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## READING AND RESEARCHING PHOTOGRAPHS

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### **Introduction**

Basic visual literacy, the ability to “read” pictorial images, is a fundamental skill necessary for working with photographs. Learning to recognize the general subject matter shown in visual materials is an important first step. To convey information about photographs as historical resources, archivists, librarians, and other cultural resource managers also look at other factors besides subject. They consider the purpose of the image creators (the clients or publishers as well as the photographers), the function of the photographs, the influence of production techniques, and common conventions for visual expression. Knowing how pictures communicate information is critical for helping users of archives understand or explore the meanings of photographs.

Reading photographs is also the first step in researching photographs effectively. General research strategies for pictures follow the same procedures used to investigate any kind of historical record. The techniques described in this chapter emphasize the special characteristics of visual materials. The availability of research techniques and reference tools does not mean that archivists should investigate all photographs in depth. Instead, archivists need to decide how much research to undertake based on a repository’s mission, available resources, the value of the photographs, and the anticipated type and level of usage.<sup>1</sup>

Knowing how to read and research photographs helps archivists more easily reach appraisal decisions, compile background information for finding aids, provide reference services, and contribute to outreach projects. By building their own visual literacy and investigative skills, archivists can also offer sound advice to researchers on how to track down information about photographs. An archives’ reference or outreach services might even include programs to help users of archives learn visual reading and researching skills.

This chapter’s first section, *How to Read Photographs*, introduces visual literacy by providing

exercises that build skills in observing visual details and exploring different kinds of meaning. A ready reference list of common visual vocabulary elements and definitions is also included. The second section, *How to Research Photographs*, outlines techniques for researching photographs: gathering information from internal, physical, and contextual evidence; locating similar photographs to make visual comparisons; consulting printed and online reference sources; maintaining a visual dating guide; and seeking help. Numerous examples illustrate useful investigative processes for groups of photographs as well as single images.

### **How to Read Photographs**

Many articles and books describe visual literacy, which includes a variety of analytical methods used in cultural studies, education, historical and scientific inquiries, journalism, and other areas.<sup>2</sup> Gaining a basic knowledge of visual literacy helps archivists work effectively with photographs, because it helps them assess and identify the context, content, and methods of pictorial expression.<sup>3</sup> Visual literacy involves analyzing photographs by taking into account the photographs’ provenance, the technology of photography, conventions of visual expression, and the viewpoints of both the photographer and the intended audience. Reviewing any textual information available with photographs (such as captions, log-books, and folder or box labels) is also important for deciphering visual meanings.

Archivists can become more visually aware through hands-on experience working with photographs and by reading about the history of photography. Asking basic questions, such as who made the photographs and why, helps establish the function or purpose of the images. Comparing similar and dissimilar visual elements improves the archivist’s ability to recognize related images, duplicates, and reproductions. Considering photographic processes, formats, genres, and techniques

## TERMINOLOGY

The SAA Glossary (revised) defines *visual literacy* as “the ability to decipher cultural and technological systems that express meaning using graphic images, icons, or symbols.” In more general terms, visual literacy is “the ability to understand (read) and use (write) images and to think and learn in terms of images.”<sup>4</sup>

also contributes to determining the evidential, informational, artifactual, and associational values of photographic documents. For more information about those values, see chapter 4, Appraisal and Acquisitions.

### *Building Visual Observation Skills*

A simple exercise for analyzing photographs can help archivists improve their visual observation skills by learning to spot key visual elements and weave different aspects of an image into a coherent description. This exercise usually begins by finding an interesting photograph and looking at it for a minute or more. The next step is to name everything seen in the image. The exercise concludes with writing a summary of

what the photograph means.<sup>5</sup> The ultimate goal is to analyze groups of photographs expeditiously, but starting with a single image is usually easier.

*Example:* (see fig. 3.1) Look for more than a minute at the portrait of the Sylvester Rawding family taken in 1886 at their sod house in Custer County, Nebraska. The photographer, Solomon D. Butcher (1856–1927), used a view camera and large glass negatives to capture this scene and many others for his proposed county history. An initial reaction to the photo might be “people and animals posed near a low building.” Continued observation could expand the inventory of the image’s contents to include such features as a cow on the roof (?), a large watermelon cut open on a table covered by a circular cloth; two big glass windows and two doors, one open; the parents seated in chairs at each end of the table (mother wearing an apron and father holding a hat and coat); the daughter seated next to the three sons (standing); and a dog and a pair of mules.<sup>6</sup>

As part of this exercise to stimulate visual awareness skills, an archivist should also speculate about the circumstances behind the photograph. Try to account



Fig. 3.1. Solomon D. Butcher. Sylvester Rawding family sod house, north of Sargent, Custer County, Nebraska, 1886. The 1885 Census mentions Sylvester, wife Emma, daughter Bessie (age 16), son Philip (age 17), son Willie (age 7), son Harry (age 15). Glass plate negative, 6.5 by 8.5 inches. (RG2608. PH-1784) *Courtesy of the Nebraska State Historical Society Photograph Collections.*

**TIP**

**Identify all assumptions.** False assumptions are all too easy to make when looking at photographs. To build awareness of your own assumptions as well as those in any written text accompanying the photographs, ask the reason for each word or date that describes a photograph: “How do I know that this is true?” Flagging obvious assumptions with question marks is a useful tracking technique when drafting captions or taking notes. Placing check marks by fact-checked information can help the less obvious assumptions stand out, because the information that might still need to be verified will lack check marks.

*Example:* (see fig. 3.1) If the Rawding group portrait didn’t have the word “family” in its title and the individual names of the family members in its extended caption, describing the group portrait as a family would be a risky assumption. One or more of the people might be hired workers. The question about the cow standing literally on the roof can be resolved only in the sense that the cow is tethered to a hillside that would have been part of the sod house roof if the house were dug back into the hill.

for the influences on the image by devising a narrative that explains what the photograph might mean. Theorizing about the contextual meaning raises awareness of the relationship between the photographer and the subject and how they wanted the image to function. In a real life situation, an archivist would ask many questions and verify facts before writing the following kind of caption paragraph.

*Example:* Solomon Butcher became a full-time photographer in 1886 when he decided to compile an illustrated history of Custer County and include many family portraits and stories. The Sylvester Rawding family posed for a portrait that would commemorate their contribution to settling the prairie. The photographer portrayed the family’s general living conditions as well as their pride in their homestead by posing them with their sod house, several animals, and appetizing watermelons. Despite the difficulties of working with a large glass plate camera outdoors, Butcher kept most faces in sharp focus and achieved a legible composition. Butcher also gave this portrait a distinctive touch by making the cow appear to be standing on the roof.

Another kind of visual analysis exercise emphasizes the ability to distinguish between what the viewer infers from looking at an image and what information needs to be verified. The viewer learns to take photographs at more than face value and to question assumptions. A worksheet can prompt viewers to

**PHOTOGRAPH ANALYSIS WORKSHEET<sup>7</sup>****Step 1. Observation**

- A. Study the photograph for 2 minutes. Form an overall impression of the photograph and then examine its features more closely. Next, divide the photograph into quadrants and study each section to see what new details become visible.
- B. List what you see in the photograph.
- C. Think about who made the photograph and why. What purpose does the photograph serve?
- D. Consider how the photograph expresses information. What visual elements or techniques does it use?

**Step 2. Inference**

Based on what you have observed above, list three things you might infer from this photograph.

**Step 3. Questions**

- A. What questions does this photograph raise in your mind?
- B. Where could you find answers to them?

state what they think a photograph means and then figure out how to verify the ideas.

*Example:* The Rawding family photograph might lead an observer to infer quite opposite ideas. The portrait could show either successful homesteaders or struggling pioneers. The observer should pose a wide variety of questions such as: “What signs of achievement or hardship are visible?”; “How typical of prairie settlement life do the family’s circumstances appear to be?”; and “Why is everyone lined up in a single row?” Answering the questions would involve looking at more photographs by Solomon Butcher, studying his purpose for making the photographs, reading about life in sod houses and Nebraska in the 1880s, and researching the family’s history.

### *Recognizing Different Kinds of Meaning*

The question “What do these photographs mean?” rarely has one correct answer. If nothing else, archivists try to account for the factual or representational content shown in photographs. They also document and

preserve the context in which photographs were created so that researchers can investigate the full meaning of photographs.

One approach to understanding photographs distinguishes three levels of meaning: “of”—things shown in a photo; “about”—the subject matter and circumstances; and “abstract elements”—visual expression techniques and creator viewpoints.<sup>8</sup> Another method identifies three aspects of photographs to ask questions about: the image creation, the image itself, and the intended audience.<sup>9</sup> Both techniques have the common goal of understanding photographs by emphasizing the context of their creation as well as their content.

*Example:* (see fig. 3.2) Even a quick reading of this daguerreotype shows a woman seated at a sewing machine. No caption names the woman nor is the photographer identified, but the machine is a Grover and Baker industrial model introduced in 1853. The woman is, therefore, likely to be a wage-earning seamstress, which fits an image genre called occupational photographs. One writer concluded: “Whether made for a proud member of the emerging class of skilled industrial workers or by a manufacturer for advertising purposes, the photograph carefully presents sewing and the use of sewing machines as part of a respectable middle-class lifestyle.”<sup>10</sup>



Fig. 3.2. Unidentified photographer. Occupational portrait of a woman working at a sewing machine, 1853 or later. Sixth-plate, hand-colored daguerreotype,  $2\frac{3}{4}$  by  $3\frac{1}{4}$  inches. (LC-USZC4-3598) *Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division.*

Try one of the photo analysis exercises with fig. 3.3—a group of newsboy photographs by Lewis Hine (1874–1940). Looking at a series of related photographs improves the ability to understand the photographer’s purpose and how he interacted with his subjects. Lewis Hine sometimes left his own shadow in photographs; he doesn’t seem to be hiding his presence or the fact that he asked the boys to pose for him in particular ways. Hine also caught more spontaneous scenes such as the newsboys watching a race. Viewing additional photographs by Hine would reveal that he took more than two hundred images of newsboys in many different cities as part of his investigative work for the National Child Labor Committee (NCLC) between approximately 1908 and 1920. The NCLC used the photographs in exhibits, slide lectures, newspapers, magazines, and other publications in its campaign to persuade people to change the child labor laws and improve children’s lives.<sup>11</sup>

Developing visual literacy skills ensures that archivists become aware of the photographers’ cultural



**TO-MORROW'S CITIZENS**

A DEMOCRACY MUST HAVE  
HEALTHY NORMAL INTELLIGENT  
MEN AND WOMEN



A BOY IN THE STREET  
IS A BOY OF THE STREET



STREET TRADES  
AND STREET GANGS  
MAKE REFORM SCHOOLS  
NECESSARY

**WHO CAN AFFORD THIS?  
LET US SEE BECAUSE**

THE FAMILY CANNOT PARENTAL CONTROL IS LOST  
THE SCHOOL CANNOT TRUANCY AND LOY GRADES RESULT  
THE CHURCH CANNOT SEE HOW FEW NEWSBOYS ARE IN SUNDAY SCHOOL  
THE REFORMATORIES CANNOT THEY ARE CROWDED BECAUSE OF STREET TRADES  
THE STATE CANNOT NO STATE EVER HAD SO MANY GOOD CITIZENS AS IT NEEDED

**YOU MUST DECIDE THIS QUESTION  
NOT THE CHILD**



Fig. 3.3. Lewis Hine for the National Child Labor Committee. Newsboy photographs in the "Street Trades" albums, 1908-1920. Gelatin silver prints, between 4.5 by 3.5 inches and 5 by 6.5 inches. Bottom left: Watching the races, the newsboys' picnic, Cincinnati, August 1908 (LC-DIG-nclc-03169). Center left: John Howell, an Indianapolis newsboy. Makes \$.75 some days. Begins at 6 a.m., Sundays, August 1908 (LC-DIG-nclc-03225). Top left: Six-year old boy, Louis Shuman, and his 11 year old brother. Dallas newsboys. The little fellow usually has a brother who makes him do most of the work, October 1913 (LC-DIG-nclc-03904). Top right: Exhibit panel, 1913? (LC-DIG-nclc-03896). Bottom right: Joseph Wench, newsboy, 315 W. 2nd St. 7 years of age. Selling papers 2 years, Wilmington, Del., May 1910 (LC-DIG-nclc-03593). *Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division.*

assumptions, deliberate deceptions, propaganda efforts, and staged scenes, because they affect the meaning of photographs. For information about authenticity issues and the manipulation of images as an inherent aspect of photography, see chapter 1, Photographs in Archival Collections, and chapter 4, Appraisal and Acquisitions.

### *Reading Visual Vocabulary Elements*

Photographs express the photographer's viewpoint through visual elements that can be thought of as a specialized vocabulary. Considering such characteristics as composition, contrast, and focus helps archivists understand how images convey information. This aspect of visual literacy can help archivists not only read photographs but determine which images are more "legible" than others when confronted with many similar photographs to choose among.

The visual vocabulary of photographs includes the following elements:<sup>12</sup>

- *Color balance*, the overall color of an image, especially as regards deviation from accurate reproduction of neutral tones; also, the ability of photographic materials to reproduce colors accurately
- *Composition*, the arrangement of the subject elements in the image
- *Contrast*, the relative difference between the lightest and darkest areas of an image; high-contrast images have a significant difference between the highlights and shadows and often have very few mid-tones
- *Depth of field*, the range of distances in which the photographic subject can be captured with sharpness
- *Exposure*, the intensity and duration of light or other radiant energy used to make a photographic image
- *Focus*, the sharpness of an image created by an optical system; sharpness is also a subjective impression of an image's clarity of detail, while blurring can express a sense of speed
- *Perspective or point of view*, the position of a camera relative to its subject (e.g., an aerial view or close-up portrait)

- *Rhythm*, the repeating use of visual elements as a design feature within a photograph
- *Sequence*, a serial arrangement of images that presents a story, explains a process, or documents an activity
- *Space*, the creative use of white or background areas
- *Tonal range*, the number of shades between the lightest and darkest areas of an image

*Example:* (see fig. 3.3) Lewis Hine relied on many visual vocabulary elements to strengthen his message about the plight of child laborers. His straightforward compositions often placed the children in the center of the images to accentuate their need for assistance from those who saw the photographs. Hine drew attention to the children's very young ages by placing them near adults or recognizable street fixtures, which emphasized their short heights and small bodies. He varied the depth of field and perspective to portray the children in both close-up portraits and amid risky surroundings. The selection of appropriate exposure times contributes to the general legibility of these photographs. The blurred figures and uneven lighting in some images reflect the hazards of using cumbersome glass negative camera equipment in busy street settings.

Reading negatives fluently requires specialized experience. The reversed polarity of black-and-white negatives makes it hard to recognize subject content, especially with small 35 mm film frames. The dark areas such as roadways appear to be light, while light elements such as a daytime sky appear to be dark. The dyes in color negatives can be difficult to translate to their full-color transparency or print counterparts. For common situations such as matching up negatives and prints, look for distinctive features rather than attempting to read the whole negative in detail. Comparing image edge areas or the position of a hand, roofline, or tree branch is usually easier than considering overall similarities. When only negatives are available during appraisal, processing, or reference work, consider having sample images printed or scanned to verify the nature of the visual information.

## How to Research Photographs

Many photographs have incomplete or missing identifications, and many photographs never had textual captions. Archivists often need to investigate images to determine their basic subject matter, creators, or dates.<sup>13</sup> Without some identifying information, it is hard for repository staff to reach appraisal decisions, undertake arrangement and description, or provide reference and outreach services. Researching photographs can also contribute information to finding aids or individual captions that help staff and users alike locate and understand photographs.

Identifying information is most necessary at the collection or series level to establish the images' basic content and context. General information can suffice, such as "Views of Florida, ca. 1950–1970, taken by the Tourism Office for travel brochures." More detailed research can usually be left up to future collection users, especially at the item level. Archivists most often compile item-level captions only for special projects or constituencies. The five broad categories of research techniques for photographs are discussed below.

### *Gather Information from the Internal, Physical, and Contextual Evidence of the Images*

The first step in researching single photographs, series, or collections is to look at the images. Really look at them! Check the fronts and the backs of the pictures for both visual and textual clues.

- Study the photographs, any negatives, and their housings closely. Use a magnifying glass and adequate light to read the details. Note carefully any written information—from cryptic abbreviations or signatures to partial or full captions and studio imprints.

- Describe all the things in the photographs that could be checked in reference sources to help identify a place or time period.

- List the obvious features that can help determine a place or date including business signs, calendars, license plates, street signs, and theater marquees.

*Example:* (see fig. 3.4) This view of the main street in Globe, Arizona, shows a marquee announcing "Melvyn Douglas in Our Wife." This information about a movie makes it easy to set the earliest date of the photograph at 1941, when the movie was first released.

- Look for other clues to help estimate time periods including building styles, clothing styles, equipment styles, furniture styles, transportation systems, and even portrait studio props.

- Note the absence of things such as cars or telephone poles, which can help date photographs to the years before such things were available in a particular place.

- Talk about what might be happening in the photos to stimulate observation of objects or topics to investigate.

- Ask what events or activities might have caused the creation of the photographs and provide clues for discovering the images' original purpose or function.

*Example:* Were the photographs meant for advertising, corporate publicity, ethnographic study, government propaganda, photojournalism, scientific documentation, or tourist views?

#### TIP

### **USE SEVERAL KINDS OF RESEARCH TECHNIQUES TO INVESTIGATE PHOTOGRAPHS.**

- Gather information from the internal, physical, and contextual evidence of the images
- Look for similar photographs that have more identification
- Consult reference sources—both printed and online
- Maintain a visual dating and identification guide based on people, places, and events relevant to a particular archives
- Ask for help; show the photographs to people familiar with the suspected subject matter or with photographic history in general



Fig. 3.4. Unidentified photographer. “Main Street in Globe, Arizona,” 1941 or later. Gelatin silver print used by the Albertype Company, probably to publish a souvenir view or postcard, 6.5 by 9.5 inches. (LC-DIG-ppmsca-06702) Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Wittmann Collection.

- Consider the images’ style, form, or genre for clues to the creator and provenance.

*Example:* Does the photo style resemble commercial work, an artistic school, or an amateur snapshot?

*Example:* Are the images in soft or sharp focus, outdoor action scenes or posed studio shots, pictorialist seascapes or news photos of naval events?

- Identify some of the physical media characteristics for clues to time periods.<sup>14</sup>

- Are the image processes unusual?

*Example:* Dating a glass autochrome (ca. 1907–1930s) can be easier than dating a long-lived process such as a gelatin silver print (ongoing since the mid-1880s).

- Do the images have color? Are they one color, multicolor, or hand-colored?

*Example:* Photographs with an overall bright blue image color are likely to be cyanotypes. Although invented in 1842 and still available

today, this blueprint process was only in common use between approximately 1890 and 1920.

- Are the image sizes unusual? The dimensions may help narrow the date range or determine a photographer.

*Example:* A group of four-foot-long panoramic prints indicates the use of a special type of rotating camera. These “Cirkut” cameras were very popular in the early 1900s. The photographer’s name might be found through commercial ads in local newspapers or directories of the time that mention this specialized service. One caution—panorama cameras are still used today; not every extra-long photograph is an antique image.

- What are the image bases? Are they film, glass, metal, paper, ceramic, or leather?

*Example:* Film negatives are unusual before 1900.

- What are the image formats? Are they postcards, slides, or stereographs?

*Example:* The first 35 mm color slide film was marketed in 1936. This fact provides a “no earlier than” boundary year for dating 35 mm slides.

- What types of image mounts or mats were used? Are they commercial card stocks, special papers, or studio mats? Are the images in distinctive mats, frames, or cases?

*Example:* Researchers can date common card styles by their era of popularity. A calling card size (usually 4.5 by 2.5 inches) indicates carte de visite photographs, which were most popular in the 1860s and 1870s, although they continued until about 1905. Thin card stocks are generally older than thick stocks.

- Are the images originals or reproduction copies?

*Example:* The archives has paper photographic copies of what appear to have originally

been daguerreotypes or ambrotypes. Locating the original images may reveal captions or photo studio markings on the cases.

- Check for written evidence on the photographs (backs and fronts) and on their containers (boxes, folders, envelopes, mats, and frames). Look for
  - autographs of the photographer or subject;
  - captions;
  - copyright statements that indicate the dates of creation and rights owners, which can lead to the names of photographers;
  - dates;
  - inscriptions from a previous owner (e.g., “Doesn’t Aunt Alice look funny in this hat?”);
  - numbers that can lead to more information in a photographer’s logbook entry or captioned negative;
  - photographer or studio names as imprints on or underneath the mats or frames;
  - photographer or studio credit lines on the print mounts or backs; and

#### TIP

**Be cautious.** When identifying photographs, do *not* automatically believe everything written on them. Instead, “reality check” each piece of information against other visual clues.<sup>15</sup>

- Family members may caption photographs after they’ve forgotten exact names and dates. Stay alert to obvious inconsistencies such as a portrait dated later than the year in which the sitter died.
- Photographers and subsequent image users often caption images quickly, possibly including misspellings and incorrect information.

*Example:* (see fig. 3.5) A list of negative numbers in a documentation file misidentified this photo as Jerusalem. The stereograph actually shows a bell tower in Bethlehem with the town below. The relatively low height of many structures made the archivist wary of Jerusalem as the location. Comparison with similar scenes correctly captioned by the photographer resolved the misidentification problem.

- Photographers sometimes pose people with clothing and artifacts from unrelated settings to enhance the sitters’ status or create more saleable images through special effects.

*Example:* Photographers sometimes asked Native Americans to wear buckskin garments regardless of their own traditional dress. Question the visual authenticity of such scenes.<sup>16</sup>

*Example:* Before assuming that portraits annotated “Having fun at the San Diego beach” show people on the real beach, look for signs of painted studio backdrops.

- Publishers and news agencies may misidentify people and places in photographs, as also happens with textual stories.
- Sellers of photographs may associate an image with a famous individual or event in order to charge a higher price. Ask for proof of the connection before accepting such images at face value.



Fig. 3.5. Matson Photo Service. Bethlehem from a belfry, showing the Church of the Nativity and the Herodium, about 1935. Stereograph glass plate negative, 5 by 7 inches. (LC-DIG-matpc-04960) *Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division.*

- photographer names, studio initials, or signatures in the image areas.
- Check accompanying documentation for contextual clues about probable creators, subjects, place names, and time periods. Consider the following factors:
  - Appraisal and accession notes, processing notes, and finding aids, especially provenance information
  - Location of the images within the larger collection’s original order; dates on nearby folders or photographs may establish earliest or latest years
  - Photographers’ correspondence, diaries, and logbooks
  - Published uses of the images, which may provide captions or become citations in finding aids to alert users to the availability of additional information

#### *Look for Similar Photographs that Have More Identification*

After developing a general idea of the subjects, creators, and photographic formats and processes, don’t overlook the value of information in other visual resources. Seek out similar photographs that might

already be identified. Comparing images can either verify an educated guess about a subject or disprove a false identification.

- Consult other holdings at the archives.
  - Are there corresponding albums, contact sheets, negatives, or prints with captions?
  - Does the same subject appear in different record groups or collections?
  - Are there dated photographs on similar mounts or studio mats or identified images with the same backdrops and props?
- Use online picture catalogs and Internet “image search” tools to visually verify a suspected subject.

*Example:* (see fig. 3.6) To confirm the name and location of Mount Assiniboine, look for mountain-top views using Google, Yahoo, AltaVista, or other Internet “image search” services. Use more than one search service to retrieve the widest field of results. Each search technology has some distinct capabilities and may retrieve different pictures.

*Example:* Checking online catalogs that include digital images can also be helpful. The



Fig. 3.6. Henry G. Peabody. “Mt. Assiniboine, Alberta,” Canada, August 1902. Mammoth plate glass negative, published by the Detroit Photographic Co., 18 by 22 inches. (LC-DIG-ppmsca-06704) Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division.

Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division provides many examples in its reference aid “Online Picture Catalogs,” [http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/resource/223\\_piccat.html](http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/resource/223_piccat.html).

- Search textual catalogs to find relevant collections at sister institutions that might have photographs. Online guides to archives and manuscript collections, such as *Archives USA* and *NUCMC*, point researchers to primary or unpublished resources that often contain photographs. For descriptions of these tools, see chapter 13, Outreach.

*Example:* Papers of people who knew each other or attended the same events often wind up in different archives. Captioned albums or correspondence in one person’s papers may help identify photographs in the papers of acquaintances, colleagues, or relatives.

### Consult Reference Sources—Both Printed and Online

Online as well as printed reference sources can help archivists verify the subject and time period of photographs or determine photographers’ names, addresses, and dates. Whenever possible, verify the information in more than one source. The sources most frequently used to research photographs include the following types of published reference works.<sup>17</sup>

- Pictorial histories provide clues for dating automobiles and other kinds of transportation; styles of architecture, clothing, furniture, and hair; local and national events; and many other subjects. To locate such published visual works, search in library catalogs for the desired topic combined with such title phrases as “Illustrated history” and “Views of” or the subject phrases “Pictorial works,” “Photographs,” “Portraits,” and “Description and travel.”

*Example:* (see fig. 3.7) W. E. B. Du Bois gathered more than three hundred photographs of African Americans from many sources to display at the Paris Exposition in 1900. Few images had individual captions and dates. Recently, historian Deborah Willis identified several of the portraits and their Atlanta-based photographer, Thomas Askew (1850?–1914). She also used information in the book *Dressed for the Photographer: Ordinary Americans and Fashion, 1840-1900* to confirm that the people’s clothing and hats reflected the newest fashions of the late 1890s.<sup>18</sup>

- Timelines and histories of photography can help establish a general date span or media type. Old encyclopedias of photographic processes are also useful.

*Example:* The book *Care and Identification of 19th-century Photographic Prints*, by James M. Reilly (Rochester, N.Y.: Eastman Kodak, 1986) features a well-illustrated chart outlining print processes developed in the 1800s and their date spans.

*Example:* *Cassell’s Cyclopaedia of Photography*, originally published in 1911, is also available as *The Encyclopaedia of Early Photography*, edited by Bernard E. Jones (London: Bishopsgate Press, 1981).

#### TIP

**Be cautious.** The presence of a particular type of hat or car indicates the earliest date for a photo, but not the latest date. Objects can continue to appear in photographs years after they have fallen out of general fashion.



Fig. 3.7. Thomas Askew. Portraits in albums compiled by W. E. B. Du Bois for the 1900 Paris Exposition Universelle. Left: The Summit Avenue Ensemble, Atlanta, Georgia, 1899 or 1900. From left, the photographer's twin sons Clarence and Norman Askew, son Arthur, neighbor Jake Sansome, and sons Robert and Walter. Gelatin silver print, 7.5 by 10.5 inches. (LC-USZ62-69912). Right: Self-portrait, 1899 or 1900. Gelatin silver print, 6 by 5 inches. (LC-USZ62-124795). *Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Daniel Murray Collection.*

*Example:* The Wikipedia offers a Timeline of Photography Technology that expands through the work of many online contributors at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline\\_of\\_photography\\_technology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline_of_photography_technology).

- Photography dictionaries and directories can help determine photographers' full names and dates. Many historical directories focus on a particular geographic region such as a city or state.

*Example:* The George Eastman House hosts a database with information on more than 60,000 photographers as part of the "Photography Collections Online" area at <http://ftp.geh.org/>

*Example:* *A Bibliography of Writings By and About Women in Photography*, compiled by Peter E. Palmquist (Arcata, Calif., 1990).

*Example:* *Catching Shadows: A Directory of Nineteenth-Century Texas Photographers*, by David Haynes (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 1993).

- Biographical dictionaries and genealogical sources can help verify names for people shown in portraits as well as photographers.

*Example:* RootsWeb lists free as well as subscription-based online genealogy resources, including the Social Security Death Index, at <http://www.rootsweb.com/>.

- City directories, business directories, telephone books, and yellow pages can help
  - identify street locations shown in photographs,
  - match photographers' addresses to particular ranges of years, or
  - obtain the full corporate names of businesses that appear in the photographs.
- Maps can help confirm addresses and positions for places and structures shown in photographs. Fire insurance maps and atlases provide valuable information about the functions, construction materials, heights, and lot sizes for structures in thousands of cities and towns.
- National registries and directories provide dates for such things as named aircraft, hotels, railroads, schools, and ships.

*Example:* The annual volumes of *Jane's Fighting Ships* can help verify name spellings and years of service for naval vessels.

## BIOGRAPHICAL RESOURCES

Many kinds of reference sources exist for tracking down information about individual and corporate photographers as well as people and companies shown in photographs. The following list focuses on large printed directories and representative online resources. Additional sources include geographically based directories of historical photographers; newspapers, city directories, and photography journals contemporary with a photographer's lifetime; and articles or books about particular people or photographers.<sup>19</sup>

The selection of online resources suggests the types of "people finder" tools that exist in 2006, but specific services change rapidly. The Internet Public Library (<http://www.ipl.org>) and the Librarians' Index to the Internet (<http://www.lii.org>) cover many additional online resources in their biography, genealogy, and telephone and address sections. Another new resource involves requesting information about photographers through Internet listservs. For names of listservs related to photography, see Appendix IV, Locating Sources of Assistance.

### Historical Photographers

- George Eastman House, Photography Collections Online, GEH Database, <http://ftp.geh.org>. An expanded version of Andrew H. Eskind's *Index to American Photographic Collections: Compiled at the International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House*, 3rd ed. (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1995).
- Browne, Turner, and Elaine Partnow. *Macmillan Biographical Encyclopedia of Photographic Artists and Innovators*. New York: Macmillan, 1983.
- Edwards, Gary. *International Guide to Nineteenth-Century Photographers and Their Works: Based on Catalogues of Auction Houses and Dealers*. Boston: G.K. Hall, 1988.
- Kelbaugh, Ross J. *Directory of Civil War Photographers*. Baltimore, Md.: Historic Graphics, 1990.
- Palmquist, Peter E. *A Bibliography of Writings By and About Women in Photography*. Arcata, Calif.: Peter E. Palmquist, 1990.
- Palmquist, Peter E., ed. *Photographers: A Sourcebook for Historical Research*. 2nd ed. Nevada City, Calif.: Carl Mautz, 2000.
- Sennett, Robert S. *Photography and Photographers to 1900: An Annotated Bibliography*. New York: Garland, 1985.
- Willis-Thomas, Deborah. *Black Photographers, 1840–1940: An Illustrated Bio-bibliography*. New York: Garland, 1985.
- Willis-Thomas, Deborah. *An Illustrated Bio-Bibliography of Black Photographers, 1940–1988*. New York: Garland, 1989.

### Contemporary Photographers (with representative online resources)

- Open Directory Arts Photography Resources, <http://dmoz.org/Arts/Photography/Photographers/>.
- Marix Evans, Martin et al., eds., *Contemporary Photographers*. 3rd ed. New York: St. James, 1995.
- Photographer's Index, <http://photographersindex.com/>.
- Library of Photography, <http://www.libraryofphotography.com/>.
- Photolink, <http://www.photolink.de/>.

### People and Companies in General (representative online resources)

- Ancestry.com, <http://www.ancestry.com/>.
- AT&T, AnyWho Online Directory, <http://www.anywho.com/>.
- Bigfoot, <http://www.bigfoot.com/>.
- Free Obituaries Online, [http://www3.sympatico.ca/bkinnon/obit\\_links.htm](http://www3.sympatico.ca/bkinnon/obit_links.htm).
- RootsWeb.com, <http://www.rootsweb.com/>.
- Verizon, BigBook, <http://www.bigbook.com/>.
- Yahoo, People Search, <http://people.yahoo.com/>.



Fig. 3.8. CIF. “Mexico. Teatro Nacional,” about 1920. Photographic print, 7 by 11 inches. (LC-DIG-ppmsca-06703) *Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division.*

*Maintain a Visual Dating and Identification Guide Based on People, Places, and Events Relevant to a Particular Archives*

An archives can compile its own reference sources by copying and annotating photographs that visually identify the common topics in its collections. Creating a chronological list of key events, illustrated if possible, also simplifies the dating of photographs. These local tools are valuable visual guides for all phases of archival work.

*Example:* A corporate archives might include pictures and dates for subjects related to the history of the company and its work, including advertising campaigns, major events, headquarters buildings, major officers, and organizational changes.

*Example:* A local history collection might include dated pictures related to its geographic area, such as the introduction of gas lighting and paved sidewalks; major fires and floods; and portraits of leading citizens and notorious residents. Visual dating guides often feature tall buildings in skyline chronologies. In the case of the Palace of Fine Arts in Mexico City (see fig. 3.8), the skeletal framework of the dome indicates that construction is still underway. Although work on the building began circa 1905, most construction did not start until almost 1920 and was most active between 1932 and 1934. The photograph’s acquisition date of 1925 narrows the likely time frame to

the early 1920s for this image, which can then be used to help date other images showing the dome in a similar condition.

*Example:* The Smithsonian Institution Archives recruited high school interns to develop building histories that list when a Smithsonian structure was first proposed to Congress, the design competition dates, construction dates, all major building renovation, and dates for additions. These histories help in the dating of undated images that show these buildings, even in their backgrounds.

*Ask for Help. Show the Photographs to People Familiar with the Suspected Subject Matter or with Photographic History in General*

Archivists should not be shy about asking for assistance. Requesting advice is a good way to involve more users with photograph collections. Many people enjoy sharing their knowledge or solving mystery identification puzzles. In fact, many researchers will offer archives fuller identifications for photographs without a special invitation. Archivists can successfully use the following techniques, among others, to gather information about photographs.

- Contact staff members at other repositories that specialize in the suspected subject area or type of photography; send them copies of unidentified images for quick visual confirmations.

- Display copies of uncaptioned photographs in the archives, preferably in a prominent place that has a lot of foot traffic.
- Encourage staff members to request documentation from researchers for any new identifying information that would be useful to add to repository descriptions.
- Hold a picture identification party where people try to recognize copies of photographs displayed around the party area and write down captions to compare with each other.
- Post copies of mystery photographs on a website or publish them in a newsletter or local newspaper. Inquire about possible creators as well as subject matter. Offer prizes to the puzzle solvers.
- Request advice from local historical societies, historic preservation groups, or photography historians and collector organizations. Invite representatives to visit the archives and examine the actual photographs.

When seeking help to identify photographs, archivists need to be prepared to verify the credibility of either the information provider or the data offered. Archivists should encourage the people who supply information to explain what they based their identifications upon. Requesting contact information for follow-up questions saves time in the long run and helps the archives understand the reliability of the information.

*Example:* An archives offers a paper or online form to help people submit information in ways that create sufficient documentation to simplify further verification work. The form asks people to state the reference code location for the photographs, list the new or corrected information, and

#### TIP

**Be cautious.** Well-meaning people do sometimes give misinformation. Adopting the journalist’s strategy of confirming information through multiple sources minimizes the risk of adding false information to descriptions of photographs. More than two sources are ideal; published sources are preferable. When only one source is available, then assess the information provider’s reliability carefully. Also cite the source and circumstances for the new information in collection descriptions or documentation files to help future researchers evaluate its credibility.

then cite their sources—preferably by providing published references with titles, authors, and page numbers. The contact information requests occupation as well as name and address.

*Example:* (see fig 3.9) Library of Congress staff received help identifying an uncaptioned negative by Russian photographer Sergei Mikhailovich Prokudin-Gorskii. They

- relied initially on visual evidence and collection context to devise a minimal descriptive title: “Metal truss bridge on stone piers, Russia (?), 1905–1915”;
- displayed the image in an online exhibit and catalog;
- received messages from several people who provided the names of the river and place and identified the bridge as a then-new railroad structure;
- verified the information in reference sources; and
- expanded the catalog description to: “Trans-Siberian Railway, a newly built metal truss railroad bridge on stone piers, over the Kama River near Perm, Ural Mountains, Russia, ca. 1910.”



Fig. 3.9. Sergei M. Prokudin-Gorskii. Trans-Siberian Railway, a newly built metal truss railroad bridge on stone piers, over the Kama River near Perm, Ural Mountains, Russia, about 1910. Center frame detail from three-color separation glass negative, 9.5 by 3.5 inches. (LC-DIG-prok-10023) *Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division.*

### Summary

Archivists need to draw a line between providing sufficient basic information and leaving most in-depth research up to collection users. But acting as photographic detectives in appropriate circumstances brings valuable benefits. By becoming visually aware, archivists can handle photographs more proficiently. By becoming familiar with the photographic reference sources, archivists can better advise collection users about research strategies.

Learning basic visual literacy skills significantly improves an archivist's ability to work effectively with photographs. Researching the creators and intended audience is important to establish the purpose or function of the photographs. Time spent investigating photographs ensures informed decisions during appraisal, adds basic information to finding aids that can save staff time during reference work, and can contribute interesting captions to the archives' own publications, exhibits, and other outreach projects.

## READING AND RESEARCHING PHOTOGRAPHS WORK WELL TOGETHER

(See fig. 3.10)

For a special project about people and their prized animals, an archivist researched a group of twenty-eight contact sheets (168 images) containing photographs of a cat show taken by *Look* staff photographer Charlotte Brooks but never published. *Look* was a biweekly general interest magazine designed to appeal to families. The archivist

- read each contact sheet briefly to gain an overall impression of the event and noted the predominance of women as well as cats, with only a few older children or men shown in the images;
- checked the magazine's photo assignment books to confirm the photographer's name and lack of other documentation: "2769-53 Cat Show, Brooks, 12/3/53";
- looked at each contact sheet image in detail and discovered blue ribbons with the name of a possible sponsoring organization, the Garden State Cat Club; a blouse embroidered with "Hoboken Cat Club"; and a woman holding the Newark Star-Ledger newspaper;
- consulted a microfilm copy of that New Jersey newspaper and found a notice about the Garden State Cat Club's fifteenth annual cat show to be held from 10:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. at the Wideway Hall, 929 Broad St., Newark, N.J., for more than three hundred cats from the United States, Canada, and Europe;
- searched the Internet for information about the club, which has its own website and describes itself as one of the oldest (founded in 1936) and most prestigious cat clubs in the United States;

- tracked down the photographer's biography through citations in the George Eastman House online database and learned that Charlotte Brooks (born 1918) was one of the first woman photographers hired by *Look* and worked for the weekly magazine from 1951 until it ceased in 1971;
- rechecked the *Look* logbooks and learned that Brooks submitted sixty-seven jobs during 1953, including seven in December alone, which indicates a fast pace for most assignments during her early years at *Look*;
- wondered why the photographs were not published, since five were flagged with orange selection marks by an editor, and the images seemed to fit *Look*'s audience goals;
- resisted the temptation to pursue additional research avenues such as contacting the club to learn more about the judges and prize-winning cats featured in the photographs; and
- used the information gathered in two hours of research to update the scope and content summary in the catalog with a new opening sentence:

"The photographs show cats, women, and a few men and children participating in the Garden State Cat Club's 15th annual show, held December 1-2, 1953, at the Wideway Hall in Newark, N.J., for more than 300 cats from the United States, Canada, and Europe. Includes owners grooming cats, judges examining cats; owners holding cats with award ribbons; and people viewing cats in cages."



Fig. 3.10. Charlotte Brooks for *Look* magazine. Scenes from the Garden State Cat Club's 15<sup>th</sup> annual show, Newark, N.J., Dec. 1953. Photographic contact sheet for frames 165 to 173, 8.25 by 10 inches. Lower left: Detail showing city name on newspaper. Lower right: Detail showing names of cat clubs on prize ribbons. (LC-DIG-ppmsca-06701) *Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division.*

## Chapter 3 Endnotes

- 1 For additional information about research based on photographs see John E. Carter, "The Trained Eye: Photographs and Historical Context," *Public Historian* 15 (Winter 1993): 55–66; Walter Rundell, "Photographs as Historical Evidence: Early Texas Oil," *American Archivist* 41 (October 1978): 373–98; Thomas J. Schlereth, "Mirrors of the Past: Historical Photography and American History," in *Artifacts and the American Past* (Nashville, Tenn.: American Association for State and Local History, 1980), 11–47; John Schultz and Barbara Schultz, *Picture Research: A Practical Guide* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1991); and Joan M. Schwartz and James R. Ryan, eds., *Picturing Place: Photography and the Geographical Imagination* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2003).
- 2 Iconography, semiotics, and other formal methods for analyzing moving images, paintings, and prints as well as photographs, are beyond the scope of this chapter. For information about the different visual analysis techniques that users of archives might employ, see Peter Burke, *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2001) and Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to the Interpretation of Visual Materials* (London: Sage Publications, 2001).
- 3 For articles that explore the role of visual literacy in archives, see Elisabeth Kaplan and Jeffrey Mifflin, "'Mind and Sight': Visual Literacy and the Archivist," in *American Archival Studies*, ed. Randall C. Jimerson (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2000), 73–97, and Joan M. Schwartz, "'We Make Our Tools and Our Tools Make Us': Lessons from Photographs for the Practice, Politics, and Poetics of Diplomacy," *Archivaria* 40 (Fall 1995): 40–74.
- 4 John A. Hortin, "Theoretical Foundations of Visual Learning," in *Visual Literacy*, ed. David M. Moore and Francis M. Dwyer (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Educational Technology Publications, 1994), 25.
- 5 The method of this exercise is adapted from Nancy E. Malan, "American Women Through the Camera's Eye," in *Clio Was a Woman: Studies in the History of American Women*, ed. Mabel E. Deutrich and Virginia C. Purdy (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1980), 260–302.
- 6 For more information on Butcher's work, see Nebraska State Historical Society, Solomon D. Butcher Collection, <http://www.nebraskahistory.org/lib-arch/research/photos/highlite/butcher/index.htm>; and John E. Carter, *Solomon D. Butcher: Photographing the American Dream* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985).
- 7 Based on a worksheet developed by the United States National Archives and Records Administration, Education Staff, <http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/worksheets/photo.html>.
- 8 Kaplan and Mifflin, "Mind and Sight," 111–14.
- 9 Specific questions to ask in each category are suggested in Rose, *Visual Methodologies*, 188–90.
- 10 Vincent Virga, et al., *Eyes of the Nation: A Visual History of the United States* (New York: Knopf, 1997), 151.
- 11 Russell Freedman, *Kids at Work: Lewis Hine and the Crusade Against Child Labor* (New York: Clarion Books, 1994). For information about several collections of child labor photographs by Lewis Hine, see Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, "Related Resources" in National Child Labor Committee Collection, <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/pp/nclchtml/nclcabt.html>.
- 12 The definitions are from or based on the SAA Glossary (revised) and Leslie Stroebel and Richard Zakia, *The Focal Encyclopedia of Photography*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Focal Press, 1993).
- 13 Photographs lack identifications for many reasons. The original creators may have relied on memory to recognize the images and avoided time-consuming caption writing. Or, the photographers may have marked only a number on images and kept their documentation in logbooks that were later lost. Old folders and prints may have abbreviated labels that provide only partial data such as a place name but no time period. The original labeled containers may have been thrown away.
- 14 See the bibliography at the end of the book for many examples of guides to dating and identifying processes. The information in this section comes largely from Gordon Baldwin, *Looking at Photographs: A Guide to Technical Terms* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 1991); Brian Coe and Mark Haworth-Booth, *A Guide to Early Photographic Processes* (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1983); William C. Darrah, *Cartes de Visite in Nineteenth Century Photography* (Gettysburg, Penn.: William C. Darrah, 1981); Robert Leggat, *A History of Photography*, 1995, <http://www.rleggat.com/photohistory/>; and Henry Wilhelm, *The Permanence and Care of Color Photographs* (Grinnell, Iowa: Preservation Publishing, 1993).
- 15 Even when photographs have extensive captions (e.g., news photographs or publicity stills), research may be necessary to verify their general accuracy by fact checking a sample. Alternatively, staff can remind users to evaluate text that accompanies photographs with the same scrutiny given to any primary resource material. Inaccurate as well as absent information can lead to false research conclusions and usage rights violations.
- 16 For examples of this and other common anomalies, see Joanna C. Scherer, "You Can't Believe Your Eyes: Inaccuracies in Photographs of North American Indians," *Studies in the Anthropology of Visual Communication* 2 (Fall 1975): 67–79.
- 17 Contact a local reference librarian if assistance is needed to find printed or online sources that would help identify visual subjects or creators. For guides to online reference works, consult the Internet Public Library (<http://www.ipl.org/>) or the Librarians' Index to the Internet (<http://www.lii.org/>). For access to subscription online databases, such as Thomson Gale's Biography Resource Center (<http://www.gale.com/BiographyRC/>) and History Resource Center (<http://www.gale.com/HistoryRC/>), check with a public, state, or university library.
- 18 Deborah Willis, "The Sociologist's Eye: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Paris Exposition," in *A Small Nation of People: W. E. B. Du Bois and African American Portraits of Progress* (New York: Amistad, 2003), 51–78; Joan L. Severa, *Dressed for the Photographer: Ordinary Americans and Fashion, 1840–1900*. (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1995).
- 19 For more examples, see Amy Rule, *Researching Photographers* (Tucson, Ariz.: Center for Creative Photography, 1984).