

Amateur Historian: Dealing with photographs while doing family history

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Amateur historians always have access to their family history. One may not have access to great databases, may not live near a research library, or may not live near a great archive, but most of us have access to our families. When we are rebuilding the life of people in the past, we often are lucky to find a single thread of information, and we treasure any information that we can get to.

Family history quickly turns into family archeology when people near to us die. We suddenly find ourselves with a lot of artifacts and documents that can help us rebuild our relative's life. And here we find ourselves in the strange situation where instead of having too little, we have too much, especially photographs.

Photographs are often not organized. If we are lucky, they are in photo albums. Most of the time I find them in blown boxes, one piled on top of each other. Most people don't bother to organize them or to put captions on them. So we don't know who most people are in the photos. We don't know why there a photo of an old building, or who that baby is.

If we only had to deal with a few dozen photos, this would not be a big deal. We could keep them and wait to see if the information about these people appears at some point.

But people have been taking hundreds and hundreds of photos in the last century. A lifetime of photos means that there are a few thousand photos to go through. It is even worse if the person had photography as their hobby.

What should we do with these photos?

The sad answer is that for most photos, the appropriate action is to throw them out. Without context, a photo is useless.

If we don't know the situation where a photo was taken, who the person in the photo is, or where and why it was taken, the photo is not really providing any information.

People in those photos may be your relatives, but if you can't find out who they are, they may as well be unrelated to you.

Even more useless are the photographs of buildings without context. Yes, the cottage may be the place where your grandparents grew up, or it could be a random house taken during a travel. There is no way to know. And it would probably take less time to actually go to the family house yourself than to try to figure out where the image was taken.

So when you are going to go through those old photographs off your dead relatives, get a garbage can nearby, and be ready to throw:

* Any photos of buildings you can't recognize

* Photos with people that you can't recognize

* Random photos of objects, such as cars, stereos, toys, etc.

Now, begin to organize the photos where you can establish context in the following manner. Turn the heap of photos into a usable family history photo album.

First, come up with a naming system so that each photo will have a specific id. What I did was to classify each photo by the batch of photos where I found them, and then give them a number. So the first photo that I classified was B1-1 for batch 1, photo 1. Come up with any scheme that you feel comfortable with.

The next step is to write down a caption for the photo. Write down the name of the people who are in the photo. Write "unknown" for the many people you don't know who they are. Remember, only identify people like this if there is an identifiable person in the picture, or you know that someone can identify the people for you. If you can't, throw that image out.

Finally, write a small description giving the time and place for a series of photographs.

Another great addition would be to include at the beginning of each album the family tree segments of the people who appear in the album. At some point, we all are cousins of other people. Knowing exactly how we are related will help you a lot when you sit down to write some family history.

Creating a database for finding the images seems to me to be overkill if the images are not already scanned and digital. However, you can place the photo ids in the record of each person in your genealogy program. Then you will instantly be able to find where all of the images of a certain person is located.