

When Was it Taken?

Halvor Moorshead reveals some tricks used to date old photographs

IN THE MARCH/APRIL 2006 issue of *Family Chronicle*, we invited readers to send their undated pictures to us for a feature where we would explain some of the techniques we use to date old photographs. We offered to date up to 500 submissions. We received about 550 and, in fact, we responded to them all.

We were not able to help everyone. A few of the pictures had no useable clues, but these probably accounted for no more than two percent of the total. With others, there were some tenuous clues and we made a guess at a date range, but we were not always very confident.

We received so many submissions that we can only show a small percentage in this feature.

The pictures we were sent were those that the owners presumably cared about, but for which they could not figure out a date, so we got an unusual number of difficult ones. Although we had trouble with some, we were able to make a stab at estimating the date for most.

Anomalies

We received several pictures which appeared to have anomalies; that is, different clues pointed to different dates. The most common were:

1. The subject matter is very old but the process is much later. For example, a photo with clothing, hair and poses fitting the 1850s is on a cabinet card (these were introduced in 1866) or on a relatively modern paper. We were sent several of these — maybe 50 or more. Could it be people dressing up in old styles? That is possible, but it is far more likely that the picture is a copy of an earlier one.

The earliest photographic processes were one-of-a-kind. However, from the earliest days, commercial photographers could make copies by photographing the original image.

2. The hairstyle on a woman is an excellent clue, especially when

there are a number of women in a group shot. This is such a strong indicator that it is often all that is needed in order to date the photograph. However, there will always be people who pay little attention to fashion — they like the way their hair looked when they were 30, so it's good enough when they are 60.

3. Many people believe that rural folk dressed in fashions that were years out of date compared to "city folk". Having studied literally thousands of old photographs, this is generally not true. Having your photo taken was an event and wearing an out-of-date dress was unthinkable. To confuse matters, a few people, usually older ones, will occasionally be seen in an old dress.

General Rules for Dating Old Photographs

Try to work with one clue at a time. If there are both men and women in the shot, always start with the women — generally they are far easier to date in most pictures.

Is the hairstyle distinctive? Can you find a similar style in a reference book? 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. We show two good examples over the page: an early telephone switchboard and bicycles.

You will almost certainly have to use reference books. There are also excellent books by Maureen Taylor (for details see her website,



A good example of misleading format. The card is a cabinet card and from the style and type face it is probably from the 1880s. However, the subject matter is certainly much older. We estimate from the clothing, the beard, the lady's bonnet and her dress that the original is from 1858, +/- 5 years. Photograph from Colleen Cavanaugh of California.

www.photodetective.com) and *Family Chronicle* publishes two books: *Dating Old Photographs* and *More Dating Old Photographs*. We have also published a number of articles on the subject in *Family Chronicle*, the most recent being July/August 2006.

And last, but not least, finding the date of a photograph is not usually an end in itself, it is used to try to identify the subject. If a photograph is in a collection you inherited, there is a reason for it being there — the person was important, often a relative. Knowing the date the picture was taken is the best way to identify the subject.

Old Photographs

Photographs With Several Clues, Making Them Fairly Easy to Date



The ladies here all have a similar hair style, and we can also see the full dresses and bodices. Both the hair and dresses are typical of the late 1880s. We estimate 1888, +/- 3 years. Photograph from Jerald Riessen of Minnesota.



The dress and fabric pattern are typical of the 1860s. The ringlets in the hair and the pose confirm this. Photograph from Greg Michell of Indiana.



We can't be sure of the dress type worn by the lady on the left, but on the right we can clearly see that the dress has a large bustle. This fashion is absolutely indicative of the late 1870s to mid-1880s. The hats and hairstyles confirm this. Photograph from Brenda Johnson Gaetz of Manitoba.



In the early part of the 20th century, large numbers of traveling photographers earned a living by taking pictures of this type, people standing outside a business as here, or outside the family home. Photograph from Sue Hill of Ohio.



The lady's hat is very distinctive, which is just as well as the man and child don't help much with the dating. These huge hats were popular around 1905. From the little we can see of the dress and hairstyle, these are compatible with this date. Photograph from B. Niven of Ontario.



This photograph fascinated us. Although it can be dated from the clothes and the hairstyles, it appears to be taken in front of an extremely early telephone exchange jacks for only 50 lines. Some further research could probably date this within a year or two. Our estimate was 1895. Photograph from Mary and Fred Marvel of Oklahoma.

Photographs With Few Clues, but for Which We Can Estimate a Date



This photo is a bit tricky. The boys are wearing unusual outfits for which we could find no similar example. The chair does help: this type was popular around 1900, as are the boots on the boys. It appears as though the hair parting on the baby is on the side, meaning it is almost certainly a male. Photograph from Nancy Nolte of Colorado.



Formal dress on men presents real difficulties as there have been few changes for decades. However, in this picture there are other clues. All of the men have mustaches and beards. The background is obviously a studio and the pose has been carefully arranged. The man without a top hat unfortunately adds little information. Based on the pose and the studio set we estimate a date of 1898, +/- 5 years, but it could be earlier. This is consistent with the hats and the beards. However, we have less certainty about this guess than with most pictures. Photograph from Frank McGuire of Victoria, Australia.



This is a good example where there are few clues to be gleaned from the subjects, but their proud possessions, the bicycles, are very distinctive. The handle bars are unusual, but research on the Internet showed bikes from the late 1890s with similar styles. Photograph from Cheryl Watsey of California.



It is not easy to see any useful details from the clothing and the hair style could be from several time periods. However, the pose, the backdrop and the table with books are typical of the 1880s. Photograph from William Christie.



This certainly appears to be an early photograph, but from when? The dress cannot be seen and the hairstyle was common for over 30 years. The rather rigid appearance and the little we can see of the dress enable us to estimate 1860, +/- 5 years. Photograph from Joanne Pollok of Pennsylvania.

Photographs Which Present Problems or Cannot be Dated



Men's fashions changed much more slowly than women's and this applies to hairstyles as well. The suit and hair style here could almost be current. The wood on the left and the background, however, would not appear in a modern picture. A pure guess of 1910 was made. Photograph from Mary Beaulieu of Virginia.



You would think that with five subjects that this would be easy to date, but it is not. The men are all wearing tuxedos and have hairstyles that lasted for decades. Similarly wedding dresses have not changed much and the women's hair hardly helps. The hat on the lady at the right is about the only clue. We guessed a date of the 1930s, without any degree of conviction. Photograph from Michele Rawleigh of Texas.



There are few clues in this photograph that can help. The dress style cannot be seen and the hairstyle reveals nothing. Even the young child's clothes don't help. The only real clue are the boots on the child, but these were used over several decades. Photograph from Peter J. Gossett of Alabama.



Almost all the clues have been erased from this picture as it has been drawn over. The tie indicates that it is an old picture, but this style was in fashion on several occasions. Photograph from Pat Lambert of Alaska.



This photograph could be from almost any period. The only clue is that the pony's head is blurred indicating a long exposure time. But apart from guessing that the picture is before 1930, nothing else can be gleaned. Photograph from Michele Rawleigh of Texas.