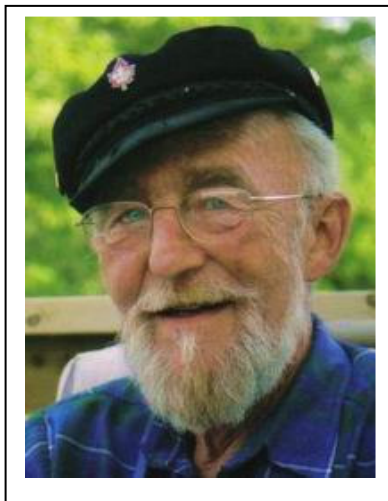


The Family Historian

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Column #16



Old Photographs: An Introduction

Most of us have a number of old, unidentified and undated photographs and would dearly love to know a little more about them. These old photos can be quite fragile and are susceptible to damage from the oils on our fingers so they should be handled with white cotton gloves (the kind you will often find in an archives). It is also better to pick them up from the sides rather than the corners, which break off easily.

Richard Pols, the author of *Family Photographs, 1860-1945*, recommends looking at a photographic collection as a whole before trying to analyze individual photos. There may be some logic to the arrangement of album pages or the sequencing in the shoe box. In archive-speak this is called "*respect des fonds*" and is a good principle to follow with any batch of evidence that comes our way.

Of course, the easiest way to identify a photograph is to make copies and distribute them to older family members asking if they recognize any of the people, places or events depicted. Eventually,

however, there will be some photos that are still mysteries and you will need to know a little bit about the history of photography and other techniques for dating either the photo or its contents. You do want to be cautious because it is always possible that the print you have is not the original and therefore the technique by which it was produced is not an indication of the date of the original.

The earliest known photograph in North America was taken in October or November 1839 but it is highly unlikely that most of us would have any photos that are nearly that old. The first commercially successful process was the *daguerreotype*, which was popular between 1840 and 1850. The image was exposed directly on to a silver-coated copper plate and no negative was involved. When turned in the light, daguerreotypes seem to turn negative in appearance and are generally no more than a few inches across. They were very expensive and if you have any from your family, it is an indication that they were reasonably well off.

Collodion prints, which were popular between 1850 and 1860, began as a glass negative, but by 1852, its inventor had come up with a method that produced positives by bleaching the negative, backing it with black paper, cloth, or black varnish and placing it in a frame. Collodion prints are called ambrotypes in the USA and often in Canada. They were much cheaper, but due to their fragility and their brief reigns of popularity, both formats are rarer than later paper prints, and are quite easy to date.

The Ferrotype, tintype, or tin-plate photograph, was invented in 1854 and remained readily available for almost a hundred years. It used a thin iron sheet coated with black enamel. The photo was usually coated with varnish which darkens with age so many tintypes look quite dark. They can often be identified by rust stains showing through background flaking and, of course, a magnet will give a positive identification. It was a popular process for travelling, and fairground photographers. Appearing at the end of the 1870's "American Gems" were inexpensive, stamp-sized ferrotypes shot on multi-lens cameras. The resulting multiple copies were cut up with scissors and often offered as "photographs while you wait".

Examples of the different types of photographs can be found in books on the history of photography. Helmut and Allison Gernsheim's *The History of Photography* (McGraw-Hill, 1969) has been through several editions starting in 1955 and with slight name changes. The revised edition in 1982 was *The Origins of Photography*.

Until WW I family snapshots were not common and most photographs were taken in a studio. It was usually a big event with everyone dressed in their Sunday best. Itinerant photographers travelled the countryside taking portraits, often using temporary backdrops. My wife and I have found records of sixty different photographers working in Lanark County in the late 19th and early 20th century and an almost equal number in Renfrew County. We are trying to establish the exact dates during which these photographers worked here as an aid to dating their photographs. If you have any early photographs with the photographer identified, we would love to hear from you.

We will explore a variety of other dating techniques for photographs in subsequent columns.