

# 24. The Value of Photo Archiving

by: Charlie Nye

## FAMILY PHOTOS

### UNSOLVED (and some solved) MYSTERIES

By Charlie Nye



## Are the people in your old family photos **LOST TO TIME?**

*Maybe not!*

Anyone interested in genealogy treasures the photos that have been passed down by their parents and grandparents -- fascinating visual records of times long ago. Better than words, these images make it possible to visualize what life was like in the days of Model Ts, farm living and family reunions -- the days before television, cell phones and modern conveniences we take for granted, like washing machines and electronics. The appreciation for these wonderful photos increases when you know who the people are

and when they were taken. Unfortunately, few people took the time to write complete information on photos (and many still don't). Now that people in the photos are gone, it's too late to ask them. How disheartening to stare into those youthful faces in the pictures and have no idea who they are, what life stories lie ahead for them. Most unidentified pictures will remain mysteries of time, but don't just give up. With some photo analysis, research and help from other family members, some mysteries can be solved!

### Start discovering the 5 "W's" in old family photos:

- WHO?** Someone may have written general comments or observations like "family meal" but not the names (*they* knew who they were, but weren't thinking that people 50 years later wouldn't know who is in the photos).
- WHAT?** Use the power of observation. The camera captured many interesting things -- toys, pony carts, pictures on women's broaches, school buildings that are long gone, canes, farm implements.
- WHEN?** Clues: license plate dates, clothing styles of different decades, estimated ages of people you recognize.
- WHERE?** Does something look familiar?: pictures on the wall, buildings in the background, location of trees?
- WHY?** This is perhaps the most difficult to discern. Today, we take pictures nonchalantly, but years ago a family may have reserved the taking of photos for a special occasion (family visiting from out-of-town, marriage).

## Who's who: The challenge of unidentified family photos

### 1) FAMILY TREE

For starters, have your family tree readily available for reference when you look through old photos. The names, birth/marriage/death dates will prove helpful in confirming or ruling out possible identities of people in your photos. For instance, a photo from the 1950s or 60s might be date stamped by the photofinisher, but has no name. If you think it could be a certain relative, check that person's age that year (and living/dead status). People you don't recognize may be cousins, in-laws or children that did not live to adulthood.

*(TIP: Verify information if it comes from a tree compiled by someone else. People often make mistakes. Take time to write names/dates/location on photos as you survey them (for your descendants).*

#### Notes:

### 2) GATHER/ORGANIZE/DIGITIZE

Gather photos from family albums, loose pictures, old family scrapbooks. If there are a lot, you might keep your maternal line photos separate from those in the paternal line (in labeled file folders or manilla envelopes) in a plastic tub for each line. Good clear portraits are helpful to have in digital form (at a high enough resolution to enlarge on your screen to see detail). Multiple pictures of a person at various ages could prove helpful when comparing photos. When naming digital files, include the family name and date of the photo (if known) to make searches easier. Organize the digital files by placing them in folders for each family.

*(TIP: Many cell phone cameras provide acceptable quality when copying photo prints. Move in as close as possible and make sure the copy image is fully focused. For digitized photos, you might want to make some prints/printouts for reference and as a backup).*

#### Notes:

### 3) GET HELP FROM OTHERS

If your parents or grandparents are still living, sit down with them and go through photos and write down information they remember about the photos. Ask about any relatives they know who might have information and other family pictures. If you haven't yet gotten a DNA test, do so in order to discover blood relationships to others in your family line interested in genealogy. By contacting my Ancestry.com DNA matches, I have found second cousins (or more distant) who have photos of shared ancestors. Share your photos with them by mail or email, especially group photos, as they may know some people in group photos that you don't recognize.

*(TIP: This is a long-term project. You can send messages to them through the genealogy company's messaging, but sometimes it takes months for someone to read their messages and respond. Also, when you send a group photo, you might draw a photo key to be able to refer to persons by number).*

#### Notes:

### 4) PUT ON YOUR DETECTIVE HAT AND DO PHOTO ANALYSIS

Study your photos closely. Look at the faces, the clothing, the body language, buildings, even the direction of light (that can tell you if it was taken in the morning or afternoon). All these are clues that could be helpful in learning about the photograph and the people in it. Advanced photo analysis is best done when you have high resolution digital images (see No. 2). You can zoom in on different areas of a photograph to see greater detail and discover things you might ordinarily miss in a print. Regardless, be it print or digital, these visual documents from the past are telling stories. If you don't know the year a photo was taken, look for things like the style of women's clothing -- the length of skirts for example -- to help pinpoint certain decades. Sometimes you'll be able to read dates on license plates or names of businesses in the background. A cousin of mine once dated a group photo that included her mother because she knew her mother changed her hairstyle after graduating from high school. Identifying people is sometimes possible by close scrutiny of facial features (eyes, nose, forehead, ears) and comparing the photo to portraits of the person taken years before or after.

*(TIP: If you have a vintage studio photograph, the format will also help narrow down dates, as tintypes, albumin prints and cabinet cards are associated with certain years).*

#### Notes:

## 5) AUXILIARY SOURCES

Some newspapers in the early 20th century ran small items that families submitted of birthday parties, anniversary gatherings and family reunions (the Dayton papers did this). These items did not include photos, but many of the items did list the names of attendees. If you have a photo of a large family gathering, you might get lucky (as I have) and find a published news item that has names of people at the party that you can look for in your photograph. I found clippings in my grandmother's scrapbooks, but Newspapers.com searches could possibly find these items. Other newspapers, especially in small communities, sometimes published historic photos from their town, submitted by readers. The *Miamisburg News* published such photos years ago, many of them school class photos, sometimes with names of the students in the pictures. Other auxiliary sources include the photo archives of a historical society or library and your own family's personal records. My father kept diaries and scrapbooks, which I saved, and I now refer to them frequently when doing family photo research (it helps to have an approximate idea of a date to search).

*(TIP: You are the primary source for photos of your immediate family -- the pictures of your parents, siblings, your children. Do future generations a service by writing down the names, dates and locations, as well as any other significant information for your photographs).*

### **Notes:**

## A FINAL WORD ABOUT VINTAGE FAMILY PHOTOS

Don't carelessly discard any vintage family photos you have in your family because you have no clue as to who the people are in the pictures. Almost every family had studio photos -- tintypes or cabinet cards -- at one time, but most have gotten rid of them, at garage sales, auctions or just tossed them. Perhaps they asked their children if they wanted them and they said no. A sad truth is that many people are so preoccupied with their own lives, it isn't until later in life they become more curious about and take an interest in the lives of their ancestors. At that point, those photos are gone forever. Consider donating them to a historical society or local library in your family's name if no one in your family line wants them. You never know -- some day a child, grandchild or great grandchild might love to see those photos and begin a search of their own to solve the mystery of who those unidentified ancestors are.