Identifying a Family Photo

Helpful tips and tricks for solving a picture mystery
What are we going to cover?

- Sherlock Holmes, not Harry Potter – science of deduction!
- Gather all the evidence you can and eliminate possibilities
Photograph Type

• Daguerreotype: first publicly available photos, started in 1839; used mostly in 1840s-1850s
• Ambrotype: prominent in 1850s-mid 1860s
• Tintype: prominent in late 1860s-1880s, but still used until early 20th century
• Carte-de-visite/Cabinet card: introduced at different times, but most popular from 1880s to 1920s
Photograph Examples

Daguerreotype

Ambrotype
Photograph Examples
Photograph Examples
Photograph Examples

Tintype

Cabinet Card
Photographers

• Use every clue available! Any caption/written information could be a key.
• Many early photographs had a trademark logo written or stamped on—these photography studios have their own history that can tell you about your picture.
Photographers
What can I find out from this?

- The Pugsley Studio operated in Peru from 1908 to 1934, so we know that this picture had to be taken sometime in that range.
- The Studio specialized in portraiture and miniatures, so this was probably not a “favor to a friend” situation, but if a majority of other pictures were taken by the same Studio, it could indicate a personal relationship with the owners (Phillip Pugsley, Nettie (nee Conner) Pugsley, or Ray Pugsley).
- The Studio set up shop in two different locations, both in downtown Peru, so we know this person likely had convenient access to the town.
Photographers
What can I find out from this?

• The Klein & Guttenstein Studio operated at this address for only one year, before moving to a new location, so the NYPL was able to determine that this photo was taken in 1899.

• The NYPL has a huge online database (over 100,000 photographers in the USA) called the Photographers’ Identities Catalog, or PIC, that was launched in 2016.

   http://pic.nypl.org/

• Another great website is the Photography Database, though it is less user-friendly.

   http://photographydatabase.org/
Fashion

• One of the best ways to date a photo is by looking at the people in it—what are they wearing? How do they do their hair? What jewelry or accessories do they have at hand?

• Many fashions were particular to certain time periods, so identifying a certain dress type or sleeve variety may help you narrow a date range down to ten years or less.
Fashion

Family portrait from 1873

Personal portrait from 1893
Environment

• The items in the background of a photo can be just as helpful as fashion in determining when a picture was taken
• Take note of any visible buildings, technologies, tools, signs, sidewalks, etc. that appear in the photo
• Background items can help determine both date and location
Fashion

Family portrait from 1873

Personal portrait from 1893
Environment

One of the first brick buildings in Peru, pre-1926

A man and his new car, 1946
Fashion

- Resources:
  - The University of Vermont’s “Dating Historic Images” Project:
  - Wikipedia Fashion by Decades Example, 1870s fashion:
    [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1870s_in_Western_fashion](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1870s_in_Western_fashion)
Family Information

• Take the data you’ve gotten from the pictures and try to work it in—do any of the dates or locations match information you already have about your family? Do you have any identified pictures from the same time/place that might match? Is there anyone else in the family who might have more information about that time/place?

• Keep going with genealogy!
Protecting Family Treasures

How to Preserve important family items for future generations
What items are at risk?

- Short answer: everything! (But in different ways.)
Biggest Problems for Collections

- Temperature and humidity
- Pests
- Poor storage materials/methods
Temperature and relative humidity

• Be consistent! Even if you can’t keep temperatures and humidity exactly where they should be, keeping them stable will help.
  • Avoid storing records in places with bad airflow or uneven access to climate control—e.g. a stuffy attic or closet; a musty basement;
  • Cooler temperatures slow down decay on your items. Everything is slowly being destroyed by chemistry, and heat (a form of energy) feeds chemical reactions. It would be better to keep everything at 75 degrees year-round, though, then to have it at 50 degrees in the winter and 90 degrees in the summer.
  • Relative humidity, ideally, shouldn’t be too low or too high. Too much moisture in the air (above ~65%) will encourage mold growth and pest infestations. Too little moisture (below ~15%) will rob materials of their flexibility, encouraging brittleness and cracking.
    • If an item gets exposed to black mold, best practices are to throw it away immediately, to avoid exposing your other items to mold spores. Spores will not be visible to the naked eye, and once the mold itself starts growing, you need to assume that everything around that item has already been infected. Unchecked mold growth is one of the fastest ways to lose an entire collections.
Don’t store stuff here!
Pests

• There are many creepy crawlies who enjoy snacking on your family heirlooms. Some of the more common for paper and photographic collections are silverfish, cockroaches, and occasionally small rodents like mice or rats.

• Even specialized museum collection areas with restricted rules and no outdoor access have occasional problems with animal invasions, so it will be virtually impossible to fully safeguard a standard house.

• Be vigilant! Be aware of any damage your collections have, so that you notice if new holes start to appear. If you see any animal remains or any living organisms, odds are high that there are more pests throughout the collection that you aren’t seeing, so take action quickly. Setting traps around your storage area can also be an early detection method to let you know that critters are about.

• If you do have an insect problem, you can kill them with minimal damage to your collection with an extended freezing period. Wrap the items tightly in plastic and put them in a freezer that goes down to at least 0 degrees Fahrenheit and leave them there for a week. Take them out, let them thaw, then freeze them again for another week. The changing temperature will not be good for the collection, but will be far less damaging than an unchecked insect invasion.
Common Pests

Silverfish

Firebrat
Poor Storage Materials/Methods

• The Cardinal Rule of Preservation is to never do something to your materials that you can’t undo. If you’re thinking about doing something to your collections, ask yourself: “How difficult will it be for me to do something different later?”
  • For example, gluing or taping an item into a scrapbook will be very difficult to seamlessly undo later.
• Remember that small issues now will become big or permanent problems with time
  • Using paperclips or staples will cause rust stains and indentations or holes; using acidic materials will cause faster breakdown of materials; leaving a rubber band on an item can cause permanent stains and material breakdown; storing items in plastic bins will restrict airflow and alter temperature and humidity controls
• As much as possible, take care that your items can be stored flat. Any bending or leaning will cause constant strain on the item and hasten material breakdown.
  • This can be an issue with three ring binders as well as boxes. If binders are filled too much, they will create a strain leading towards the middle, which will warp your items.
Storage Don’ts!
Any Questions?