local history sources, tell you something about the economic status of the people, tell you the season of the year, reveal the lifestyle of the subjects, etc.
- To help in dating the photo, look for objects that have evolved in style or form over the years (make and model of cars, numbers of stars in a flag, type of telephone, etc.).
- Can you identify why the photograph was taken? Was it a special event, and, if so, what type?
- What questions does this photograph raise in your mind? Do the details tell some part of this family's story?

From Architectural Photographer and Genealogist Boris Feldblyum

http://www.bfcollection.net/fast/articles/photo_inter.htm:

- What is your immediate impression? Who and what do you see?
- What feelings does the photo evoke in you?
- What is obvious, and what is subtle?
- What, if anything, is happening in a photo?
- What can you say about body language? Do people show themselves off, hide behind?
- What do you notice about the emotional state of each person? Can you describe the people as attractive, depressed, shy, proud, fearful, suspicious, introspective, happy, anxious, bright, curious, distant, rigid, friendly, arrogant, lonely, trusting, crazy, strong, weak?
- For each person, analyze posture, hands, arms, legs, the face, the eyes, the mouth. Do you sense harmony or inconsistencies?
- Is there anything that disturbs you? Do you identify with the people on a photo? How are you alike? different? Would you want to be a part of this family?

Photographic Methods (Taylor 2005, p.37):

- 1839-1860: daguerreotypes (*clue: hold at an angle to view*)
- 1854-1865: glass ambrotypes (*clue: has holes in backing material*)
- 1856 to mid-1900s: iron tintypes (*clue: they're magnetic*)
- Late 19th century: paper cabinet photos (encased in cardstock)

Reference Works:

Harrell-Sesniak, Mary, Oct.,14, 2013, “How to date old ancestor photographs with early photo types,” GenealogyBank.com: <https://blog.genealogybank.com/how-to-date-old-ancestor-photographs-with-early-photo-types.html>

Moreshead, Halvor, “When Was It Taken?” in *Family Chronicle*, Nov/Dec 2006, available online at <http://www.internet-genealogy.com/Dating%20Old%20Photos.pdf>

“Dating Ancestor Photos Through Clothing and Hairstyles” (Civil War era) <https://www.olivetreegenealogy.com/photos/fashions-photos.shtml>

Severa, Joan, Dressed for the Photographer: Ordinary Americans and Fashion, 1840-1900.

Interview with Boris Feldblyum, May 2003:

http://www.bfcollection.net/fast/articles/photo_inter.htm

Margot Note Consulting LLC, “How to Analyze Historical Photographs”:

<http://www.margotnote.com/blog/2017/11/1/how-to-analyze-historic-photographs>

Taylor, Maureen. “Every Picture Tells a Story: Finding Harry’s”: <https://maurentaylor.com/every-picture-tells-a-story-searching-for-harrys/>

Books by Taylor are sold through her online store at <https://maurentaylor.com/store/>:

Family Photo Detective

Fashionable Folks: Bonnets and Hats

Hairstyles 1840-1900






Free online from Maureen Taylor, Sep. 11, 2016: “Toxic Hairstyles in Old Family Photos,” online at https://www.familytreemagazine.com/articles/save_share_family_history/family-photos/1920s-photos/toxic-hairstyles-in-old-family-photos/

Taylor contributes a regular “Photo Detective” feature in *Family Tree Magazine*. You can access issues of *FTM* through the Camarillo Public Library. Under Explore→Digital Resources, go to RBDigital Magazines. You will need to be logged in with your library card and create an account with RBDigital. Search for “family tree” and then “check out” an issue.

Suggestion: The February 2005 issue of *FTM* has an article by Taylor entitled, “Pictures of Success,” pages 34-39. Taylor walks you through the steps of solving photo mysteries.

Resources in the VCGS Genealogy Collection: Go to <https://venturacogensoc.org>

In the left frame, click on “Library” then “Library Holdings.” In the search box, go to the bottom line, select “keyword” search, then type “photograph” in the next field. Selected hits (when online, click on the eye to see details):

Actions	Call Number	Title ↑	Author
	016.929 REI REFERENCE	CARE AND IDENTIFICATION OF 19TH CENTURY PHOTOGRAPHIC PRINTS	Reilly, James M.
	016.929 GAG REFERENCE	DIRECTORY OF PHOTOGRAPHERS IN THE UNITED STATES 1888 & 1889 AND CANADA 1889	Gagel, Diane VanSkiver
	016.929 SEV REFERENCE	DRESSED FOR THE PHOTOGRAPHER Ordinary Americans and Fashion 1840 - 1900	Severa, Joan L.
	016.929 TAY REFERENCE	UNCOVERING YOU ANCESTRY THROUGH FAMILY PHOTOGRAPHS How to identify, interpret and preserve you family's visual heritage	Taylor, Maureen
	016.929 FRI REFERENCE	UNLOCKING THE SECRETS IN OLD PHOTOGRAPHS	Frisch-Ripley, Karen