

Beyond the Shoebox: Practical Tips for Taking Care of Personal Photos

By Rod Slemmons

Ask any professional archivist or museum person how they store their personal collection of family photographs and you will find that it is just as you do: jammed in small boxes or manila envelopes, or placed in sticky-leaf albums in a hot, dry attic or a damp, moldy basement. Organizing photo collections obviously is a project that is hard to find time for. Here are some suggestions for preserving your family heritage that will make life more interesting for your grandchildren and easier for your local historical society long after these worries are no longer your problem.

Identification: It is always tempting to write names and dates right on photographs, but this is usually not a good idea unless you write very lightly near the edge of the back side in pencil. Writing on the face of a photograph is very hard to remove, especially if in ink. Writing in ink or pencil in the middle of the back will emboss through to the front of the image, and some inks actually bleed through after a few years.

Some people photocopy unidentified photos and send copies around to family members to help identify. Writing on the photocopy will save the original. You can keep a notebook or file folder of these copies with your photo collection.

Albums: Avoid modern albums that have self-sticking leaves, since the lines of adhesive show through in a few short years and will often rip the photos if you try to remove them. The best way to mount photos in an album is still the original way, with old-fashioned black photo corners that place no glue on your pictures. Try to find an album that has white pages and use only one side of each page, leaving the facing page blank. This method prevents damage caused by placing pictures face-to-face. Acid-free albums are available in good bookstores.

If your older family albums are already loaded on facing pages, you can solve this problem by interleaving the album with good “bond” writing paper. Choose an acid-free variety, available in stationery and craft stores. Sometimes you can even bind these interleaves into the album by taking out the cord or metal bolts that hold the album together, punching holes in the bond paper to match the album, placing the sheets between pages, and then putting it all back together. Be careful to keep the order of the album pages, as they usually are in chronological order or in an order that tells a story or corresponds to important family events. This is especially important to genealogists who are trying to establish dates.

Try to avoid removing individual pictures from albums, which may tear them and destroy the original context that helps date or identify them. These albums are your most valuable family history resource. As memories fade — or are modified by good storytellers — the album remains as concrete evidence.

Slides: Colors slowly shift on slides in dark storage, and shift faster if slides are projected many times. If they are kept cool and in low-humidity storage, the colors can sometimes be surprisingly bright after many years, however. The standard painted metal boxes with lids that allow you to store a whole vacation trip or birthday party in a single block are the best. Archival plastic-sleeve sheets for three-ring binders are O.K. but may stick to the slides in high humidity situations. Trays and plastic sleeves are available in photography stores. Buy the thinner slide

sheets — Print File or Light Impressions are both good brands. When projecting, change slides every 10 or 15 seconds if possible. This will make them last longer — and keep your audience awake!

Sleeves, Envelopes and Boxes: If nothing else is available, regular “bond” stationery envelopes make good individual sleeves for photographs or negatives. Just be sure to place the emulsion of the negative (the dull side) and print face away from the envelope’s glued seams, since these attract moisture and deposit it on whatever comes in contact with them. A better solution is to write for a catalog of photo preservation products from companies such as:

Light Impressions Corp., PO Box 940, Rochester, NY 14692 800 828 6216

University Products, PO Box 22708, Holyoke, Massachusetts 01040 800 628 1912

These catalogs carry a wide array of products to protect your photographs, some of which can be purchased at the University Bookstore in Seattle. The archival materials companies will mail any quantity of their product, large or small. Good, acid-free paper sleeves are available for just about every imaginable size of picture and/or negative, as are inexpensive acid-free albums. The companies also sell storage boxes that are sturdier and less prone to collapse than the traditional shoebox.

If you lack the time or patience for this, just store your pictures on edge in good bond envelopes, sorted by size and placed in stiff, non-brown boxes. Writing a brief description on the envelope, before you insert the photo to avoid embossing, will help you retrieve them quickly.

Storage Conditions: Photographs and slides, especially, are particularly susceptible to mold damage, so it is important to store them in the part of your house that has the low humidity and the most consistently median heat (50 to 70 degrees Fahrenheit). Front hall closets are usually a good place. This also helps you grab them on your way out in case of fire. Surprisingly, photos and slides also can be quickly damaged by chemical fumes from nearby highways, and especially by fumes from drying petroleum-based paint products. This can be guarded against by storing your smaller boxes in a large closable container, such as a trunk. This is usually where your 100-year-old photographs have lived until now and why they have lasted so long. If you are planning to refinish your floors or paint with oil-base paint, it is important to remove your photos from the building. Paint fumes immediately damage the photographic image.

Copies: Important and unique family pictures should be backed up with a good copy negative, and with prints distributed to the rest of the family. This also can remind relatives of unique pictures in their possession that they may want to share. You also might consider sharing copies of important images with your local historical society.

Rapidly advancing technology: One disturbing effect of the new digital imaging systems is that archives of physical photographs have stopped accumulating. Just as recorded sound has migrated from records to eight-track tapes to cassette tapes to compact discs, changing technology is altering the way we save photographic images. What will be left for your grandchildren of the digital images and videotapes you made on your last vacation? Migrating digital and other electronic images to new platforms as they develop is a good way to make sure the idea of the “family album” doesn’t disappear. Also, scanning your old family photos should not be thought of as a substitute for taking care of the analog originals—they are still your best chance of preserving the past for the future.