

# **PRESERVING FAMILY PHOTOGRAPHS**

## **PRESERVING THE PAST FOR THE FUTURE**

Family photographs provide a window into the past and reveal many details about our ancestors and where we came from. Photographs document the way the family home looked in the 19th century, the clothes grandma wore, your resemblance to Uncle Frank, and the heirlooms proudly handed down through four generations. Photographs help us to understand who we are by illuminating those who came before us. We need to preserve these photographs to enable future generations to enjoy the pleasures of seeing the past.

## **PHOTOGRAPHY BASICS**

Photography became commercially available in the 1850s and evolved using various types of materials, bringing with it, varying degrees of permanence. Identification of these photographic techniques can be important to ensure that these items are treated in the most appropriate manner.

Most photographic materials are made up of layers, and the materials in these layers distinguish one process from the other. Some of the materials in these layers are more stable than others. Generally speaking, most black and white photographic techniques (silver processes) are more stable than color photographic techniques.

Proper storage and display of these historical documents are two of the most important preservation measures. How photographs are stored or housed ensures their continued existence. Good environmental conditions include: low relative humidity (in the 40-50 % range), moderate, stable temperature (50-75 degrees, with daily cycling not to exceed 7 degrees Fahrenheit); good air quality, and low light levels. Ultraviolet (UV) radiation (sunlight and fluorescent lighting) is a high-energy wave that directly attacks paper fibers, causing them to deteriorate. It also causes fading of dyes found in color photographs, negatives and slides.

Careful handling allows for viewing of the photographs without damage. When framing photographs for display, it is important to use UV filtering glass or plexiglass, anodized aluminum

framing, and polyester corners to hold the photograph in place on the mat. Archival housing is essential to insure preservation and is generally constructed from acid-free (or lignin-free) materials. Good quality storage materials can be bought from reputable vendors. The prevention of damage is easier and less expensive to achieve than repairing damage already done. Often, more damage is done to photographs by well-meaning attempts to repair them than by neglect.

## **CELLULOSE NITRATE NEGATIVES**

There are some photographic items that have special requirements due to the nature of the materials from which they are made. Cellulose nitrate negative film, produced from the 1880s to the 1950s, is problematic. As the cellulose nitrate ages, deterioration and combustibility increases. Any film prior to 1950 should be suspected of being cellulose nitrate which, if improperly stored, can ignite and produce toxins while burning. Edge printing along the negative, or the absence of it, may be used to identify cellulose nitrate film. It should be assumed that a negative not identified as "safety film" should be classified as cellulose nitrate until identification to the contrary is known. For further information, see the bibliography below. Once separated from the rest of the negatives, nitrate film should be copied onto safety film or printed and the original negatives disposed.

Cellulose acetate or "safety film" was developed in the 1930s as a response to the flammability and chemical instability of cellulose nitrate film. Early cellulose acetate film (diacetate), produced from the 1930s to the 1960s, proved unstable because the base shrinks, causing the emulsion to buckle and separate from the base. As with cellulose nitrate film, cellulose diacetate film must be identified and copied before images are lost through distortion. Cellulose diacetate was replaced by the stable cellulose triacetate film used today.

## **SIMPLE PRESERVATION PRACTICES YOU CAN DO AT HOME**

To help in safeguarding the well-being of photographs and negatives there are simple practices to follow when handling, storing, or displaying images. This list of dos and don'ts also applies to other types of art on paper and historic documents.

- DO use gloves or wash hands before handling photographs. Touch only the edges.
- DON'T touch the image or emulsion side of any print or negative. Oils from skin can harm these fragile items.
- DO use archival folders, envelopes and boxes to store photographs. Photographs should be placed individually in folders or sleeves within each box.
- DON'T put photographs into albums or scrapbooks made of acidic materials such as construction paper or cardboard. “Magnetic” albums are particularly damaging. These albums use strips of slow-drying, medium tack adhesive running across the page which can damage the photographs and make them difficult to remove. Repairing this kind of damage is extremely expensive, if even possible.
- DO separate different types of materials. Negatives need to be stored separately from prints.
- DON'T place newspaper clippings and photographs or negatives together in the same file or envelope. Newspaper is extremely acidic and causes damage to materials it comes in contact with.
- DO use a piece of archival board inside the folder or sleeve to support prints that are brittle or on a deteriorating mount.
- DON'T use paper clips, staples, or rubber bands to hold items together. Paper clips will both damage the print surface and rust. Rubber bands deteriorate and adhere to adjacent items.
- DO use a pencil to put written identification on the outside of archival sleeves housing the photos. Copy any identifying or historical data on old enclosures before throwing them out.
- DON'T write on the back of photographs with ink or felt tip pens, even pencil can be

damaging. Inks can migrate through the paper and ruin the image, or an impression can be set into an image by too much pressure being asserted with a pen or pencil point.

- DO use accepted mounting techniques which include: paper hinges with starch paste, encapsulation, mounting corners, dry mounting, and good quality die-cut album pages.
- DON'T use glue or pressure sensitive adhesives on or near your photographs or negatives. This includes rubber cement, scotch tape, masking tape, or strapping tape.

Following the guidelines outlined in this brochure will help preserve your family photographs for generations to come. Consult the bibliography for more information on preserving photographs.

-KATHLEEN M. ORLENKO

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