

Using photos in your family's history

Why graphics are important

Family photos of your ancestors and living family members can greatly enhance any family history as they can just about any publication.

Graphics help attract readers' attention, provide information concisely ("One photo is worth 1000 words").

Studies have repeatedly shown that for example, newspaper and magazine readers invariably look first at the main heading, then the main illustration and its caption before reading a word of the text.

Knowing this, you should do what you can to include as many photos, maps and other graphics as you can.

A few layout tips

- Where possible, place photos near the text (narrative or charts) describing the individuals in the picture.
- Use a computer art programme to put a light key line (black border) around each photo
- Group photos from the same branch of the family tree on the same page or group of pages.
- Accompany narratives with photos of the key people in that story.
- Create a photographic timeline such as a series of group shots from a family reunion taken over successive years.
- Pair a wedding photo of a couple with a photo from their 50th anniversary. Alternatively, if you have them, use a series of photos of the same person taken over time.
- **Captions** are especially important in a family history. Attempt to identify each person in a photo. For very large groups of people where identification of everyone is impossible, at least caption the photo with information about when and where the photo was taken such as "Smith and Brown cousins gathered at Catherine Brown's home in Alstonville for her 90th birthday in 1987."
- Use a consistent style of type for captions throughout your book.
- If you can, consider sprinkling scanned signatures (taken from wills, letters, etc.) throughout your book. Place them near the text about that person.
- Include photos of significant buildings or other locations including homes, farms, family cemeteries, or places of business. Where possible, place the photos near the text describing these places.

- You can dress up your publication with maps showing where the family holdings, handwritten documents such as letters or wills and relevant newsletter and magazine clippings.

Assess your graphic resources

As you know, very few old family photographs are found neatly labelled on the back with names, dates, people or places.

Solving the mystery faces and places in your old photographs requires your specialist knowledge of your family history, combined with detective work.

For example if you can identify the type of photographic technique used to create particular old photos, it is possible to narrow down the time period when the photograph was taken. Daguerreotypes, for example, were popular from 1839 to about 1880.

If you have trouble identifying the type of photo yourself, a local photographer may be able to help.

Other clues to dates can be gleaned from close examination of the clothes people wear, their poses (stiff formal poses are very much 1860 to 1880), studio backgrounds and even whether streets are curbed and guttered or boast electricity poles.

This talk is not really about identifying photos so let's assume you have amassed a collection of photos and are reasonably sure that you can identify people and places in them.

You will also of course, if required, obtained the **copyright** holder's permission to use particular photos or prints in your publication. If they are older than 75 years you are **probably** ok.

If you are worried and can't get permission to use possibly copyrighted material either from the owner or via his/her publisher you can add a note that you tried. However such a note is not necessarily a legal defence in case of dispute.

If you have questions, contact the Australian Copyright Council at www.copyright.org.au

Artwork is copyright but the outline of a nation or state is not so you can copy a drawing of Australia, delete most of the place names and add your own. However, do include the major cities to help readers orientate themselves.

Choose the best of your originals

So let's say you have amassed a collection of basically black and white prints, possibly a pencil or pastel sketch or two, old newspaper and other cuttings and various documents and maps.

You may also have some hand-tinted photos or even glass negatives or similar old forms of reproduction.

Obviously you'll get the best result for reproduction in your publication if you **start with the best quality original photos or graphics that you can.**

Black and white photographs, when properly processed and stored, are both stable and permanent. But in real life you may have to use photos in your family history which are tattered, torn and faded because they have been poorly stored for years.

High humidity and temperature variations over years cause curled prints, mould growth, fungus, blotchy reddish-brown stains aka foxing, negatives sticking to containers or themselves and photographs sticking to glass frames.

Photos deteriorate for four main reasons – they have been left in a bad environment, they have been subjected to chemical attack, they have been physically badly treated and they have been attacked by insects or fungus.

Environmental deterioration

The most common forms of deterioration are excessive humidity and exposure to extremes in temperature. The "ideal" humidity for photographs should be 50% relative humidity $\pm 5\%$ and the temperature should be around 20deg C (68°F).

Air pollution can also cause damage. In the past our ancestors often lived and worked in cities where coal, oil and gas were burned without any attempt to control particulate fallout.

Also, in the past photographers did their own processing and often used chemical well past their use-by date.

The result is that today we find photos where the image is fading or stained because either the photographer did not use enough fixer or did not completely remove it in the washing process.

You will also find photos that have degraded because they were poorly stored.

You will find holes, scratches and spots caused from the abrasion of one material against another. Brittle matte board or photographs can snap and remove parts of the image area. Glass plates, when not handled properly, can chip or break.

Spilled liquids can also do a lot of damage – floods, leaky pipes and spilt drinks have a lot to answer for.

Biological deterioration is another common cause of photographic deterioration.

Photographic materials contain ingredients - such as gelatine and cellulose in paper - that attract insects and mice. Insects will actually chew off pieces of prints and even containers, especially when they are moist.

The lesson is obvious – **protect your precious old photos** and other documents from all forms of attack.

Experts say processed negatives, slides and prints should be enclosed in special envelopes, sleeve file folders, or albums to protect them from dirt and physical damage and to facilitate identification and handling.

You will find lots of information of this on the Web and in books.

Of course you can attempt to repair damaged photos using chemical baths and other treatments but the risks of doing further damage is high unless you are a trained conservator.

So why not try the digital solution?

With patience, graphic software and a personal computer you can do a lot to restore a damaged photo. You can also make old letters, documents and other printed items easier to read by increasing the contrast and eliminating foxing and stains.

And finally, if you wish you can convert your modern colour snaps into monochrome so that they sit comfortably in a family history with the older photos.

What you need

You need a modern scanner, appropriate software and a computer.

You know your scanner better than I so I'll just touch on a few pointers that apply to most scanners sold today.

Know your scanner's sweet spot

All flatbed scanners have minor inconsistencies in their scanning mechanisms. This means some areas within the imaging area are better than others. If possible, you should place your image within this "sweet spot" to obtain the best and most consistent scans. Usually it's in the centre so don't always place your material in the far left hand corner unless you have good reason.

One way to find the sweet spot is to select a small high-quality image with good contrast,

fine detail, and bright colours. Scan it several times, with the image on a different part of the platen each time.

Open all the scans in your image editor/art programme and arrange the windows so you can simultaneously view the same section of each scan. Judge which is the best.

You have found the sweet spot.

Clean the glass

Make sure the glass is clean and unsmudged. Tiny bits of dust and even your fingerprints can be visible in a high-resolution scan. You need to check the scanner manual first to see what kind of glass cleaner is safe to use. Otherwise use a lint-free cloth.

Orient your original on the glass properly. Keep it parallel to the edges.

Whenever possible, plan to **scan your image at its final output size**. If you have to change the size of an image later, the image-editing software will introduce fuzziness as a consequence of adding or removing pixels (called interpolation).

Save. After you scan an image, save it as a TIFF file. You can convert it afterwards. Do not throw out your original scan after the conversion.

If you make changes later, perform the edits in the original and then convert to JPEG. Resaving JPEG files removes even more data, thereby keeping the file size small.

Improving the image

The next step is to modify the scan using image programme like Paint Shop Pro or Photoshop Elements.

You can modify your image in so many ways- lighten it, darken it, crop it, resize it, change colour to mono, remove scratches and tears and replace missing areas.

Almost all scanned images can benefit from a certain amount of sharpening to compensate for fuzziness that is introduced during the image-acquisition process.

The tool for this is called an Unsharp Mask and the best way to learn how to use it effectively is by trial and error, so have fun.

One of the computer user's most useful graphic tools is the **Clone tool**. You use it to copy one part of a photo over another. For example, let's say you have an old photo with a big crease across it. Copy uncreased sections over the creased party and voila! – no crease!

Even the simplest graphic programme has a host of useful tools for the family historian.

The best way to learn to use them is to experiment on a copy of an old photo.

With time and patience you can restore old photos to their former glory and then enhance your particular family history.

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