Skills Lesson: Dating a Photograph

Knowing the general time period for a photograph—if not an exact year—can be very useful when you're examining it for historical information. Here are a few tips that might help.

- Does the photograph "look old"? Most adults can look at a photograph and get a feeling for whether it was taken in 1880 or 1940. Students are unlikely to have this sense. So, looking at a few old photographs--seeing what format they have, what the color is like, how they are mounted, what people are wearing, and so forth--can be a good introduction to dating photographs. Most of your students will never need to be able to tell a daguerreotype from an ambrotype or a cabinet card from a carte-de-visite. But getting a feeling for what a nineteenth as opposed to twentieth-century photograph looks like is a good idea.
- Remember that NO photographs were taken before 1830, and very few before 1839.
- If the photograph is a "snapshot," it was taken after 1888, when Kodak came out with the first easy-to-use camera for nonprofessionals. If the snapshot is in color, it was probably taken after 1960. If the color in the photograph is good (i.e., not reddish or blueish) the photograph was probably taken in the late 1970s or later. After that, color processing became cheaper and more stable.
- To get more specific, look at details in the photographs. Sometimes there will be a date on the photograph itself, on the mounting of the photograph, or on the back. But if there isn't, you can look for "signs of the times." Fashions are often great clues, for example. And there are many websites online that show what people were wearing in various decades.
- Other dating clues include automobiles. (If there's a street with no cars but a horse and buggy, that's a good clue, too.)
- Researching a product in a photograph can yield a window of time or even a specific year. Cheetos, for example, were introduced in 1948. If there's a Cheetos bag in a photograph, it wasn't taken before that year.

Helpful Websites

Flickr collections by era

These contributed photographs are grouped by decade, and the multitude of images will provide you with a helpful frame of reference to compare your vintage photos.

[100 years old](#) | [1900-1910](#) | [1910-1920](#) | [1920s](#) | [1930s](#) | [1940s](#) | [1950s](#) | [1960s](#)

Legacy Tree

[Dating Old Photographs, Part I:](#) This page covers formats of photographs and introduces the idea of internal clues.

[Dating Old Photographs, Part II:](#) This page covers using women's clothing fashions to help date a photograph.