



SAVING FAMILY HISTORY

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One chilly winter day, my childhood friend Jane invited me to her ordinarily spotless home for tea. Today however, photographs and scrapbooks littered the kitchen table, spilling over onto the floor. "I'm trying to organize these," she said, with a sweeping hand, but I think it's a losing battle. She handed me a picture of a short, elderly man with a neatly trimmed mustache and smiling eyes. "Who is this?" she asked. Noting the chupa in the background, I suggested it might be a picture taken fifty years ago at her wedding. She shrugged. "I think I'm just going to throw them all out."

"No," I cried, but I understood her frustration. At a certain age, you just want to pitch everything so 'the kids' don't have to do it when you die. But in my case, something extraordinary happened. My cousin, a clever genealogist, connected with distant family members. The use of documents, grave sites, research, memories and pictures resulted in the publishing of a family tree containing hundreds of relatives going back centuries. I realized I needed to save the pictures and documents in my possession for future generations and to document the history of my time. But like my friend Jane, I needed an easy way to do this. So I did a little research and came up with these ideas for her and for myself.

PHOTOGRAPHS

First: Old photographs: Who are those people?

1. Buy a photo marking pencil. They are not expensive and can be bought at any hobby or photography store or on line. A soft # 1 lead pencil can also be used. **Do not use a pen.** New photos that are plastic coated are difficult to write on, but the soft lead pencil should work.

2. When marking, always place the photo face down on a hard surface and press only as hard as necessary. One method for groups is to use a separate piece of paper preferably acid-free. Draw circles to represent the people. You can put the paper on top of the photo and gently trace the group. Label the circles to create a key to the picture. Keep the two together but don't staple or paper clip them! Finally, don't use press-apply labels or tape.

3. Write who, what, where, when and why, if possible on the back or under your photo. Jane and I puzzled all afternoon until we remembered the picture was of her grandfather's brother, born in Kansas City in the 1870's and founder of a business that no longer exists. To have lost that precious visual piece of history would have been so sad.

4. Buy acid free (I'll go into that term later) folders and storage boxes, also at the hobby store or at Amazon.com and put all your loose photographs in them.

Second: What to do now?

1. If, after reflection, you are sure you do not want to fool with them any further, call **David Boutros at the Western Historical Manuscript Collection-Kansas City, 816-235-1544.**

WHMC-KC may choose to archive your boxes of photographs. Materials given to them become their property, and they may be selective about what they take. However, if accepted, your family history will be preserved for future generations.

2. On the other hand, if you would like to place your photographs in a scrapbook, here's how to do it.

SCRAPBOOKS

According to the State Archives of Florida, making scrapbooks to preserve family memories has made an extraordinary comeback in recent years. It originally became very popular, in a slightly different form, during the European Renaissance. The earliest books were called "commonplace books," and were used to copy down bits of philosophy, quotes, poetry, and anything else of personal interest to the writer. As magazines and newspapers became more prevalent, commonplace book creators found it easier to snip out an article and paste it into a commonplace book than to hand copy it.

Scrapbooks are today's memories saved for tomorrow's generations. You might consider journaling about things that you would like your great grandchildren to know about you and the family.

Label pictures so that each person in the album has a name and what relationship they have to others. What is the picture about and when and where did it happen? Be specific. Dates without a year in them will not be helpful in thirty years and there are many places with the same name (Kansas City Missouri and Kansas City Kansas,) and why is it so interesting? The State Archives of Florida suggests that having the memories written about with a bit of detail can help with particulars that might go missing over the years.

Today's scrap booking is more than just cutting a few items from a newspaper and gluing them into a book. A whole industry is devoted to special pages, stickers, photograph holders, fancy cutouts, and multicolored pages. There are even websites and magazines devoted to it.

Remember: The scrapbook itself becomes a valuable historical document with the content and care put into its making.

Acid free?

Acid is used in paper manufacturing to break apart the wood fibers and the lignin which holds them together. If acid remains in the materials used for photo albums, the acid can react chemically with photographs and accelerate their deterioration. It's imperative that all materials (glue, pens, paper, etc.) used in memory albums or scrapbooks be acid-free.

Scrapbooks also can be placed in acid-free storage boxes and given to WHMC-KC. In most instances, leaving the scrapbook alone and storing it in an acid free box will be the best solution. Boxing also helps to keep together any enclosures that are trying to fall out of the book.

Here are some tips for home use

Page protectors are a good idea for scrapbooks. Look at office supply stores or hobby shops for acid free, and PVC (Poly Vinyl Chloride)-free top or side loading plastic page protectors that are specifically labeled photo-safe or archival quality. They will slip over a finished album page. I don't want to get too complicated here, but if you have items with chalk, pencil, colored pencil, pastel, or charcoal, etc on them, use an acid free paper interleaf.

Store your albums and scrapbooks in a safe, comfortable, low humidity, no-pollution, low temperature (65-68 degrees is ideal), light-free location. This can dramatically extend the life of paper-based materials. It is best to store scrapbooks upright and provide ample room for binding. Large books should be stored flat.

You can share your scrapbooks with others but try to keep sticky, salty, oily fingers from coming into direct contact with your photos. FYI: the Library of Congress suggests you use cotton gloves when handling photos directly, but that may be going too far for me. To avoid this problem altogether, David Boutros recommends you make high quality laser color photocopies or a new print from a scanned photo. Thus, the original can be safely stored in folders and protected.

When making copies of documents or photos, use acid-free paper which will endure much longer than original memorabilia.

Don't place your rare heirloom documents in a scrapbook. Instead, make copies or scan them for your scrapbook. Keep the originals in a safe or safe deposit box. And **don't laminate them!!!** Don't laminate photos either.

Use acid-free stickers, photo-corners, and low-depth embellishments.

My mother made a scrapbook of my baby years in which she placed a lock of my hair. I was surprised and thrilled to see the REAL color of my hair but my curl was falling apart so I placed it inside a polyester envelope for posterity. You can do this with other fragile objects. A polypropylene envelope mounted to the page will do well. Newspaper clippings should be photocopied onto permanent paper. Another option thought not as permanent, is to spray with deacidification spray found at the hobby store.

Do you have old marriage documents, birth certificates, immigration papers, letters? Often the paper is brittle and may break if forced open but whenever possible, store these items unfolded. Tuck menus, maps and other folded items into polyester sleeves mounted on the page.

SIMPLE SOLUTIONS PRESERVES NEWSPRINT

James and Morris Carey suggest an easy method of preserving newspaper articles and "keep them looking good as new. Add one tablet or capful of milk of magnesia to a one-liter bottle of club soda. Allow it to sit overnight; the next day, pour it into a shallow dish.

Before soaking and treating your clippings, make photocopies, and try a few test pieces first. Then, soak your clipping for a few minutes. This process neutralizes the paper's destructive acids. Carefully dry them on white paper towels." Press the papers by putting them between two pieces of blotter paper with a board and a weight on top. Watch out for glue that may have released in the water but might re-stick to the blotter or paper towels.

But don't do this with photos!

Here are a few things to watch out for

Inks that are water soluble, particularly color inks. Test by rubbing an obscure place with a wet Q-tip. If you see any discoloration on the q-tip, then don't put the item into the bath. Inked notes on the newspaper article will bleed and/or disappear. Articles soaked too long will turn to pulp.

MORE ABOUT PHOTOS

If you wish to go further into archiving photographs, there are numerous website where you can get good information. Here is one.

<http://www.kindredkonnections.com/DigitizingOldPhotos.html>

RESOURCES I USED

State Library & Archives of Florida

<http://dlis.dos.state.fl.us/archives/preservation/index.cfm>

Northeast Document Conservation Center

<http://www.nedcc.org/resources/resources.php>

Library of Congress – Preservation Directorate

<http://www.archivalscrapbooking.com/scrapbookalbumlife.html>

American Institute for Conservation of Historic & Artistic Works

<http://aic.stanford.edu/library/online/brochures/index.html>

“Preserving Precious Papers - Proper Care Can Extend the Life of Priceless Mementos”

Kansas City Star, Feb. 13, 2005

<http://docs.newsbank.com/s/InfoWeb/aggdocs/NewsBank/10842B1EB4ED0A14/0DD30A58A3057015>

Saving old letters and identifying old photos

<http://www.dearmyrtle.com/06/0322.htm>

Other resources

Keeping Your Past; Kansas City Area Archivists (KCAA)

<http://www.umkc.edu/KCAA/index.htm>

David Boutros, Western Historical Manuscript Collection-KC

<http://www.umkc.edu/WHMCKC/>

Thanks to all.