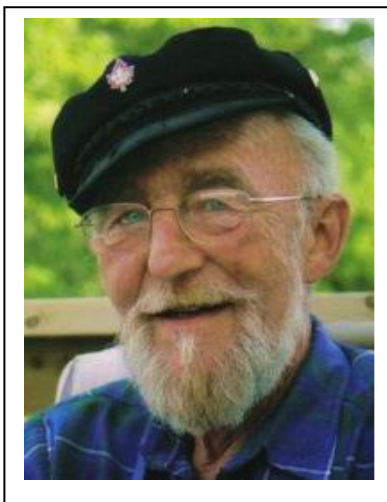


Unlocking the Secrets in Old Photos



In the latter half of the nineteenth century, studio photographs were printed on very thin paper and were often mounted on cardboard backing and were called Cabinet Photographs. Smaller ones, usually about 2½" (6.5 cm) x 4" (10 cm) were called Carte de Visite (CDV). They were used for a variety of purposes including advertising, travel souvenirs (like post cards) and, of course, for family pictures. Some people collected CDV's like children collect trading cards today. Not all CDV's in a family collection are necessarily of the family. Some could be friends, entertainment stars, notable people, etc.

Of course, the best way to identify and date any photograph is to turn it over and find that some kind ancestor has written the name, date, event and place there. I have never found one of these miracles, but I have been assured that it does happen. Usually if anything is written there, it is something really helpful like "Mary at the lake"—Mary who at what lake?

I prefer to start on a batch with a group photo. There is a better chance that someone will recognize at least one of the people and that can provide some ballpark dating. The pose might suggest if people are related or not or what the occasion was. Adults of different sexes usually did not touch each other in a photo unless they were related or about to become so. Combining this with what you already know about these people can narrow down the dating.

Some people loved to photograph dead relatives before burial and this can be helpful for dating. I saw one photo of a family group with the father and mother seated and surrounded by their children. The death date of the father was known so this photo could be dated exactly because, although seated in an armchair, he was quite dead.

Sometimes there are elements in a photograph, intended or not, that can help. A man with sergeant's stripes was photographed after he made sergeant. I have one photo with a car in it. An antique car expert can tell me the model and year and give me a 'not before' date for the photo. Sometimes an address plate is inadvertently included or a piece of furniture or appliance that can help to narrow down the period.

Sometimes the props in a studio photo might help. Originally they used books, urns, furniture, staircases. Around 1875 they introduced rustic accessories and papier-mache props. A magnifying glass can often help in the search for dateable significant elements.

If the image cannot help us enough, we can look at the physical properties of the cabinet photo or CDV and we will explore those properties in a subsequent column.

City Directories On-line

The National Library is experimenting with on-line city directories and has made a large number of them available. You just might be lucky. Check them out at:

<www.collectionscanada.ca/canadiandirectories/index-e.html> . Select "Search the Database". You can select the directory you wish to consult, then type in your search term(s) and in the comfort of your own home do your research.

I chose Lovell's Province of Quebec Directory for 1871 and typed in "Hickey" and "Montreal" as the search terms. Four hits appeared. Some of the pages seemed inappropriate as they were not in the 'H' range but closer examination showed that 'Hickey' appeared as the second name in a business, e.g. Sleath and Hickey.

There are two view options offered: standard and DjVu. The 'Standard View' displays a plain page image and if you have no trouble reading it, don't worry about the other view. There is an option available to download 'DjVu' and I thought it was my duty to try it so that I could tell you all about it. It seemed to take about four hours to download but I didn't doze off so it must have been more like five minutes or so. Viewing in 'DjVu' allows zooming and panning of the page image so you can magnify it to a more comfortable level. The program works much the same way that Adobe Acrobat does with a pdf file and is very simple.

Let's encourage the National Library to do more of this sort of thing.