



## **Ask an Expert: Preserving Your Photographs: Windows to the Past**

"Enjoy your photos, don't look at them as a chore," says Bonnie Wilson, the Minnesota Historical Society's curator of sound and visual collections. "Sit down with someone, look at your photographs, and see what memories they elicit. A picture can trigger stories that you can't get any other way. They provide a wonderful way to explore family history."

Wilson is frequently asked about how to preserve and safely store family photographs.

**Q. How should someone get started in preserving their own photos?**

**A.**

The first step is to identify what the pictures show, because only photos that are identified and labeled are worth preserving. Sometimes it's best to start with your most current photos and work backward in time. Note what's going on in the picture, who's in it, and where the picture was taken. Also date the photo as closely as you can. Write that information on the back of the photo with a soft 6B drawing pencil, which is available in art-supply shops. Be sure to use people's real names if you know them, not just associations like "mother" or "grandfather."

For home movies, write the identifications on the leader. Note when it was shot, by whom, and what the event is. Home movies can be very difficult to identify. If possible, sit down with the person who made the movie, ask them to narrate it, and take notes.

Many people have photos in their collections that are undeniably old, but are unidentifiable. You often can't say with certainty whether the person shown is a family member. Set these pictures aside and work on them last. Put your energy into the ones that can be identified.

**Q. What comes next?**

**A.**

After you've identified the photos, work on storing them properly. There are two

primary ways to store photographic prints - using a filing system in archival boxes or using photo albums.

I recommend filing photos in archival boxes if you have a lot of photos to arrange. You can organize the pictures in files by subject, person or year. Once the pictures are organized, you can pick the best and put them in an album. It's important to use acid-free folders and boxes. The acids in paper products can be harmful to photos.

Albums allow you to display pictures more easily, but also tend to be more expensive than filing. Some of the best pre-made albums are manufactured by Webway, a Minnesota company. Again, seek out acid-free papers and notebooks made from archival board. Or you can buy clear plastic pages made from polypropylene and insert the photos. Do not use vinyl pages or notebooks - they emit harmful vapors and shorten the life of photos.

In general, don't take apart existing photo albums. They're like diaries and scrapbooks; they have a personal story and order to them. Often they contain the handwriting of the person who made them. If the photos in an old album have become loose because of detached or missing photo corners, replace the photo corners. The exception to the don't-take-apart rule is magnetic photo albums. They contain a sticking material that is detrimental to photos. People buy them because they allow you to easily arrange photos on a page, but photo corners allow easy arrangement too.

Slides can be stored in boxes or carousel trays if you keep the lid on; they are very susceptible to dust. Non-vinyl slide pages can also be used. And if you have slides, photo CDs, home movies, or home videos, be sure to save the hardware that you'll need to view them. You'll need that equipment to enjoy your images, when the technology becomes obsolete in the future.

**Q. Is there any risk in displaying framed photographs?**

**A.**

Exposure to light can hurt photos. Locate framed pictures in the darkest possible place in your house, or make a copy of the photo and keep the original in dark storage. Metal frames are preferable to wood. Use a 100 percent rag matte board and remove any wooden backing - it can emit harmful chemicals.

Dark storage is also important for children's school portraits. Some studios do not process them properly, making them more susceptible to color changes. Since they come in multiples, display one and keep one in storage.

**Q. What can people do to make new pictures last longer?**

**A.**

The absolute best film to use - if you want your pictures to be around for your grandchildren and their children - is black and white. Most color photos fade over time. If black and white pictures don't seem appropriate or possible, then take color prints or slides. Prints have the advantage of being easier to view, and they don't accumulate dust as much as slides. Polaroid pictures are good for parties and games only. They're likely to disappear in 10 years, so when you're going to document an important event, leave your Polaroid at home.

And it's very important to save your negatives. Many people think negatives are a nuisance, but they are the originals and they'll allow you to make new prints if a print is destroyed. Negatives last well if they're not handled. Keep them in the plastic envelopes they came in, or you can buy plastic pages.

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