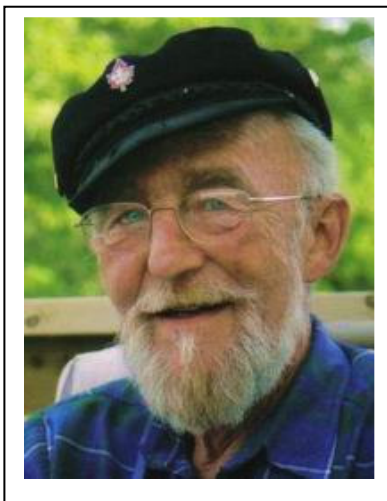


Dating Your Photographs by Costume



A very popular method of dating old photos is by the style of costume, hair-do's, jewellery, etc.. There is an extensive supporting literature on the subject and one of the most highly recommended sources is: Severa, Joan. *Dressed for the Photographer: ordinary Americans and fashion, 1840-1900* (Kent State University Press, c1995, ISBN 0873385128). A quick computer check showed that it is included in most large library collections in Canada.

Personally, I am not wildly enthusiastic about this kind of documentation. I agree that it has its uses for those who could afford to dress in current styles and even among the less well-to-do many young ladies would adapt older clothing to newer styles. For the majority, however, my sense is that people kept their good clothes for a long time. Furthermore the advent of a new style did not automatically mean the death of the previous one. One thing that costume dating can do is to give us a 'not before' date. It is unlikely that a woman will be wearing a broad brimmed hat before they came into style, although she may continue wearing it for some time after a

newer style has appeared, if it is the only good hat she has. So, if we look for the most recent style element in a photograph, we can determine the 'not before' date for it.

A magnifying glass is sometimes essential for this minute examination of a photo. It may also show us details of jewellery that can indicate if someone is married or in mourning or is wearing the insignia of some group.

A style expert I am not. My efforts to co-ordinate what I am wearing evoke pity, amusement (and perhaps despair) among my family, but I will try to highlight a few of the more easily discernible stylistic developments to help with those old photographs. For more detail I strongly recommend venturing into the literature.

In the 1840's women's clothing featured close fitting garments on the top half of the body with full shirts giving a smooth bell shape. The crinoline was all the rage in the 1850's and 1860's, while the 'Dolly Varden' dress appeared in the 1870's. This dress had a bodice connected to a short bunched-up over-skirt that overlay a full loose skirt. The bustle also made its first appearance in the 1870's and by the next decade it was worn high in the back. Tight corsetry was a feature of the 1880's and 1890's creating an 'hourglass' figure and by the early 20th century it had helped to create a sleeker look that seemed heavy breasted and had an "S" shaped stance. 1909 saw the introduction of a close-fitting dress with a long hobbled skirt that narrowed at the ankles. The big broad brimmed hats were popular in the few decades before WW I.

Men's fashions seem a little simpler. In the 1840's and 1850's their suits were worn tight and fitted close to the body. In the late 1860's the lounge suit became popular with its characteristic deep cuffs. Then the suits tightened up again in the 1870's and 1880's but they can often be distinguished by being double breasted. In the 1890's a baggier look prevailed. Men wore soft falling collars from the 1850's to the 1880's when the stiffer starched collars became the norm. The long falling tie (Windsor tie) became popular around 1880.

Family Chronicle magazine, which has published a number of articles on old photographs, has recently published a book called *Dating Old Photographs, 1840-1929*. It includes over 650 pictures whose dates have been ascertained to within two years. The idea is that you can browse the pictures looking for ones that most closely resemble features (hair style, costume, beards, etc.) in your mystery photograph on the assumption that yours will be close in date to one that it closely resembles.

In the final analysis, I am more inclined to use costume to support a possible dating than to determine the dating.