



Photo Identification

Who is that person? Where was this taken? When was this taken? These and other similar questions are often heard as family members gather to look at old family photos. If you have some vintage photographs that leave you guessing as to who, what, where or when, it's time to put on your detective hat and solve the mystery!

Looking For Clues . . .

A historic picture is a great source for information on family history, historic clothing, architecture, artifacts, collectibles and family keepsakes. Learn more about the people and places in your past by carefully examining old family photographs.

Photography was invented in 1839, and portrait photography became popular by mid-century. These portraits give a glimpse at what our ancestors actually hung on their walls, how their clothing was worn and the furniture they had in their homes. Their poses and other details also reveal much about the culture of a period.

If you have some mystery photos without a clue as to who the people are or when it was taken, these guidelines will help you try to solve the puzzle.



1. Examine the type of mounting used. An early mount from the 1860's often is on a white card with square-cut corners. The background appears plain and neutral. The photographer's name usually appears on the back as a small, simple trade plate. Examples from the 1870's or later were more detailed and publicized the photographer and his services prominently.

2. Describe the people. How many are there? What are their ages? What is their sex? How are they posed? Full-length shots carried over from portrait painting and were often used at first. (Whole body poses in portrait painting cost more and made stronger references to wealth and status.) By the late 19th century, shots were often closer to the subjects with just the head and shoulders visible. Some featured a "fading away" at the edges, so that the head and collar appeared to be floating.

3. Describe any distinguishing features of clothing or hair styles. For instance, crinoline skirts were replaced with bustles during the late 1860's. Gently sloping shoulder lines and low-set wide sleeves also suggest this period while the Gibson Girl look was popular around the 1900's. Skirt hems began to rise for the Roaring Twenties period.

Women's hair styles in the 1860's had a center-part and were smooth, covering the tops of the ears. Later styles had exposed ears, curls and bangs. Bobbed hair was popular in the 1920's with more classic, loose, shoulder-length hair often worn in the 1930's.

4. How are the people positioned? Is it a posed and formal or candid shot? If looking at a formal vintage shot of a couple or a family, are the people facing squarely to the camera? Often men were seated facing the camera while

their wives stood, turned slightly toward the man and eyes looking at him or to one side. This was typical of the patriarchal culture during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Snapshots became progressively less formal in the 20th century until color cameras became popular in the 1950's. At that time quick, unposed snapshots began recording people in everyday activities and spur-of-the-moment happenings.

5. Is the background a studio backdrop or a natural surrounding? Backdrops in studio settings have been widely used since the late 1860's. Props used depended upon the subject's age, sex and locale.

Natural outdoor surroundings give a great deal of help for identifying photos.

- What identifying features are there in the landscape or surroundings?
- Consider the function of the buildings or structures. What materials were used in their construction? Can you identify an architectural style or any distinguishing details of the building?
- Describe any vehicles or machinery that may be shown.
- Are animals present? If so, are they utilitarian or pets?

If an inside shot, what additional features are there about the interior? What objects are shown (furniture, collectibles, wall accessories, tools)? What was their use?

6. Draw conclusions about the photograph. When do you think it was taken? Where do you think it was taken? If people are gathered together, what was the occasion (school, family reunion, marriage, baptism, quilting bee, military service)? What was their occupation? What did the building/structure mean to them (home, work place, neighborhood store, school, church)? What do you think happened immediately after the picture was taken?

How do your conclusions fit into the overall history that you know about ancestors? Is there an older relative or friend who is knowledgeable about your family history that could help to confirm your conclusions? What neighborhood groups are there (museums, schools, churches) that have historical records to help pinpoint the period of time and names of the people shown?

If you've had no luck in identifying people and location, write down any information you have and keep with the photograph until more positive identification is available. Perhaps at a family reunion, these pictures could be displayed allowing other relatives to have input on who, when and where.

Labeling Tips...

After you have identified people, places, occasions or period of time, use a No. 2 lead pencil to lightly write this information in the margin of the picture, not on the image itself. Some people prefer to write lightly on the back of the photo, again in the margin not over the back of the actual image since this may cause damage. Better yet, make a copy of the picture, write notes on the copy and keep this with the original vintage photograph. Do not use water soluble ink. In humid conditions the ink may transfer to other nearby surfaces. If you use ink, select India ink or other permanent ink and write the description on a separate label or by the photo, not directly on it.

References/Sources:

- >Leopold, Allison Kyle. "The Telling of Vintage Photographs." *Victorian Homes*, Volume 18, Issue 6. December, 1999. Pages 16-17.
- >The Kentucky Heritage Council. Capital Plaza Tower, Frankfort, KY.
- >Dr. Kim Miller, Associate Professor, College of Human Environmental Sciences. University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY.

Linda Adler, M.A.
Extension Home Furnishings Specialist
Photo ID