WISCONSIN HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Dating Family Photographs

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Agenda for the morning

- **History of Photography**
  - Big changes in technology
  - How our relationship to photography changes over time
- **Methods of identification and dating**
  - Talk to living family
  - Photographic format
  - Researching the Photographer and Location
  - Clothing
  - What's in the background?
- **Where to start?**

Earliest Commercial Photography

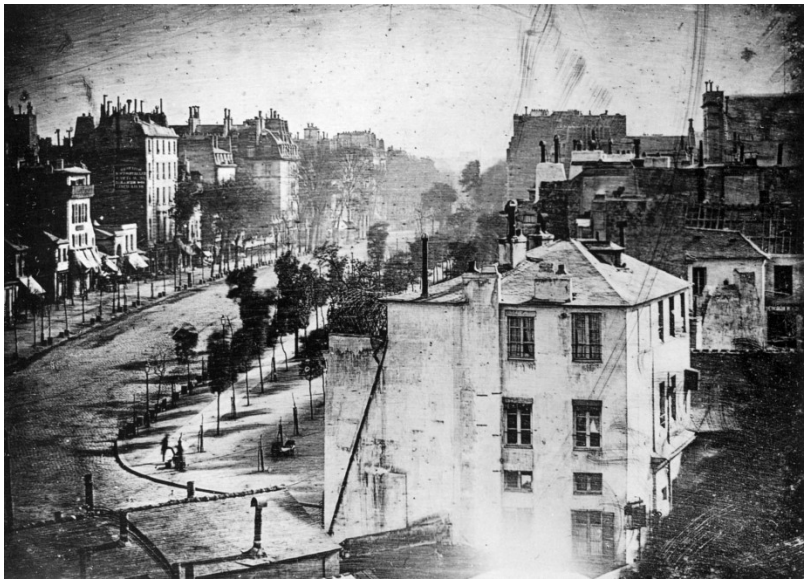
1839- Daguerreotype patent
1840- Talbot creates the first salt and paper prints with his photographic process

Daguerreotypes 1839- ca.1860
- Reflective/ghostly
- Silver plated copper plate, can tarnish

Ambrotypes 1851- c.1880
- Glass base

Tintype/Ferrotype 1856- 20th century
- Iron or metal base, magnetic and can rust

Paper prints 1840-present



Paris ca. 1838

Creation of Negatives/Positive

Wet Plate process

- Must produce the negative right away
- Mobile darkroom or studio
- Mostly professionals who are taking photographs

1855 Albumen Print

- Use egg whites to seal the paper to prepare for photosensitive chemicals
- Paper curls if not mounted to cardboard
- Tend to be shiny with a yellow tone

1880 Cyanotype (Blue)

Amateur photography

- **Dry Plate process**
  - No longer need a mobile dark room
  - Leads to the commercialization of photography

1870s Gelatin Silver Process

1888 First Kodak Camera

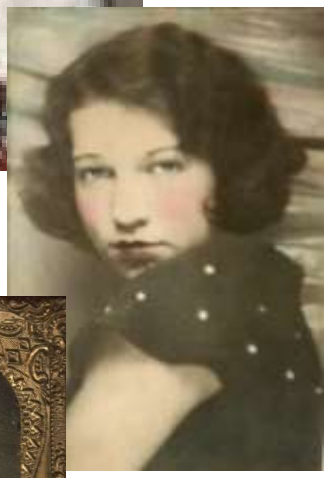
1901 Brownie Camera

- **Allows for the first real candid photography**
- **Massive increase in popularity and volume of photos created**

Shutterbugs Camera Club, 1900, Manitowoc

Color Photography

- Before color film all color was added by hand
- Color film is available as early as ca.1905, but it is very expensive and not very popular
- Black and White is considered more artistic and serious
- Journalists use Black and White
- Begins to gain popularity after the war, see more regular use after 1955



Talk to Family Members

- Encourage family members to identify photographs as they are created
- Try to talk to someone from your EXTENDED family
- Create a Photo ID worksheet to collect basic information and questions

Questions for family members:

- Are any of the people in this photograph familiar?
- When did the family move to the area? When did they leave?
- Do you know for what occasion this photograph would have been taken?
- Do you have a collection of family photographs?
- Who owned this photograph before you?
- Is this a location that you recognize?

Photographic Format

- **Identifying the photographic format can help establish an earliest possible date for a photograph**
- **There are also well established ranges of popularity**
- **Graphicsatlas.org**

Other Elements of the photograph

- **Is the print mounted to a card?**
- **Size of the card**
  - Carte de Visite 2.5in x 4 in
    - Popular from1854-1870s
  - Cabinet Cards
    - Popular from 1870s-1890
    - Last produced in the 1920s

Researching the Photographer and Location

- **Photographers imprint**
  - City directories
  - Newspaper Ads
  - Wisconsin Photographers index
- **Real Photo Postcards**
- **Cased Images**
  - Cases and Mattes

When were photographs taken?

- **Special Occasions**
  - Wedding
  - Graduation
  - Confirmation/Communion
  - Funerals
    - post-mortem
  - Teams/Clubs
  - Immigrants

Clothing and Accessories

- Women's Fashions
- Military uniforms
- Hairstyles

Ladies' Fashions

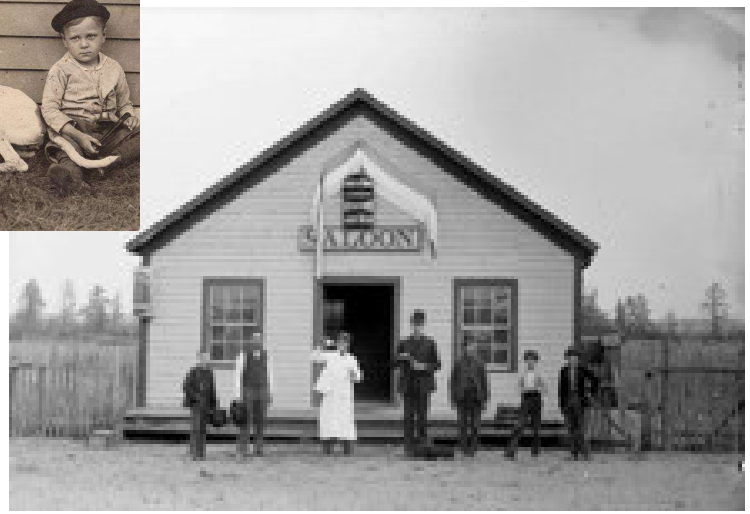
1898

1895

1890

What else is in the photograph?

- Cars/bicycles
- Electric lights
- Telephone
- Street names
- Pets
- Building names or store fronts
- Architectural details
- Advertising or Calendars



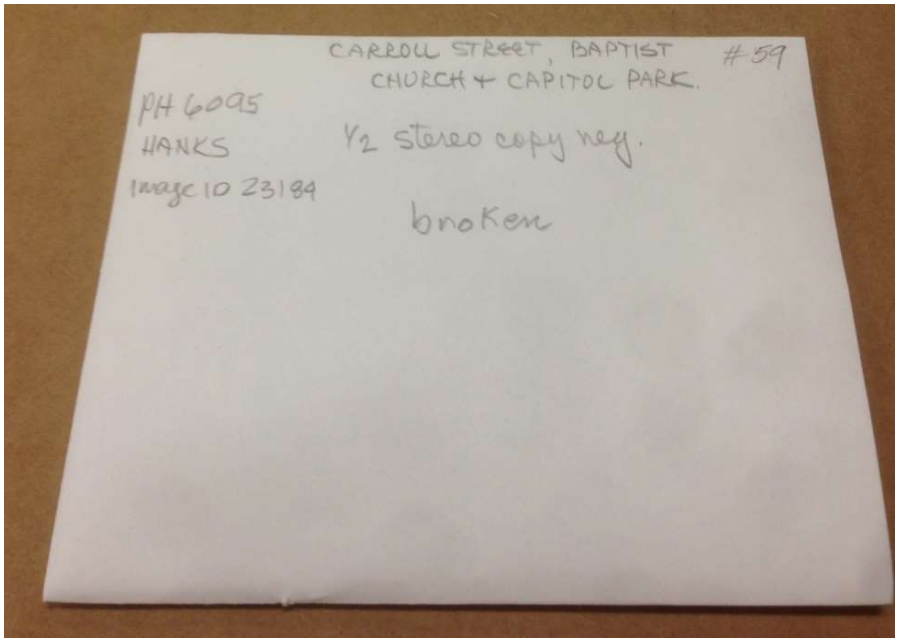
What is on the back?

- Postmarks/stamps
- Real Photo Postcards

Tips for photo organization and identification

- Keep like photos together
- Don’t move things around too much until you are sure
- Think about how photographs intersect with your other research needs or brick walls
- Don’t get overwhelmed, pick a few to start
- Stay organized and be as systematic as possible
- Scan or copy unknown images to share with family

Photo Storage



How to store photographs

- Low relative humidity (30-40%)
- Cool (room temperature or lower)
- Clean, pest-free environment
- Little light exposure
- Protective enclosures

Ideally each photograph is stored in its own sleeve or enclosure

- Acid-free, lignin-free
- Minimizes light exposure
- Porous
- Cannot be viewed in enclosure

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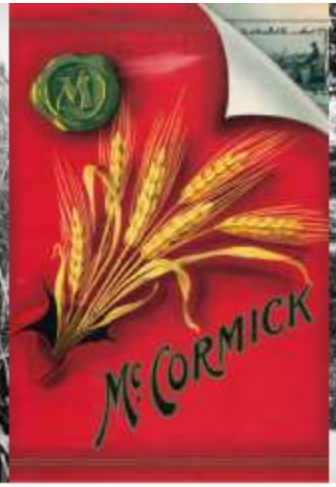

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THANK YOU

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