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Photograph Albums: Visual Entertainment, Family Record



Picture the front parlor of the mid to late 1800s. It's the family's formal room, reserved for entertaining visitors and business associates—the public area of a private home. The best furniture and draperies are there, as well as the treasures the family wants to share, displaying their taste, social standing and aspirations. On the small table in the center of the room, given pride of place, are a small selection of photographs in cases and a photograph album.

With the invention of the daguerreotype in 1839, average people were at last able to record their own likenesses. News of the process spread swiftly, and as early as 1840, Ezekiel Hawkins opened a studio in Cincinnati. The J. T. Teliga studio opened in Toledo in 1844, offering photographs for prices ranging from \$1.50 to \$3.00.

The daguerreotype was made by treating a copper plate with a light-sensitive silver iodide coating. After

exposure in the camera, the plate was developed in mercury vapor and produced a permanent image. To protect it from physical damage and oxidation, the photograph was covered by glass, sealed in tape, framed in a gold mat, and placed in a velvet-padded folding case, similar to those used for miniature paintings. A gold wash or color tinting could be added for additional cost. Improvements in technology rapidly shortened exposure times and soon cheaper alternatives were available. The ambrotype was a glass negative, which, when backed with black paper or varnish and sealed in a mounting like the daguerreotype, appeared positive. The tintype (or ferrotype) used the same process with a wet emulsion coated onto a metal plate. These, too, were often available in miniature cases, although they were often enclosed in a heavy paper folder.

At right, an ambrotype shows the common display method used by daguerreotypes, ambrotypes, and often by tintypes in the mid-19th century. The case hinged closed, latched, and was often lined in red plush.



The photograph was cutting edge technology in 1840, displayed not just as a portrait but also to show that the family shared in the latest scientific advances. Two technical improvements made the photograph and the album into the common, mass culture items of the late 19th century. The first was the invention of the inter-negative process, allowing the creation of a single negative from which an unlimited number of copies could be made. The second was photographic paper. This light-sensitive paper was created by coating it with an emulsion of egg white (albumen) and a salt solution and then in silver nitrate. Much less expensive than glass or metal, these photographs were mounted on cardstock and eventually came in a selection of sizes.

The Civil War Era



Photography had been available for a generation by the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861. With parents, wives and sweethearts separated from their soldiers, a photograph was a valued keepsake. A review of the letters between soldiers and their families in the Center for Archival Collections shows many references to sending and receiving photographs or having "a likeness" taken.

At left, tintypes were available in a variety of sizes. These range from 2" square, to 4 x 2 1/2", although they could be as large as the camera allowed--8 x 10" tintypes are occasionally found. The family group in the upper left is still in its original card stock holder.

The carte de visite was about 4 x 2 1/2", mounted on cardstock, often providing a full-figure portrait of the subject. First popular in Europe in the late 1850s for use as visiting cards, Americans adopted them as collectibles. Special albums with heavy card-stock pages with die-cut openings were designed to hold the photographs. Exchanging and collecting portraits of family and friends soon became a very popular fad. There was competition to amass the largest albums. Soon, images of national celebrities in politics, war, and the arts were in common circulation, and portraits of President Lincoln and General Grant mingled with those of aunts and cousins.

Family photograph albums were considered part of polite entertainment, not only for the family that collected it, but also for guests. While stereoscope views of famous battles or Bible lands were also popular, the album could be used as a conversation-starter, allowing the owner to regale guests with family stories. There is some evidence through the fiction of the day that such sessions were accepted with the same tolerant boredom that slide shows and vacation videos were received in the twentieth century.

Through the 1880s, photographs were only taken by professionals in studios. Since the photograph was intended to be a permanent record of the deepest character of the subject, people wanted to look appropriately sober, and the long exposures required ensured that no one smiled. Occasionally, the head rests and other braces used for support are visible in the finished work. Poses followed the styles set by paintings and were limited to the furniture and backdrops on hand.

Because people saw their albums as a permanent historical record of their family, friends, and interests, a conventional arrangement quickly emerged: the elders of the family appeared first (sometimes copied from earlier daguerreotypes or artwork), the parents and children of the current generation, followed by aunts and uncles and their children, then friends, and finally any celebrities. Just a generation later, everyone's albums "all looked the same."

At right, the photographer has placed his studio address and specialty on the reverse of a carte de visite. Until the appearance of the Kodak camera, almost every photograph was taken by a professional with a studio. Some photographers plied their trade in wagons travelling from town to town. Others considered photography a sideline to their main business.



The Kodak Era and Postcards



Another technical breakthrough brought the next change in albums. In 1888, George Eastman introduced a box camera pre-loaded with a 100-exposure roll of film. Anyone could take snapshots with this camera, send it to Kodak, and have the prints and (re-loaded) camera returned. By this time, exposure length was no longer a problem, and with an easy-to-use camera, photography became the passionate hobby of millions. Now, instead of page after page of formal portraits, photograph albums began to resemble scrapbooks, with creative layouts and pictures of family picnics, graduations, first cars, and holidays. Pictures could now tell their own stories. People smiled or made faces for the camera.

At left, a new style of photograph album allowed collectors to choose their own layout. No longer mounted on cards, the photographs could be cut out or rearranged to suit. The page label reminded everyone of the name of the company that had brought amateur photography to the world.

The photograph album might still appear in the family room, but even then, a more informal mood took hold. The family unit was still the center of interest, but friends and daily activities were the gathered together, rather than ancestral mug shots.

At right, the front and back sides of real-photo postcards.

Photographic paper that was pre-printed with mailing information was commonly available during the early decades of the 20th century.



In 1892, the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago offered picture postcards for sale and a new format became popular. The local drug store or photo shop could print portraits or amateur snapshots on a postcard, suitable for mailing. Commercial scenic postcards supplemented or replaced family vacation snapshots. Businesses and cities found it worthwhile to publish views of buildings and street scenes which promoted the community. With postage at only a penny, postcards sold in the millions. Resources for the amateur photographer continued to improve throughout the twentieth century. Flash equipment for indoor snapshots, adjustable focus, color film for prints and slides, faster exposure times, and instant-prints (most famous as the Polaroid), all contributed to photography's becoming the most popular hobby in the United States. Albums continued to be used to gather, organize, and protect family photographs. String-tied scrapbooks with black or buff pages, spiral-bound gatherings of heavy pages with contact adhesives and clear plastic covers, and small flip-books designed for specific formats have all found their way onto our bookshelves.

Now that most photography is digital, the album has gone online as well. Snapshots are as close as your cell phone. We photograph, we collect, and we share.

--Lee N. McLaird