

FAMILY PHOTOGRAPHS



A collection of family photographs can give you a great deal of pleasure. You can also use it to explore the events and patterns of your personal life. Gathering together family pictures sparks in-sights creates connections in ways that no single image can. You probably know in your heart of hearts that your photograph should be carefully mounted in neat and uniform rows on the pages of your family album. But right now you have them jumbled in shoe boxes on a closet shelf, stuffed in a drawer some place still in the original processing envelopes, and thumb-tacked to a bulletin board. Just the idea of having to do something about them makes you nervous. Relax. You probably haven't

done as badly as you think, in our experience; more damage is done to photographs by overly aggressive attempts to take care of them than by neglect. And if you approach the care of your photographs as a project for pleasure rather than as an onerous, compulsive task, you will probably do a better job of it anyway. Most people automatically associate family pictures with a photo album. An album does give you an excellent way to arrange, store, and display your pictures, all at the same time. We suggest, however that you think of it as one tool among many for creating a family photo archive. Envelopes, boxes, and file cabinets can also be useful for your toolkit.

PHASE 1 | ORGANIZING YOUR PHOTOGRAPHS

This part is a lot of fun. Arranging your collection gives you a chance to see what you have and to start making the connections that tell you more about yourself and your family.

How do you start? Cases differ, of course, but most of the same methods work equally well for organizing your photographs, whether you have recently found your grandfather's collection in the attic or you want to gather together all the snapshots you have taken since 1970.



Try this working approach. Start by getting everything in one place. Dig out all your photos from their hiding places and put them together. Ask other people

in the family if they would like to give you any old pictures they don't need anymore. Explain what you intend to do and promise to take care of their photographs, and you will often find that your relatives part with them with surprising alacrity. After all, they probably feel just as guilty as you do about not taking adequate care of them.

You need to get some kind of workspace. A large table that you can leave undisturbed for periods of time is best. You might set up a trestle table in some out-of-the-way corner with good lighting. If your collection is housed in crates and boxes that have accumulated a lot of dust and dirt, you may need another, separate place for your initial examination and unwrapping.

Allocate yourself a reasonable amount of time for the work. Avoid rushing; it spoils your pleasure in the job. It also tempts you to handle things carelessly, to mount prints with the most convenient method, and to dump photographs higgledy-piggledy into boxes. Start by evaluating all material. Examine the condition and note the format, medium, and

state of the enclosures. This first sorting tells what kind of material you have to work with and indicates the scope of your project. It enables you to identify potential connections problems and to see what media are in your collection. You will find this information useful, because different media will have of the same different storage and display requirements. Most collections of family photographs can usually be divided into these media such as contemporary prints, 35mm slides, instant (Polaroid or Kodak) prints, black and white (silver gelatin) prints, studio portraits, snapshots and film negatives



Prints that are brittle or that are on deteriorating mounts should always be supported with a piece of board underneath them or carried in a rigid folder. Prints that are 11 x 4 inches and larger also require some kind of support.

Now you need to decide what to save and what to discard. This question seems to come up automatically. Our rule of thumb: discard very little. One thing that you must watch for is deteriorated nitrate film. Copy it if possible before discarding. Make note of any identifying or historical data on enclosures before throwing them out. For example, a print might come in an envelope that you decide to get rid of. Check to see whether it has dates or the names of people, places, or studios on it, and make a record of these to keep with the print. The preferred approach — especially if we are talking about an institutional collection — is to keep the envelope in a separate container with a cross-reference to the photographic artifact it held. You have to decide whether time and money can be allocated to this, or whether you should allocate your resources to more critical tasks in managing your collection. But keep in mind that if you get rid of a picture of Aunt Mylene that she hated because it didn't flatter her, it may turn out to be the only picture anybody in the family had of her. Pictures that now don't seem especially interesting often acquire increased meaning with the passage of time.

PHASE 2 | EVALUATING THE WORK OF YOUR PREDECESSORS

You may very well inherit photographs from somebody in your family who has already created a family collection. This means that you have to evaluate the work that has already been done. If everything is in good condition, you are that much further ahead. But how can you be sure? Problem areas to think about include; albums with “magnetic” pages, vinyl (PVC) pocket pages, prints mounted with Scotch tape, glue, or rubber cement and album pages with acidic paper. Additionally, poor album design, staples, paper clips and loose photographs. Housekeeping problems such as dirt, dust, grease, and bugs as well as moisture damage should also be taken into account.

The most common and most intractable problems come from the adhesives people use to mount photographs. Albums with “magnetic” pages are probably the worst offenders. These have strips of slow-drying, medium-tack adhesive running diagonally across the page. People use them because they are convenient. They can simply put the print on the adhesive and then drop a plastic cover sheet over the whole page; the albums accept a mix of any size prints, and never let them fall out. But over time the adhesive turns color, hardens so that the print can't be taken out of the album, and then starts to hydrolyze the paper and bleach the photographic emulsion.

Not all prints that are badly mounted can be remounted. If the paper of the page tests acidic, however, and the print shows signs of sulfiding or fading, you will want to take action. Sometimes you find photographs stuck down with water-soluble adhesives. This is good, because you can simply immerse the page in a tray of lukewarm water until the glue releases, and then dry the print in the correct way. Always check, before immersion, to make sure the photographic emulsion does not stain or dissolve. Test for this by putting a drop of water on a non-image area of the photograph, blot it lightly, and inspect for any changes.

When an adhesive proves intractable, it may be necessary to use a solvent to release the print. This kind of sophisticated technique should be performed by a professional photo conservator, and so we will not cover this process at this time. Because of the many variables and dangers of working with solvents, we suggest that you do not attempt it without thoroughly researching the health hazards and potential danger to the photograph.

PHASE 3 | THE FIRST SORT

After your initial evaluation, your next step is to arrange everything. When you look at the mishmash in front of you, the prospect of doing this probably seems daunting. Press on. The fun is about to start. And there is a simple and logical way to bring order out of chaos.



SORT BY SIZE – Every print that's the same size goes together into a stack. Black and white prints are separate, of course, from color. Common sense tips: don't separate prints from negatives if they are still together.

SORT PRINTS THAT CAME FROM THE SAME ROLL OF FILM – This is easier than it sounds,



and it is a useful identification method. Look at the width of the margins, the style of scalloping on the edges, the dates of the photo, paper marks on the back the print. Any variation

indicates that the prints were made at different times and probably did not get made from the same roll of film. There are more minor, telltale differences between prints than you might think possible. Once you get your prints grouped this way, you can often use a face or place that you recognize in one print to infer the identity of other subjects.

PUT PRINTS FROM EACH ROLL INTO A

CONTAINER – You can best use a uniform-sized bag of clear plastic to make the sorting easier. The top-sealing type made for refrigerator storage is excellent (for sorting — not for long-term storage).



SORT THE PHOTOGRAPHS INTO LARGER GROUPS BY CHRONOLOGY – Store in large clear envelopes and place in boxes. Place divider tabs between the groups to equalize the pressure on the prints and to mark the chronology.



Look at this first sort as merely a working arrangement. It doesn't have to determine the sequence in which you finally house and display your photographs. You might start by trying

this two step approach: (1) Arrange photographs by the media (start with daguerreotypes and work through contemporary color). (2) Sequence the individual images chronologically. Maybe you need a more precise scheme of organization dividing the images thematically by subject matter. You could start with categories such as studio portraits, important occasions (weddings, graduations, etc.), holidays, family, friends, and vacations. Your next objective is to positively identify and label all subjects. Documenting the people, places, and dates of a photograph adds greatly to the pleasure that other people will experience when they look at your collection. However, this will be an ongoing process, one that you are unlikely ever to complete fully. New information may come in nearly every time you show the collection to somebody. The final (and most time-consuming) stage is to put everything into its final housing. This may mean mounting into a photo album, inserting into slide storage pages, storing in sleeves and boxes, or filing in a folder. The question is - what do you choose?

PHASE 4 | SELECTING THE PROPER HOUSING

It helps to start by looking at specific needs and their possible solutions. Determine the use of the photographs; will you use your pictures for browsing, casual shared looking, or reference, or do they merely need to go into dead storage?

FUTURE EXPANSION – In terms of future additions, is the collection closed or open? If you choose to put your pictures into a photo album, but expect to acquire more pieces in the future, the obvious answer is the type of binder that allows you to insert additional pages.

PHYSICAL SIZE OF PHOTOGRAPHS – 35mm slides can be stored in boxes or binder pages. Glass plates go into file cabinets or the wooden boxes in which they may have originally been stored (after the wood is sealed to protect the emulsion). They should be wrapped in special enclosures. Large paper prints need the protection of portfolio-style boxes or drop-front boxes.

EASE OF RETRIEVAL – A file cabinet affords the fastest and most precise retrieval of prints and negatives. An album is not as quickly accessible, and boxes (unless the contents are thoroughly indexed) tend to be even slower. If you have a small collection through which many people will look at specific pictures, albums are not the best way to house it.

BUDGET AND SIZE OF COLLECTION – Hand mounting individual prints in an album is feasible only for small collections. Once a collection includes several thousand pictures, it may become necessary to find another way to house prints so that you can insert images into the collection in a standardized way. This usually means boxes or file folders. When you have more photographs than money, but you still want to be able to look at some of them frequently, try this approach. Select the pictures you most want to see, buy one quality binder album with removable pages, and store the rest of your pictures in envelopes in acid-free boxes, as time passes, plan to acquire more albums and expand the number of photo pages.

FILM STORAGE – Negatives can either be stored adjacent to the prints or filed separately with a cross-referencing system. If you want to store negatives adjacent to the photographs, one easy way is to put the negatives in page sleeves (these are available for all negative formats from 35mm through 8 x 10) and interleave them in a binder with prints in plastic pocket pages. The materials of all housings should be of archival quality. We've covered this subject in detail already, but to recap briefly: material should be non-acidic and lignin-free, the housings should be built to protect photographs against mechanical damage and moisture, and their design should enable the photographs to be removed for examination without damage.

PHASE 5 | MAKING A PHOTO ALBUM

The first step in making a photo album is to determine your objectives. You may wish simply to have quick and efficient storage, in which case pocketed pages would be a good approach. A more studied and thematic album can be created by using large pages with many photographs attached with mounting corners. You may wish to display images and documents at the same time, which can be done with pocketed pages or on blank pages using corner adhesives. Another reason for making an album is to create a master layout for a video tape; then you would want to allow plenty of space between the images. Certain images definitely do not belong in an album. Among the ones we think of first:

- Stereo cards made on curved boards
- Cabinet cards with curved backs
- Cased images (daguerreotypes, ambrotypes, etc.)
- Glass plate negatives

All of these, in addition to the images you choose not to show frequently, can be put into storage boxes, envelopes, or file folders. You can pick from a variety of photo albums. Some of them offer certain benefits that might not seem immediately obvious.

BOUND ALBUM WITH PAPER PAGES –

These are usually manufactured like a high-quality hardbound book. They sometimes come with

leather-bound covers that are highly decorated and very impressive in appearance. There are a number of things to look for in this format.

- Quality of the paper.
- Interleaving sheets.
- Spacers built into the binding.
- Slipcase, box, or a latch to hold the book closed.
- Weight and thickness of the paper pages.
- Adhesive that may come into contact with the print.

BOUND ALBUMS WITH PLASTIC PAGES

(POCKETS AND SLEEVES) – These are mass produced, often inexpensive, and usually easy to use. They vary in both the quality of the plastic used and the design. Many times they are limited to one format of print per book. Factors to consider when purchasing:

- Type of plastic. Mylar & polyester are a good choice.
- Pocket size. Pockets that are too small cause the photo to bend and make removal difficult, possibly leading to further damage. Pockets that are too large let the contents slide around and make it possible for them to fail out.
- Mounting style.
- Quality of binding and heat-sealing on page.

WIRE BINDING WITH STRAPS –

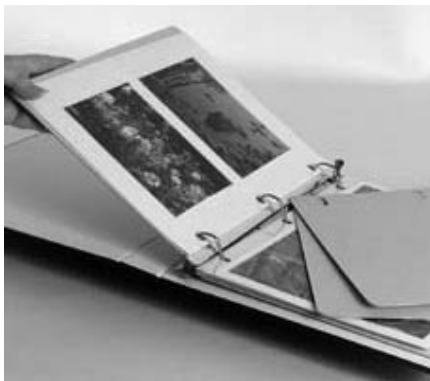
A wire staple is attached to a paper card stock, with a space to allow a plastic strap to thread through and hold the pages together. This design has significant advantages; it opens flat and stays flat while the pages are turned, is expandable and both pocketed pages and blank pages are available. Check that they meet conservation standards.

HINGED ALBUMS – These albums have a thin hinge designed into each page and into the front and back covers. The hinge is attached to the page by taping. This type of album design is popular among wedding photographers, and is available in many sizes with many types of preformatted pages. The hinged design can be expanded, but this usually requires that you have the manufacturer's instructions, because it is not obvious how it works. This type of album is not very adaptable to multiple formats. The major advantage to a hinged album is that it lies flat open. This puts very little stress on the binding and on the photos mounted in the book.

POST BINDER ALBUMS – This kind of binder is commonly used to make scrapbooks. Each page is drilled with a predetermined pattern of holes that the posts fit through. The posts hold both the pages and the covers together. These binders provide a number of important benefits:

- They can be expanded by changing the post size and adding pages
- Spacers can be added between pages to accommodate varying thicknesses
- Quality of the page paper can be customized easily There are also some drawbacks:
- Pages do not open flat
- Pages have stress points at the post holes and where they fold

RING BINDERS (THREE OR MORE RINGS) There are a variety of ring binders to choose from. They can be troublesome from the point of view of the



materials used, which are vinyl covers and pages that are difficult to find the manufacturer's specifications. Some types of rings are better than others for use in an

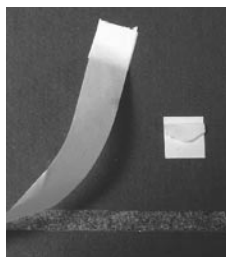
album. The three major types of rings are the standard, circular ring mounted on the spine; the D ring, mounted on the back cover; and the oval ring, usually on the spine. The standard and oval rings allow the album to get overfilled. When this happens, the covers expand past the parallel. This puts pressure on the pages and on the prints. The D ring is the preferred design because the rings keep pressure evenly applied to all pages.

We can think of quite a number of reasons to use binder albums. They are adaptable and easily expanded; they make an excellent tool for organization; they can be changed easily; and pages for them come in a variety of formats. Binders come in multiple sizes. The most common has 8½" X 11" pages in a 9" X 12" binder. Another common size has 10" X 11" pages in an 11" X 12" binder.

MULTI-RING BINDERS – These are popular with professional photographers and models as a presentation system. They are commonly available in large formats and can be effectively used as a scrapbook, where the large size is advantageous. You will not find a great choice of specialty pages for such binders.

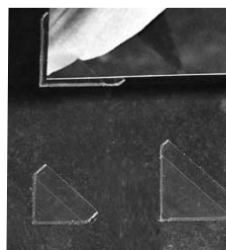
PHASE 6 | MOUNTING PHOTOGRAPHS ON BLANK PAGES

An important consideration when mounting your pictures on blank pages is the weight of the paper. In order to support the prints securely, this needs to be either a stiff card stock or a lightweight board. Bond or text-weight papers do not provide sufficient support. There is no single method of attaching the photos to the page works equally well for all applications. Corners, for example, work well with small photos, but they can cause problems when used with larger photos or prints on thin and fragile paper. The techniques used for mounting pictures in an album should meet the same criteria for other types of archival mounting: it must be possible to reverse the process and remove the object from the mount without damage, preferably without the use of chemical treatments.



Avoid attaching your photos with the following methods:

- "Magnetic" album pages
- Cellophane (Scotch) tape
- White glue (Elmer's, etc.)
- Rubber cement
- Paper clips or staples



Accepted techniques for mounting include:

- Paper hinges with starch paste
- Encapsulation, Mounting Strips
- Tapes, Mounting corners, Dry Mounting

ENCAPSULATION – *Double-Sided Encapsulation:* The print is enclosed between two sheets of Mylar and sealed on all four sides with 3M's Double-

Coated Film Tape No. 415. No taped border should be closer to the print than ½". This is an excellent technique for valuable pieces, because the print can be viewed from both sides, is completely protected from the environment and it makes the print rigid enough for mounting with photo corners *Single-Sided Encapsulation*: Place the print on the page. Apply possible tape around the edges (no closer than 1/8 inch) and cover with a trimmed piece of Mylar. With this method, it is critical that the treatment backing paper be of conservation grade.

TAPES – Acceptable tapes include a high-quality, acid-free paper tape and Filmoplast tape. These have an adhesive that can be reversed in water. Use these tapes to make hinges or to hold paper corners to the page. Several cautions apply when using tape. First, cellophane tape is not acceptable, because it is corrosive, cannot be easily reversed, stains the print, and quickly yellows. Second, do not tape directly over the front edges or corners of the print.

MOUNTING CORNERS – Mounting corners meet many important criteria for use in albums including: ease of use, they are completely reversible, no adhesives contact the prints and clear corners allow the entire object to be seen. Paper corners made of acid-free paper are available from several suppliers, or you can make them with a pair of scissors. These have to be attached with paper tape. Another type of corner made of clear polyester is available, backed with No. 415 tape, and this is also an excellent choice. The only drawback to corners is that, because they hold the print by a relatively small area, they might overstress fragile paper and cause part of it to break off.

MOUNTING STRIPS – These plastic channels have a non-acidic adhesive on the back edge. They can support thick pieces like albumen prints that are already adhered to mount board or heavy card stock. The mounting strips can be cut to size with scissors. The print can be easily taken out of the channel

ADHESIVES – There are two brand-name adhesives that you could use to hold snapshots or other items of somewhat limited value. Gudy-O-Stickers: These transfer tabs of a neutral pH adhesive to the back of the print. They are a convenient way to stick

snapshots onto the page. Glue Sticks: Certain glue sticks contain a fairly neutral adhesive that is akin to wheat paste. Make sure that you buy the kind with a white paste, rather than one with clear glue. The clear glue is acidic and attacks the photos.

DIE-CUT PAGES – Some album pages come with angled slots already cut so that you can tuck the corners of the prints into them. This is a suitable way to mount prints, provided that you take care not to bend or crease the paper while inserting the print. They have the following drawbacks. These pages accept only one format, prints can be mounted on only one side of page and print corners are not visible among the negatives of using these.

PHASE 7 | LABELS & IDENTIFICATION

The knowledge of the subjects of your photographs adds greatly to the value and interest of an album, and you should identify them with whatever information is available to you. In planning and labeling your album, it helps to look at it through the eyes of somebody a hundred years from now.

PHASE 8 | SCRAPBOOKS

For housing non-photographic materials, a scrapbook is an excellent adjunct to a photographic album. Generally, the larger-size binders make your work easier, because many of the materials you work with such as diplomas are relatively large. You will find that encapsulation is an excellent tool for handling the many papers that may be in fragile condition. Single-sided encapsulation is an excellent way to lay down a wide range of materials on a single page. Experience shows that family papers can be broken down into these categories; letters or diaries, greeting cards, financial and legal documents as well as printed Memorabilia such as news articles.

PHASE 9 | MANAGING THE FAMILY ARCHIVE

The first principle of managing your family photo archive should be the *Black Hole Rule*: *what goes in never comes out*. Offer to make copies at cost for anybody who wants them. This eliminates idle

requests from people who say they want to make a copy but never get around to it, while it enables you to take care of the people who are sincere. Of course, it means you have to keep your negatives organized and accessible. One fortunate thing about copy requests: most of them will be for recent photographs, which means that there is a better chance of the negatives still being available. In the case of older photos, you will have to go to a photo studio or a processor to have a copy negative and a print made.

You might make it a project to draw on the memories of older family members to identify and document your photographs. A relatively painless way to do this is to sit with them in front of a tape recorder and to go through the pages of the album, asking them about the people in the pictures. Assign an identification number and title to each album, write page numbers on each page, and you have an easy way in the course of your conversation to index the stories to the pictures. You might phrase your inquiry like this: "We're here in Album Three, the Fifties, and on page sixteen we're looking at the image in the upper right... Can you tell me about the man behind the wheel of the car?" That's the general idea.

PHASE 10 | HANDLING PHOTOS IN AN ALBUM



You have a number of options. For one, you can simply shelve it. To protect it, we suggest that you wrap it in conservation-grade wrapping paper and tie it with string.

Albums that come without binder sleeves also benefit from being wrapped with tissue and placed in a storage box to stabilize their environment. This kind of conservative treatment is suitable in a number of situations: for example, all the prints are permanently mounted and cannot be removed; the photographs do not need immediate intervention to save them from disintegration caused by the album itself; or the album as an artifact has sentimental, historical, or aesthetic value.

On the other hand, the old album may be damaging to photographs. It might have acidic paper, which

you can be sure of if it's made of the old style black construction paper. Mounting corners may be falling off, or the album may be so overstuffed with material that pressure is creasing the prints. In this case you also have a number of choices. Again, you can simply put the album on the shelf or wrap it and store it in a suitably designed box made of buffered board. This is often a good interim choice, if nothing else can be done immediately.



Assuming the original album has no inherent aesthetic or sentimental value, you can remove all the photographs and remount them in a new and safer style of album. Here you might wish to photograph each page, if this is feasible, to document the original sequence of the photographs. In any case, copy and transfer any identification found in an original enclosure. Perhaps you find that the pictures are permanently mounted onto black paper bound into the album, and they are already fading and sulfiding. If this is the case, interleave the pages with 2 mil Mylar sheets. The 2 mil sheets are thin enough to fit into the album without forcing the pages apart. They protect the emulsion of the photo from touching the back of the facing page, while the dry mount tissue will provide a barrier against the migration of acids from the back. Copy photos made with a polarizing filter are an effective backup step in this case.

A photographic album may come into your possession in such circumstances that you know little or nothing about the people and places shown in the pictures. It is still a good idea to make a note of the date and circumstances under which you acquired it (to establish a provenance) and where you think it might have come from. Write this down and file it with the album. Others may eventually be able to research it more completely, and the information you supply may give them the clue they need to make their identification positive.

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Written by Dennis Inch & Laurence E. Keefe

Edited by Angela Blauvelt