



# TECH TALK

## This issue: Photographs • Part II



*In this issue, Bonnie Wilson, curator of sound and visual collections at the Minnesota Historical Society (MHS), discusses working with photographic prints, and Eric Morenson, supervisor of the MHS photo lab, discusses the pros and cons of digitizing photographs for preservation.*

### Care of Photographic Materials: Prints by Bonnie Wilson

#### *Basic care of prints*

Photographic prints are somewhat easier to care for than photographic negatives. For instance, if the print has a good negative in the archives, a replacement print can be made if something harms the original photograph. However, there is no true substitute for a vintage print, a print made at the time the photograph was taken. Vintage prints are historical artifacts, and must be treated with the same care taken with original negatives.

Photographic prints of any kind should be stored separately from negatives. The negatives may emit harmful chemicals, or the researcher handling the prints may inadvertently damage negatives while perusing the collection. If negatives and prints are stored together as a temporary measure, make sure the researcher uses white gloves to examine the collection.

Prints that are in poor condition or are likely to be handled frequently should be protected with polyester sleeves. If the photo or its mount is torn,

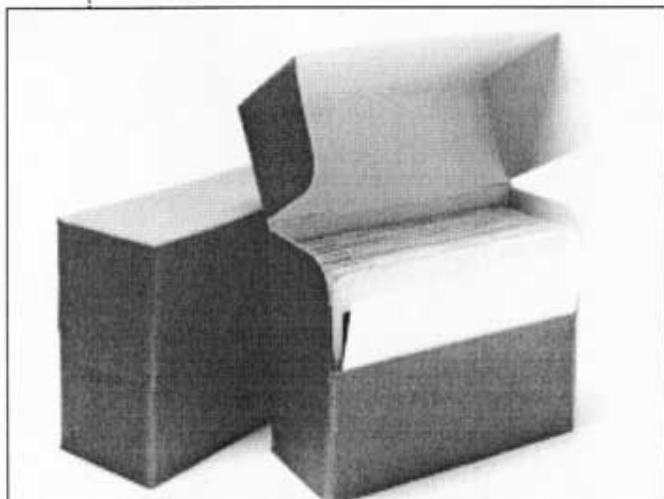
support it with a PAT-tested, unbuffered (2-ply) board before it is inserted into the sleeve. (PAT stands for "Photo Activity Test," a procedure devised by the American National Standards Institute (ANSI) for assuring that material is of archival quality.) For large unmounted fragile items, "handling folders" (see illustration below) can be purchased or made. These are composed of acid-free 4-ply board mounted on two sides to polyester sheets.

The most useful and basic storage units are the acid-free unbuffered file folder and the "flip-top" box (see illustration). Both items are available from the archival supply companies in the list of resources. When storing photos on edge in boxes, make sure they are supported with PAT-tested boards so that there is not any excess space that would cause the photos to slump into a curve. Most historical photos are roughly 8" x 10" or smaller, so the majority of your research requests will use this portion of your collection.

Vertical folders in boxes are easy to transport and use. Flat horizontal storage is useful for larger photos. When storing photos flat in boxes, lay no more than 20 in a stack. The photos on the bottom could be damaged by too much weight, and access to the box contents is less convenient for the researcher.

#### *Albums*

Some of the most interesting photographs come to us in albums. They should be respected as individual works by a compiler, much as a diary is the work of an individual writer. Just as we would never



MHS collections; photograph by Eric Morenson

*Flip-top boxes like these are useful for storing photographs in folders and for storing film negatives. Glass plate negatives need sturdier boxes.*

**Editor's note:** TECH TALK is a bimonthly column offering technical assistance on management, preservation, and conservation matters that affect historical societies and museums of all sizes and interests. We welcome comments and suggestions for future topics.





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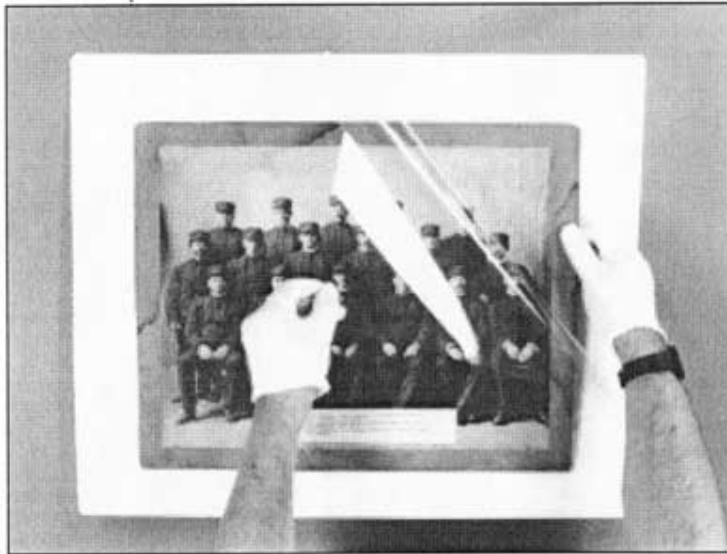
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think of pulling apart the pages of a diary, we should not dismantle albums. They were made according to some design, chronological order, or story line. They can best be cared for by placing them in acid-free boxes, or making a PAT-tested wrapper for them. If you have reason to believe that the ink, paper or images on one page are contaminating the photos on the opposite page, use unbuffered PAT-tested tissue between endangered pages. The interleaving can cause the album to become too thick, so use it sparingly.

you may want to keep it for future display. Mark the frame with the number or location of the photo and store it separately.

If the photo must stay in the frame, remove any old wooden backing boards and replace them with PAT-tested board, such as a good-quality 100 percent rag board. Clean and examine the glass for signs of deterioration. You may decide to replace it with new plain- or UV-filtered glass. Finally, make sure you install the photo with a barrier between the photo and the glass. If a window mat is appropriate, that is fine. Otherwise make a PAT-tested board barrier that is concealed between the photo and the glass under the frame. Do not store photos in frames that hold the photo against the glass because moisture will cause them to bond together, creating a conservation disaster.



MHS collections; photograph by Eric Mortenson

Handling folders provide a safe viewing and storage environment for large photos. The polyester sheet is secured on the left and bottom edges. No adhesive is used to hold the photo in place.

There is one type of album that must be taken apart and reassembled into another album: the "magnetic" or self-adhesive album. These albums destroy their contents, so extraordinary measures are necessary. Purchase an archival scrapbook and photo corners as a replacement. Before you dismantle it, photocopy the pages of the magnetic album to record any captions and the original order. Transfer the now-sticky photos immediately into the new scrapbook.

### Framed Photos

Framed photos are easy to display and difficult to store. Each frame, mat, glass and backing creates a microenvironment for the photo. It can preserve the photo or cause a disaster. Whenever possible, unframe the photo and store it like the others. If its frame evokes the vintage of the photo and is in good shape,

### Conclusion

The essence of photo care can be stated simply: To extend the life of your collection into the next generation, provide good environmental conditions and good storage materials. In addition, get acquainted with the materials that comprise your photos, negatives and storage materials, not just the content of the images. That will help you understand their vulnerabilities and predict their longevity.

### Recommended reading

- Keefe, Laurence E., Jr., and Dennis Inch. *The Life of a Photograph*. Boston: Focal Press, 1990.
- Reilly, James M. *Care and Identification of 19th-Century Photographic Prints*. Rochester, N.Y.: Eastman Kodak Co., 1986.
- Ritzenthaler, Mary Lynn, Gerald J. Munoff, and Margery S. Long. *Administration of Photographic Collections*. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1984.
- Wilhelm, Henry and Carol Brower. *The Permanence and Care of Color Photographs*. Grinnell, Iowa: Preservation Publishing Company, 1993.

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