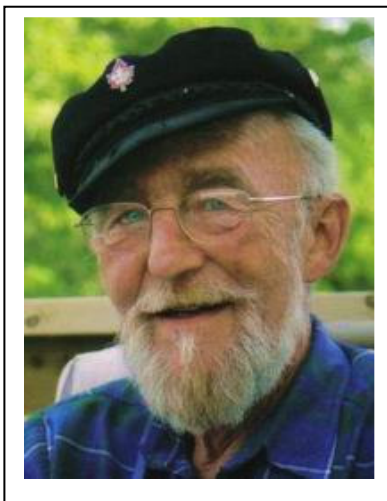


Dating Your Photographs



The thickness, colour, texture, design, and imprints of the backings of cabinet photos can sometimes be used for dating purposes. William Darrah has made an extensive study of CDV's and much of the information that follows is based on his findings. His work was mainly with American samples and I don't know how extensive his documented sample was, so I would take the information as indicative rather than absolute.

Generally speaking the thickness of the cardboard backing increased over time. You can measure the thickness with vernier calipers or a micrometer if you have one, being careful not to squeeze the cardboard. A low tech approach is based on the fact that a sheet of 20 pound bond paper (the weight we normally use for photocopying or computer printers) is very close to .1mm thick. Lay the photo on a hard surface and pile sheets, one at a time beside it running your finger over the joint. When there is no perceptible ridge, count the sheets. Five sheets or less suggests a date between 1858 and 1869; five to seven and a half sheets – 1869-1887; seven and a half to

ten sheets – 1880-1900; more than ten sheets – 1890-1910.

The corners of the card were generally square - 1858-71; rounded – 1871-1910; square again – 1902-1910 but there were a lot of exceptions so it is better to use this feature in conjunction with thickness and colour. The edges of cabinet cards could be square gilt (1870-1900), notched (1894-1900), or bevelled (1875-1900).

Card colour was generally white (but darkened with age) on earliest cards (1858-69) and on slightly thicker cards (1871-1874). Grey and tan were popular (1861-1866); yellow (1869-1874); grey (1872-1880); chocolate brown and black (1877-1887); 'soft' grey (1902-1910). A variety of pale colours was used from 1873 on, sometimes with a different colour on the front and back.

One of the original framing motifs was a one or two line border. Oval frames were printed or embossed (1863-1868) and a faint geometric pattern on the back of the cards was introduced in the early 1880's.

A real bonus for dating American CDV's of the Civil War era is that the American government required tax stamps on them to help pay for the war. The stamps were introduced on 1 Aug 1864 and used until 1 Aug 1866. A one-cent stamp is even better, it was introduced in March 1865 and used until 1 Aug 1866. The photographer was supposed to initial and date the stamp but usually this did not happen.

Ornate designs covering most of the back of the card were introduced about 1872 and Japanese and Egyptian motifs became popular in the 1880's.

Photographers usually placed their imprint on their work. It can appear on either the front or the back of the card and some of them can help with dating. Larger ones, printed on the length of the card came in about 1868. A 'Cherub and Camera' logo was used 1865-1872 and fancier fonts with decorative lines appeared around 1870. Some American photographers used the 'NPA' logo 1871-1874.

Once the photographer or studio has been identified, we really have something to go on. A number of books have been published that list the early photographers of a given area. Glen Phillips has written several for Iron Gate Publishing (London, Ontario); *The western Canada Photographers list (1860-1925)* [ISBN 0921818165] and *The Ontario photographers list (1851-1900)* [ISBN 0921818041]. David Mattison wrote *Eyes of a City: early Vancouver Photographers* in 1986 for the Vancouver City Archives [ISBN 0969163711] and Judy and I are working on the photographers of Lanark and Renfrew Counties. Consecutive City Directories may show the period when the photographer was in business. Local archives and museums may also be able to help at this stage. I saw one CDV recently with the imprint of "J. Jacksons, Photographer, Cowansville, P.Q." This already tells us that it was not taken before 1867 because P.Q. stands for Province of Quebec and that name was implemented on 1 July 1867, when Canada's Confederation took effect.