

Dating Old Photographs

By Halvor Moorshead

Knowing the date that a photograph was taken is rarely an end in itself. We want to know the date as this will help us identify the subject. After all, we can get a pretty good idea of the age of the subject – knowing when it was taken gives us a rough birth date.

The sad fact is that the vast majority of old photo albums have pictures which mean little to us. What can we do?

The Obvious Methods – But have you tried them?

Context in an album – do adjacent pictures give a clue?

Have you checked the back?

Embossed Date?

Photographer? Very tough to find commercial photographers – try city directories

Technical Processes

Daguerrotypes

Tintypes

Ambrotypes

Carte-de-Visite

Cabinet Cards

THESE CAN BE VERY MISLEADING At least one in ten of problem photographs sent to us were copies of early pictures. No wonder people were confused!!

The Process of Identifying Photos

- Try to work with one clue at a time.
- If there are both men and women in the shot, always start with the women
- Is the hairstyle distinctive?
- If that is confusing look at the dress.
- The poses adopted by the subjects can be very helpful, but you need to be familiar with these for them to help.
- Props and scenery can also be helpful

Reference Books are almost obligatory

You will almost certainly have to use reference books. Maureen Taylor (www.photodetective.com) and Family Chronicle's books: Dating Old Photographs and More Dating Old Photographs.

Rules of Thumb

- If the picture is snap-shot – not a professional - it is after 1905
- If someone is smiling it is after 1910
- If the lady's hair is anything except center-parted, it is after 1872
- If the dress has a bustle it is 1876-1890

Common Myths

- Country Bumpkin Myth – Hick - Women did NOT dress in old styles
- Time Exposures – they did not sit still for minutes except in 1839 and 1840.

How to Ensure Your Pictures Survive

Scan them at 300dpi – it's not necessary to enhance them

If you have pictures on the wall, fix a CD to the back

Use FotoTagger www.fototagger.com/

These notes and articles are online for you at

www.internet-genealogy.com/lectures.htm or

www.familychronicle.com/lectures.htm