

How to Identify People in Photographs

John M. Hoenig describes how to identify those mystery relatives.

FEW PEOPLE ARE LUCKY ENOUGH to inherit extensive collections of papers documenting family history. But people often have extensive collections of photographs. Included in just about every collection are photos of unidentified relatives. Most people think there's no hope of identifying these mystery people — and yet they hesitate (thank goodness!) to discard the photos. I've learned that sometimes it is indeed possible to identify these people.

Looking for Clues

Suppose you find a photo in a trunk in your attic and you have no idea who the lady in the photo may be. You presume it's a relative (though you recognize it might conceivably be a friend of the family). How do you identify the person? Your first task is to determine if the person is a relative on your mother's side of the family or your father's side and, if possible, take it back one more generation (to which of your grandparents is the unknown relative related?). There are many clues that can help you with this:

Note the context of where the photo was found. Was it your mother's trunk or your father's?

Note family resemblances. Does the person look like people



The author's aunt (teenager to the left) came to America on the ship seen above. By magnifying the photo it became possible to read the name on the lifeboat in the background — "Medico" or "Mexico". A quick call to the library of the Mariners' Museum in Newport News, Virginia, resolved the issue: there was a ship named the SS Mexico but not one named Medico. Below, the author's grandfather and three unidentified people. The signs in the background indicate the photo was taken at Rock City Gardens.



in your mother's family or in your father's family?

Is there anything written on the back of the photo to give you a clue?

If the photo was taken in a photographer's studio there

should be a photographer's "imprint", i.e., the name and at least a partial address was usually printed or stamped on the frame or on the back. (Always try to get a look at the original of a photo. If you get a copy, you may not be able to see faint embossing and you may not be given a copy of what's on the back of the photo.) You might find, for example, that the photo was taken in Danville, the town where your grandfather was born.

Are there clues in the photo, such as signs, license plates on cars, scenery (including foliage), tools, clothing fashions, etc.? I inherited two photos of my grandfather standing at a mountain lookout with three unidentified people in October 1946 (the date was on the back). Signs in the background identified the locale as "Rock City Gardens". By searching with Google, I found that Rock City Gardens is on Lookout Mountain in Georgia, six miles west of Chattanooga, Tennessee. There were no other photos from this trip, and my grandmother was not in the photos. My grandfather was a

traveling sales representative and he lived in New York City. I know he traveled to the south for his business. Thus, I presume the photo was taken during a business trip and the unidentified people were business associates.

Google will sometimes surprise you with its capabilities. I have a photo of my grandfather in WWI and on the back is a place name that I read as "Schladuring". But I couldn't find Schladuring anywhere. One day I searched for it using Google and to my amazement it replied with "Did you mean Schladming"? I checked the photo and it did indeed say Schladming.

Is there anything linking the photo to another photo? For example, have you seen that dress before? Clothing was often handed down to siblings or relatives. Have you seen that background before? Two relatives may have been photographed separately on the same occasion.

Recruiting Outside Help

At a certain point, you'll want to try to find someone to identify the photo. Maybe your distant cousin Matilda, who's 85 years old, can recognize the person. Or maybe, if you go through Matilda's photos, you'll find she has a copy of the exact same photo. In this case, you may not know the person's name but you've likely identified her branch of the family as the one from which Matilda comes. Maybe Matilda has a different photo of the same person in your photo. Again, you've likely identified the branch of the family.

You can ask *all* of your relatives for assistance. But that's a lot of work for one photo. The more "homework" you do, the better you'll be able to choose the right people to ask for assistance and

the more context you'll be able to offer them with the photo.

Dating the Photo

There are four basic ways to date a photo. One is to look at the style

the background would imply the photo was taken in or after 1932. Finally, don't overlook the possibility of identifying another person in the photo with a known birth date and guessing at that person's age in the photo.

Two photos taken at Yog Studio on East Houston Street illustrate a number of these points. One is of my grandfather's first-cousin Arthur and his wife Jenny. The other is of an unidentified toddler. From city directories we know Yog Studio was located at 212 East Houston from 1904 to 1909/10, thus giving an approximate date for the photos. If we assume the toddler was about two years old, then we also have an approximate birth date for him or her. Now, in almost 900 photos I've collected, these were the only two taken at Yog Studio. So, I suspected the toddler was the child of Arthur and Jenny. I have the following information from their marriage certificate and the birth certificates of their children:

January 1904: Arthur (age 25) marries Jenny (age 22);

October 1904: daughter Tillie born; December 1907: daughter Belle born.

There are several possibilities. The photo of Arthur and Jenny might have been taken on the occasion of their engagement or marriage, around 1904. Or, it may have been taken at the same time the photo of the daughter was taken, i.e., when Tillie was two (1906-7) or when Belle was two (1909-10). All of these hypotheses



This photo was taken at Yog's Studio in Manhattan. The studio appears in the city directories from 1904 to 1909/10 thus giving an approximate date for the photo (and, hence, an approximate birth date for the toddler).

of the photo, the paper, the clothing styles and styles of the accessories, the way the people are posed, etc. A second way is from the imprint on the photo. Look in old city directories to see which years the photographer was in business at the address imprinted on the photo. A third method, for photos not taken at a photographer's studio, is to look for items in the background that are informative. For example, a 1932 Chevy in

Research Techniques

are consistent with the known date of operation of the photo studio. Recently, I contacted the grandchildren of Arthur and Jennie and they identified the toddler as Tillie.

Listing the Possibilities

When you have a year for a photo and the approximate age of the person, you can make a list of possibilities, e.g., by listing all female relatives who were around age 20 in 1910-20. Also make a list of who the person is *not*, e.g., it can't be Great Aunt Sally because I know what she looked like and that's not her. This list can be refined. For example, if you know from documents that your great-grandmother Louise was tall, and there's enough context in the photo to allow you to determine that the mystery relative was short, then you can cross Louise off the list of possibilities and add her to the "not" list. Combing through documents for physical descriptions can be tedious but it's certainly practical. Also, if a photo was taken in Texas, you're probably better off looking for relatives from Texas to help you than contacting relatives in New York (though you never know who might have what).

One trick to keep in mind is that the most photos are usually taken of the first-born child. There are "a thousand" pictures of my sister (born first), "a hundred" of my brother (born second) and maybe 10 of me. By this principle, the photo of the toddler taken at Yog Studio is more likely to be Tillie (the older sister) than Belle.

Building Your Photo Collection

The more photographs of relatives you have, the easier it is to identify mystery relatives. There are several reasons for this. First, by

studying your photos you might find a match. It may be difficult — one photo might be of a young man and another of an old one. So, try to collect every photo you can of every relative so you can

not unreasonable to think that friends have photos of your relatives. Don't neglect public sources of photos, including newspapers (especially wedding and obituary photos), high school year books, naturalization photos and photos in passport applications. One of my Hoenig relatives was a prominent dentist. The American Dental Association archivist found me photos, obituaries and articles written by and about my relative in dental newsletters and magazines.

Some Examples

I found a photograph of the old man in Chassidic Jewish garb in my mother's photo collection. It's a modern photo probably taken in the 1930s in Poland. I know it's not my mother's grandfather Peller or her grandfather's brothers because I have several photos of them as old men and they don't match the gentleman in the photo. Similarly, it's not my mother's grandfather Fitzer or his known brothers. So who could it be? Two possibilities come to mind. My mother told me a couple of times that her father Matias had been

very close to a famous Chassidic rabbi in Stanislawow. He used to consult this rabbi before making important business decisions. On the other hand, the gentleman might be the father of Matias' sister-in-law or brother-in-law. As it turns out, I located a relative of Matias' sister-in-law and saw from a photo that the sister-in-law's father was not our mystery man. That's as far as I could take it until one day, when I was visit-



Photo of a Chassidic Jew from the author's mother's collection. He wasn't a grandfather of the author's mother. Who was he? A guess and a chance encounter solved the mystery.

see how your relatives aged. Second, a wide range of photos helps to eliminate possibilities. And, third, having a range of photos allows one to get a feel for family physical traits, such as a particular type of chin, nose or hairline.

In looking to build your photo collection, remember that relatives of relatives might have photos. I found a woman in Montreal whose Schaechter rela-



A relative gave the author this photo of a wedding in Jablonow, Poland. She said she had no idea who was in the photo. The image of the author's mother (with the big white bow) dates the photo closely to around 1921 or 1922. Happily, the author was able to identify two people in the photo he'd never seen before.

ing the National Archives regional branch in New York City, I started chatting with a Chassidic gentleman about genealogy. He proudly told me he was descended from the great rabbi Chaim Hager of Stanislawow. I sent him a copy of the photo I had and he was able to confirm the identity. The photo was of my grandfather's advisor (spiritual and otherwise), Chaim Hager.

On another occasion, my relative Marcia told me about a relative Batya who came to New York to visit after WWII and then went to Israel. She couldn't remember Batya's last name. Marcia also told me about an uncle Moses who died childless in the 1960s. I assumed that all of Moses' estate would go to his wife. But, the experts always advise that you look at all records for all relatives because there can be surprises. Sure enough, Moses' probate file listed all potential heirs, and they had to sign a form saying they made no claim on the estate. One of the potential heirs was Batya and, fortunately, her married name was given. Within two weeks I found her and, two weeks after that, I visited her. In

the course of the evening, she showed me the wedding photo and said "My cousin Miriam had this photo. I have no idea who's in it or why she had it." When I looked at it, my jaw dropped. The little girl with the big bow is my mother at age two, sitting between her grandparents. Immediately behind them are my mother's parents. I recognized almost everyone in the photo. With supreme joy I identified two people I had never seen before. I recognized the gentleman labeled "b" as Israel Schaechter who married my grandfather's sister Pearl. I had never seen a picture of Pearl but I knew the woman to Israel's right (labeled "a") must be her because the whole photo was organized with the wives standing to the right of their husbands. Pearl's grandchildren had never seen a picture of her either — as far as we know this is the only existing picture — and they were delighted.

I studied the photo some more. I recognized everyone in the photo except the bride and groom, the bride's parents, the dark skinned man at the far right and the girl in the front row at

the extreme left (as you look at the photo). Then I realized that all of my mother's aunts and uncles, and all of her first cousins, were identified in the photo — except for her uncle Salomon. I had never seen a picture of Salomon so I couldn't possibly recognize him. But, I figured Salomon must be in the photo because the whole family was there. Therefore, Salomon must be the groom, the father of the bride or the dark-skinned man. I decided it was probably the groom because of family resemblance. In June, I located a 93-year-old relative and sent him the photo. He told me the only person he recognized was the groom, Salomon. He said he used to visit him in Stanislawow where Salomon had a hardware business. Unfortunately, he didn't know Salomon's wife's name. But I believe I will find that information. There is a copy of the 1939 census of Stanislawow in the archives of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC. My wife is going through it page-by-page looking for them, and it's probably just a matter of time before we identify the wife.

Conclusions

Not only can you learn to identify people in a photo and determine the date, you can also learn to identify the place and determine the occasion on which the photo was taken.

Identifying the stories in photographs involves a great deal of effort, juggling large amounts of information, careful research and contacting as many relatives, relatives of relatives and friends of the family as possible.

Sometimes, you don't get certainty about a photo, just a high probability of identification. Your chances of identifying people grow as your family tree becomes more complete and as your photo collection grows. Collecting photographs and identifying people is among the greatest pleasures of genealogy. It allows you to snatch identities from the fate of eternal obscurity.

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