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Preservation Perspectives: Family Photographs, Part I-Identification

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BY BILL STOLZ

KENTUCKY HISTORY LIBRARIAN
AND CERTIFIED ARCHIVIST
LOCAL HISTORY AND
GENEALOGY DEPARTMENT
KENTON COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY

PRESERVATION
PERSPECTIVES:

Family PHOTOGRAPHS

PART I — IDENTIFICATION



In recent months, my mother has been cleaning out her basement and one of the discoveries was a small box of photographs that had belonged to my grandmother. It had been packed after her death and had been sitting on a shelf for over a decade. The box holds photographs documenting the last one hundred years of my family on my father's side. One gem I found is a photograph of my grandparents' wedding day on August 18, 1942, in Hempstead, New York. While I located the newspaper announcement years ago, this is the first image I have ever seen of their wedding. Of course, while the "new" box of photographs brings fresh discoveries, it also presents identification, preservation, and storage challenges.

If we are very, very fortunate, someone has labeled the photographs before we acquired them. Since this rarely occurs, it falls upon us to attempt to identify the people, place, and time as best we can. There are techniques and resources available to assist us when we are faced with the daunting challenge of identifying those mysterious people and places in photographs.

IDENTIFICATION 101:

- Know what you have. Survey the collection to identify the type of photographs contained within (i.e. daguerreotype, ambrotype, carte de visite). The Northeast Document Conservation Center has a handy online chart available. Look to see if any of the images have been identified. There may also be other items of historical significance, such as

letters, diaries, or yearbooks that accompanied the photographs and can provide information.

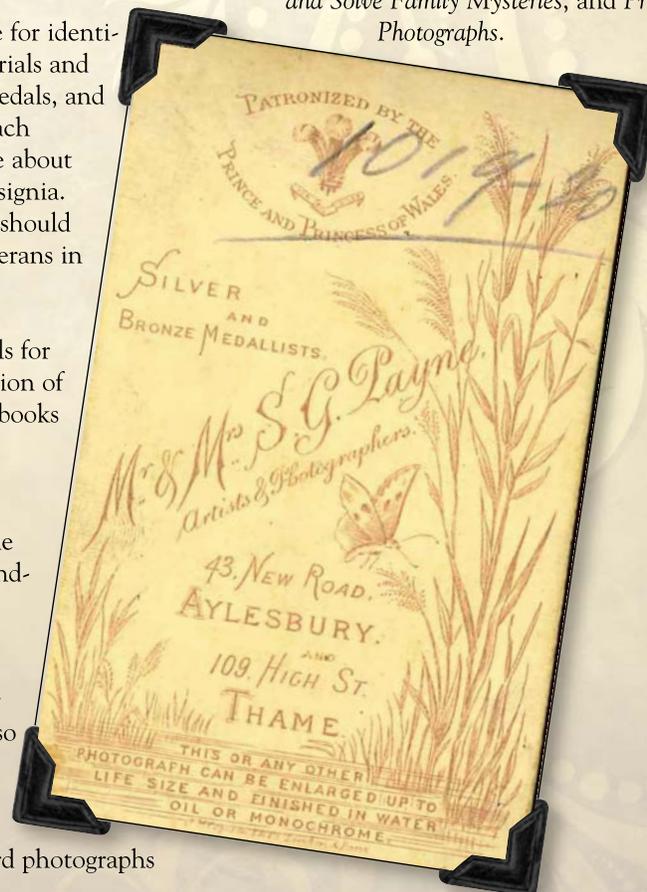
- Ask around. Photographs provide a great opportunity to engage family in research and conversation, and it may be a family member (parent, grandparent, aunt, uncle, cousin) who proves to be the key.
- The digital age also helps as you can quickly scan and email the image to family around the globe. My mother responded to my family email within minutes, with "I know everyone in the photo."
- Look closely at the clothing, hats, and hair. All can go a long way in providing a specific decade or year. Your local library should have books on the history of clothing and fashion (see nonfiction 391.009-391.4).
- Military uniforms are another great source for identification. There are a variety of print materials and online resources available for uniforms, medals, and insignia. Be sure to visit the website for each branch of the Armed Forces to learn more about the respective badges, decorations, and insignia. The US Army's Symbols & Insignia page should be bookmarked by anyone with Army veterans in the family.
- Cars, just like clothing, are wonderful tools for identification. Check the automotive section of the library stacks (629.222-629.2222) for books on the history of automobiles.
- Check the background and objects in the photograph for additional clues to the time period and location. Are there familiar landmarks in the photograph (i.e. the county courthouse, the Eiffel Tower, Mount Rushmore)? A street sign or address on a building can prove useful, as well as larger buildings, planes, trains, steamboats, and so on.
- Is there a photographer listed somewhere on the photograph? Cabinet cards and card photographs



typically include the photographer's name and studio location. The studio address provides an excellent clue since it was probably in the same neighborhood/ town as the family pictured. City directories can then be used to narrow down the time the photographer was in business and/or at the location on the photograph. At KCPL, we have compiled a Northern Kentucky Photographers Index for the years 1839-1920.

- Utilize both print and online resources. The Library of Congress Researcher's Toolbox is packed with information on identifying, interpreting, and researching photographs. Helpful print resources include *Photographs: Archival Care and Management* by Mary Lynn Ritzenthaler & Diane Vogt-O'Connor, and Maureen A. Taylor's *A Family History Detective:*

Learn How to Find Genealogy Clues in Old Photos and Solve Family Mysteries, and Preserving Your Family Photographs.



The next column will discuss how to label photographs with the information you find and some basic preservation steps to ensure their safety and longevity.

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