

Heritage Scrapbooks: Your Family History in Pictures

By Susan S. Emert

A heritage album is one in which you display old sepia-toned or black and white photographs and add detailed journaling to tell your family history. The task of starting your heritage album can seem intimidating, but the rewards of seeing it take shape are worth the hard work. You should begin by gathering pictures, papers, and other memorabilia. These things, along with the information gathered from your genealogical research, will enable you to create a wonderful pictorial history.

Preservation

Those of us who are interested in genealogy are equally interested in preserving the photographs, documents, newspaper articles, textiles, and other types of mementos that we find. Heritage scrapbooks can provide a home for our important photos and paper memorabilia, and some textiles.

When creating a heritage album, great care must be taken to provide a completely acid-free and lignin-free environment for old photographs and memorabilia. All materials, such as papers, adhesives, pens, embellishments, and the scrapbook itself, must be of archival quality.

Newspaper articles, wedding invitations, birth and death records, and other types of printed material should be sprayed with Archival Mist to preserve them in their present state. Never spray old photos, however. Documents should be mounted with photo corners, and never glued down.

Photographs should be mounted with photo corners onto mats or the background paper. Old photographs must not be cut.

Textiles, such as quilt squares, samplers, handkerchiefs, etc., can be displayed on scrapbook pages by creating an envelope or a pocket for them. They can also be stitched to a page using thread or embroidery floss. Textiles that are soiled can be cleaned by soaking them in a solution of Orvus Quilt Soap and water.

Useful Terms

Here are a few terms that you should be familiar with before you begin. They are:

Acid: used in paper manufacturing to break apart wood fibers and the lignin that holds them together. Acid can react chemically to photographs and cause them to deteriorate.

Lignin: the bonding element that holds wood fibers together. Lignin causes paper, especially newsprint, to turn yellow and become brittle over time.

Acid Migration: the transfer of acidity from one item to another. Newsprint is especially high in acid content, so it should be sprayed with Archival Mist, matted on an acid-free backing, and mounted away from the pictures on the page.

Handling Old Photographs

When working with old photographs you need to be aware of their fragility.
These tips might help:

1. Do not expose them to prolonged periods of bright light, as fading can occur rapidly.
2. Wear lint-free white cotton gloves when handling your pictures to avoid fingerprints which can damage them.
3. Never cut old photos, especially Polaroid.
4. Clean photographs by gently rubbing them with a special cleaning cloth or a soft cotton cloth.
5. Take care with the corners of the photos as many are brittle and can break easily

Researching Your Photographs

Many of you have photographs of people that you cannot identify. With a little research, you will be able to date the photo to within a few years of the time it was taken, and narrow down the list of possible subjects. When you begin to research your photos, try to answer the following questions:

1. What type of photograph is it?
2. Are there any identifying marks on the photograph? Check the back for names, dates, etc.
3. Does the name of the photographer appear on the photo?
4. What type of clothing and accessories do you see?
5. Does the setting of the photo look familiar? Do you see the same setting in any other photo?
6. Does the subject of the photo look like anyone else in your family? Look at features such as eyes, ears, nose, mouth, shoulders, etc.
7. Who else might know some information about the picture?
8. Do you see anything historically significant in the setting or written on the back of the photograph? If you do, try searching for information about the historical event.

Types of Photographs

Daguerreotype 1831-1860

This image, produced on a metal plate, has a mirror-like surface and was usually put into a wooden case to protect it.

Ambrotype 1854-1870

The ambrotype is a glass negative, which is backed with black paper or cloth to make the image appear positive. The photograph is encased.

Tintype 1856-1900

The tintype is an image created on a thin metal plate, and placed in cardboard or paper folders.

Carte-de-Visite 1859-1890

These photographs, also called Albumen prints because the process used a solution of egg whites and chemicals, were the first to be done on paper. The prints were mounted on a card, which was usually 2.5 x 4 inches. About 80% of the surviving 19th Century photographs are prints on albumen paper. Many show fine lateral cracking of the overall glossy surface.

Cabinet Card 1866-1910

This type of photo is very similar to the Carte-de Visite, but its size (4.25 x 6.5 inches) is slightly larger.

Color Photographs 1935-

Kodachrome was the first color film and was produced by Kodak. It was followed by **Ektachrome** in 1946 and **Kodachrome II** in 1961.

Polaroid Prints 1948- The first pictures had a sepia background. The true black-and-white prints came in 1950, followed by color prints in 1963.

A Bibliography

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Web Sites:

American Museum of Photography – Resources. A Primer on Processes. (www.photographymuseum.com/primer.html) – An interesting look at the processes used to create photographs of all types.

City Gallery. (www.city-gallery.com) – The learning section of this site has a variety of articles on identifying, dating, and preserving old photos.

Dead Fred (www.deadfred.com) – This site displays pictures that have been found in auctions and flea markets. You can do a surname search, and possibly find pictures of relatives.

D'Marie (www.dMarie.com) has an “Inspiration” section in which you will find the Poem Place – search for heritage poems.

Encyclopedia Smithsonian. (www.si.edu/resource/faq/nmah/antqtext.htm) – The article, “*How do I store antique textiles at home?*” is very helpful.

Family Matters (www.Scrapbooking.com) offers informative articles and layouts in its Family History and Heritage Archives section.

Kodak (www.kodak.com) – You will find information about the history of Kodak photography.

Light Impressions (LightImpressionsDirect.com) – This site provides information about preservation, and is a resource for archival supplies.

The Unwritten: Saving Your Photo Stories for the Future. Think Quest. (<http://library.thinkquest.org/C001313/fmain1.htm>) - This site, created by three high school students who are also distant cousins, gives you lessons on interviewing family members, researching your photographs, and telling your family stories.

Two Peas in a Bucket (www.twopeasinabucket.com) shows heritage pages submitted by contributors. You must be a member to access the layouts, but membership is free.

Your Family Legacy (www.YFL.com) – This site is very good for finding information about heritage scrapbooks. You will find sample layouts, journaling ideas, and informative articles. This is also a good resource for archival supplies.