

Dating Old P

FAMILY CHRONICLE's special publication *Dating Old Photographs 1840-1929* has proved to be very popular. Many of us have photographs that are undated but in past articles we have shown that it is often possible to establish the date by carefully comparing with other pictures of known date. Thanks to the goodwill of *Family Chronicle's* readers we were able to collect over 650 photographs of known date for this book.

We thought it might be inter-

esting to show in detail how a photograph can be dated with a considerable degree of precision. The photo we chose (shown in the center) is of the Walter John Harwood family and was kindly supplied by Phyllis Libby Glynn. We do actually know when this was taken: about 1890.

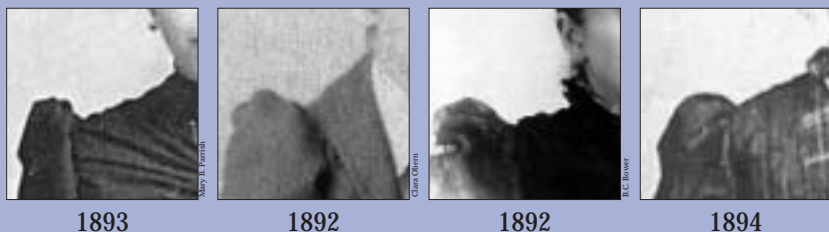
Even though we know the date, you may wish to work your way through the pointers which confirm this date. No photographs can be described as "typical" and

our example is no exception. The father provides few clues but the mother and children have several distinctive pointers.

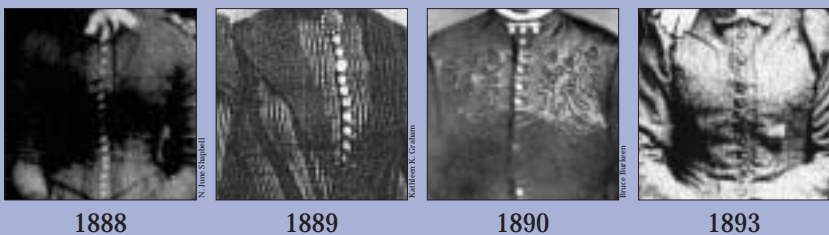
We have not described every thing that may be used as a pointer. For example, the background is clearly a painted canvas indicating a studio shot. Although painted backdrops were common for decades, the drapes and woodwork of the stairs may contain clues. The dress worn by the young lady standing in the middle

Women's fashions are the first things to check when trying to establish the date of a photograph. Fashions changed as often as they do today and they are an excellent indicator of the date.

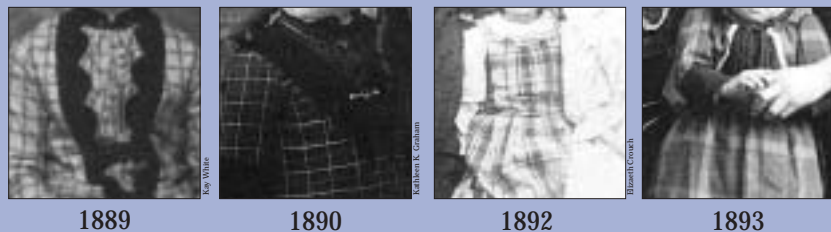
In the example on the right, the prominent top of the sleeve on the young lady's dress are very helpful. This style was only common from about 1890 to 1898 — other examples are shown here.



Some aspects of fashion fell in and out of popularity. For example, very wide, loose sleeves on women's dresses were common in the mid-1860s, fell out of fashion for a time and are then seen again about 10 years later. Even a quick examination of old photographs demonstrates that there were a number of different styles popular at any given time. You cannot state that such and such was the fashion in a particular year — you can state that it was a fashion of the period.



There are other clues in the picture. The closely-spaced buttons on both ladies' bodices are found from 1870 to 1900 — a rather broad period. However, the young girl on the left is wearing a check patterned dress; this design was popular for young girls between 1889 and 1893. A further clue is the pleated top of the skirt on the woman seated — this is only found on another photograph dated 1893.



The Walter John Harwood family. From left to right: Maude, Walter John with young Phyllis, and Walter John. Photograph courtesy of Phyllis Libby Glynn.

Women's hairstyles can provide useful clues to help in our example. The seated lady has a hairstyle that was practically the *only* way that women's hairstyles remained common until well into the 1890s (the young girl standing at the center has bangs. This is a common hairstyle for children). Bangs did become common contemporary



Photographs

and the outfits of the younger children could also be compared. No single clue is likely to provide a date but considering all the evidence we can see that this photograph had to be taken in 1890 — plus or minus a couple of years.

If you have old photographs of KNOWN date that you are prepared to send us for a further feature or possibly a further book, please see the instructions on page 34.

— HALVOR MOORSHEAD



On right: Sarah, mother Thea, Helga (standing), young Walter on his lap and Harold. On left: Phyllis Libby Glynn.

Clues for dating photographs but they do not provide a center parting with her hair tied back. Women wore their hair before 1870 and this style was rare at this time (except on very young women popular in the 1910s).

Examples with our picture are shown below.



1892



1893

Common Myths

A common myth is that fashions in rural areas lagged those in the cities by some years. Anyone who has looked at the advertisements in 19th-century newspapers will have noticed the number of merchants claiming they have “the latest fashions from New York and London”.

Having your photograph taken was an event and involved much more than the command “Smile!” Women, especially, would not be caught dead being photographed in an out-of-date outfit. Men too would dress up a bit but there are plenty of examples where we can see they could not be bothered.

There is also the myth about long exposure times. It is true that the very first photographs — in the late 1830s in Europe and 1840 in North America — did require several minutes of exposure. However, this problem was overcome in the early months of 1840. Exposure times were far slower than those of today but they were measured in seconds, not minutes. Anyone needing proof of this can see that children, far too young to understand the necessity to keep still, were common subjects even in the 1850s.

Even though most photographs can be dated by comparing these to known examples, some can be very difficult, even impossible.

Head-and-shoulders pictures of men sometimes contain no clues.

Photographs showing the subjects wearing traditional costumes are very difficult to date and brides and bridesmaids often wear dresses that bear little relationship to current fashions.

Men’s hairstyles found in pictures are rarely useful for dating. The styles on our subject on the left would not be regarded as out of place even today.

This also applies to beards; however, unkempt beards (such as the one on Charles Darwin on the right) were reasonably common during the 19th century but are rare after 1900.



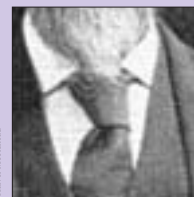
The man’s suit and shirt do not help us in this example — this style lasted from the 1870s until well into the 20th century. The necktie does give us some clues: the knot is very large by modern standards. When ties first became common in the 1870s, the knots were huge (the two illustrations on the left below). Compare these to the two on the right from 1890 and 1891.



1870



1872



1890

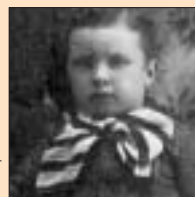


1891

Although the neckwear on the young boy on the right is partially hidden, it is very distinctive. This style for boys was fairly common from 1884 to 1894.



1894



1889



1891



1895