



WAIT! Be Careful with Those Old Photographs!

Photographs are a kind of historical document that requires very special care. Untold chapters of family history are lost because prints and, most important, negatives are not handled and stored properly. If you come across a large collection of old photographs, read these simple instructions *before going on*.

Handle negatives as little as possible. But when you must:

1. Wash your hands first. The oil on your fingers can leave permanent marks on a negative.
2. Touch only the edge or the very corner of a negative.

If you find a negative with someone's breakfast all over it, don't throw it away. Negatives can be cleaned. It's best to use the inexpensive cleaner available in small bottles at the camera store. But you can also clean negatives with alcohol and a cotton swab — carefully. Brush off dust and grit first, then gently wipe the negative, and wait for it to dry.

Negatives should be stored in envelopes.

Negative envelopes come in many sizes: 35 mm, 120, 4x5, 5x7, 8x10.

Watch out for glass plates. These are probably over a hundred years old! Put them in separate envelopes so that they can't rub together and store them so corners and edges don't get chipped. Even if a plate is cracked, save it; broken glass plates can still produce beautiful prints.

And be on the lookout for very old 35 mm nitrate film. Before the invention of modern acetate film, 35 mm films were made of a *highly inflammable* plastic which becomes kind of gooey when it gets very old. If you suspect you have some of this film, *don't* put it in your archives. Take it to an experienced photographer for identification. If what you have is nitrate base film, you can have it copied on new film (and it may look even better than the original print). If you have lots of this kind of film, take it to your local museum; they'll know how to handle it and can judge its historical value.

Keep all the negatives and prints you find until you've had a chance to go through them. They are all a valuable part of your family history.

Remember the backyard historian's motto:

IF IN DOUBT, KEEP IT!