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Preservation Perspectives: Family Photographs Part II - Labeling and Preservation

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BY BILL STOLZ

KENTUCKY HISTORY LIBRARIAN
AND CERTIFIED ARCHIVIST
LOCAL HISTORY AND
GENEALOGY DEPARTMENT
KENTON COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY

PRESERVATION
PERSPECTIVES:

Family PHOTOGRAPHS

PART II — LABELING AND PRESERVATION



Now that we have identified the people, places, and dates, we can sit down and properly label our photo collection. To label the photos, use a soft lead pencil (#1 or B) or an archival pen. Soft lead pencils can be found at most craft stores, while archival pens can be purchased from a reputable archives supply company (see **Archival Supplies and Enclosures**). Be sure to have a hard surface to place under the image before writing. The glass from an unused picture frame comes in handy for this.

Place the photograph emulsion side down on the hard surface and write gently on the very top or bottom of the photograph. Make sure to record all the information you have on the photograph: who, what, where, when, and so on. Remember that some photographs, slides, and negatives cannot be labeled directly, so the information should be written on the acid-free enclosure in which the item is stored. (See *Figure 1*, next page.)

This is also the perfect time to plan for the long-term storage and care of your family collections. Below are preservation basics that all of us can do at home to make sure our photographs survive for the next generation.

1. **Stable Environment.** Ideal conditions for photograph storage call for temperatures between 65-70 degrees Fahrenheit with a relative humidity of 30-

50%. Also keep items away from direct light. It can be a challenge to regulate the temperature and humidity in most homes and buildings, so the key is to try to keep both constant and avoid major fluctuations.

2. **Storage conditions.** This is a good time to ask what is above, next to, and in the same area as your photograph collection. You don't want your family treasures stored next to or on the floor below the water heater or washing machine. Basements, attics, and closets with outside walls are less than ideal locations, due to temperature fluctuations and the potential threat of water. Find a space (possibly an interior linen closet) away from the light and where the temperature and humidity remain constant.

3. **Affordability.** The question here is "how much can I budget/ spend to purchase the necessary supplies to preserve my photographs?" Be advised that the cost for preservation materials can quickly skyrocket. If the costs are prohibitive, this is a good time to skip to #8 and consider donating photographs.

4. **Tools of the Trade.** First, you'll want a clean workspace with good lighting and free of food and drink. Second, invest in basic tools such as soft lead pencils, microspatula, and archival quality folders or enclosures. Some experts recommend cotton gloves, while others do not. Personally, I find them very cumbersome. Disposable nitrile gloves provide a great alternative, especially when handling glass plate negatives, slides, or other fragile mediums.

5. **Archival Supplies and Enclosures.** There are a huge variety of enclosures such as folders, Mylar sleeves, etc., available today for photograph storage. While many chain stores advertise "archival friendly" or "acid-free" products, I recommend buying from reputable national suppliers like Gaylord Archival and Hollinger Metal Edge. The chain store may offer lower prices, but you don't know whether the material is truly photograph-friendly or not. *The next column in this series will focus specifically on the different types of enclosures and provide information to help*



Figure 1: Example of Photo Identification

you make the right selection.

6. **Digitization.** This could easily be a separate column, so here are some brief tips to consider. Research scanners to match your needs (will you be scanning photographs, slides, negatives?). Scanning images not only gives you a digital preservation copy, but allows you to share with family around the globe via email and social media. Scan images as JPEG or TIFF files at resolution of 300 DPI. To avoid a digital disaster, be sure to save the files in multiple locations: USB, external hard drive, or the Cloud.

7. **Donation.** Are you the sole caretaker of your family history? Are the costs for storage and preservation supplies too much? If you answer yes to one or both, it is a good time to consider donating to an archives or library where the materials will be preserved for future generations. Donating materials provides you with peace of mind, while making the items available to researchers (genealogists, historians, students) around the state, country, and even the world.

8. **Don't hesitate to call a professional.** When in doubt about preservation of your collections, contact an expert. Kentucky has archivists and conservators working at many public institutions, including libraries, universities, and the Kentucky Department for Libraries and Archives, who are available to provide information and assistance with your family collections.

9. **Online resources aplenty.** Many public institutions, such as the **Library of Congress** and the **National Archives and Records Administration**, and some private, like the **Northeast Document Conservation Center**, have great resources pages.

Have you come across terms like "acid-free," "lignin," "buffered," and/or "Mylar" and wondered what they mean? The next column will define these archival terms and discuss archival enclosures.

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