SOME THOUGHTS ON CONSTRUCTING FAMILY PHOTO ALBUMS
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At some time in everyone's life, they realize that they have an abundance of unorganized photographs that need to be organized into some sort of album. In my own case, I decided that I needed three albums covering family, career, and personal photos respectively. I found myself looking at many, many boxes of old family photos, prints, slides, studio portraits and assorted other miscellaneous prints and negatives. For the sake of simplicity, we will look at a family photo album since all of the other categories will require the same sort of selection and organization.

Realizing that this is written for a group of photographers, many of whom have photographic and computer expertise greater than my own, I will adhere to major topics and only discuss specifics that I have personally dealt with in my own album construction. Specific techniques and alternatives will be described as needed.

ORGANIZATION

Before you start sorting pictures, consider whether you want a general family album or do you want to arrange it along genealogical lines, i.e., his family, her family, ….our family. Do you plan to arrange the pictures chronologically, oldest to current? Now is the time to think about this before you start opening all those boxes of photographs. With this in mind, you can start sorting photographs.

Boxes of old photographs inevitably contain family groups, snapshots and studio portraits. The pictures will vary in size from small contact prints to giant family groups. Many of them will be faded black and white prints, the fading caused by a combination of age and incomplete removal of the fixer used in processing --- sometimes only a negative is available. Old Kodacolor snapshots will have faded. Few of them will be in such a size or condition that you can use them as album prints as is. Don't be dismayed — all or most of these problems can be solved.

About sorting ....start with simply sorting them into general categories. Put all of Uncle Will's family stuff together, Grandpa and Grandma's wedding portrait and the old house they lived in, etc. This is going to be *your* album — it doesn't have to fit anybody else's ideas.
While sorting prints, keep a soft lead pencil handy and write the name of the individual or family in the print on the back along with an approximate year it was taken — later you are going to add names to each print as you put it in the album. This is important!

PREPARATION OF ALBUM PRINTS

While most of us have happily used a variety of photographic media such as slides and transparencies as well as the standard color-negative, drugstore processed stuff for snapshots and black and white film that got used for everything, what you need for your photographic album are *prints.* Here too, we have something of a size limitation — these prints have to fit on an album page. This means that most of them need to be in the 3"x 5" or 4"x 6" range up to an occasional full page size. We will discuss a variety of techniques for producing usable album prints from whatever material you have salvaged from the 'multiple-box filing system.'

Now, a brief personal digression. I have been fortunate to have done my own film developing and printing since 1941, having had a father and older brother who taught me. Now, I have to tell you [reluctantly] that computers, scanners, and digital cameras are going to make your job of converting old and faded color and black and white prints into usable album prints a great deal easier. I still have a darkroom — I have not 'gone over to the dark side.' That said, let's look at minimum equipment and software.

SIMPLIFIED DIGITAL MANIPULATION

If you have a computer, but no scanner, I suggest you buy one. Even the simplest scanner will allow you to copy an image from a print into the computer, the first step before doing any kind of print improvement. Scanner resolution is not usually a problem with print scanning. As far as I know, any flat-bed scanner on the market will scan an 8.5" x 11" maximum print size at 150-300 dpi (dots per inch) resolution. A simple flat-bed scanner currently costs from $50 up.

Most of the current photographic handling software packages will be adequate for the project of scanning, improving and printing album prints of the appropriate size. If you already have one that you are familiar with, use it. The choice of one over another should reflect just how much time you want to spend learning how to use the software versus the desire to complete your photograph album. Here are three examples:

Photoshop, I believe it's up to version 8 now, is a program widely used by professional digital photographers; it's expensive and requires considerable time and effort to master its techniques. You will also need a state-of-the-art computer system to take advantage of its versatility. [current price $700]

Photoshop Elements, version 3, is a scaled down version of Photoshop that still retains many of Photoshop's manipulative techniques but is less expensive and easier to learn. It allows the user to make many repairs to the scanned images of your old photographs. There are several excellent after-market books dealing with this program which include a CD of damaged images and step by step instructions for their repair. [current price $100]

Photoshop Album, version 2, is a relatively simple software program that is inexpensive and adequate for handling most of the problems you are likely to encounter in the album preparation. Most of its procedures are intuitive requiring little time spent in learning to use it. It also has a simple1-step command for archiving photos to a CD. [Current price $50]

Let's look at a typical procedure for scanning, manipulating, and printing a black and white print. Computer aficionados can skip this, but if you're just getting your feet wet with computers, this may take some of the mystery out of it.

For simplification, we will use the procedure for Photoshop Album.

Place a black and white print face-down on scanner and scan at 300 dpi in grey-scale mode, saving your scan to Photoshop Album (PA). You can continue to scan multiple prints before going from your scanner controls to work on the scanned images in PA. Then, in PA, click on *fix,* then on the *brightness and contrast* submenu. Move the pointer to increase/decrease the brightness and contrast of the image and click on OK. With the adjusted image selected, click on *Print* and select the size print desired -- click OK and printing begins. It's about that simple.

The procedure for scanning and altering color prints in nearly as simple. Once again, scan at 300 dpi in the color mode; then use the *auto color* fix in PA or the *color saturation* controls to get the desired effect. Then print using the same procedure.

When scanning, you can crop the area to be scanned which will probably improve many of the old prints. You have to take into consideration that most of the old snapshots were taken with a box camera where you "placed the sun over your right shoulder, looked through the little reflex finder and pushed the button" Mr. Kodak did the rest. These photographs are usually not great works of art but they are valuable records. Don't worry too much about perfection.

After you have gone to the trouble of scanning, cropping and manipulating these digital images, print them on a good photo grade inkjet paper. Paper cost for a premium grade 4" x 6" print will vary from $0.20 to $0.25 each depending on where you buy it. Don't waste your time and ink by using a poor grade of paper.

MAKING ALBUM PRINTS FROM SLIDES

Most of us used to shoot slide film almost exclusively. Any color-negative stuff was for family picnics where everybody wanted extra prints. However, since we always had slide film in our cameras, a number of family photos ended up as slides. You could always bore your family with pictures of last Xmas on the slide projector. Now, in retrospect, we find that a number of priceless family photos are now on color slide material and we now need prints of the same. When I first faced this problem, professional grade film scanners were in the future; price-wise they still are. So, how do we convert slides to prints?

First, we need to sort the slides. Buy, borrow or steal a light box and go through those slides, selecting those from which you have to have a print for the album. This problem, like most, can be solved by money. The easy way is to have a photographic shop scan the selected slides and either make prints of them or save them to a printable disk so you can do it with your computer. [Current prices, Epperson's, are $.99/mounted slide for printing a 4"x6" print; $1.19/mounted slide or single negative scanned to CD for printing — minimum 10 images]

There are currently available some less expensive film scanners that appear adequate for converting your 35mm slides to digital format providing only reasonable levels of enlargement are required. A possibility is the Pacific Image PrimeFilm 1800u scanner which sells for about $140. This scans mounted or unmounted slides or negatives at 1800 dpi, probably sufficient for making album prints. Its higher-priced version (PrimeFilm 365OU) scans mounted or unmounted slides or filmstrips at 3600 dpi and sells for about $300.

Some of the current flat-bed scanners have provisions for scanning color transparencies and black and white negative film. Most of these are for 35-mm only, but a few will scan medium format negatives and transparencies. Some of these are only marginally useful, so read the fine print before you buy. If you plan to buy a flat bed scanner that you expect to use for scanning slides, try to find one with a built-in film scanning system, not a separate plug-in lighted holder. If you have a number of slides to copy, they may not be adequate for your purposes. If you have medium format film that you need to scan, consider the Epson 4180 Photo model which can scan at 4800 dpi and sells for about $200 --- I am considering buying one, but I have no hands-on experience with this model..

There is another way! When faced with that problem several years ago, I decided that I could use one of the available slide-copier attachments for my Olympus OM-4. This worked fairly well, but I then borrowed an old Honeywell Repronar slide copier with a built-in electronic flash unit, bought several big boxes of ISO-100 CN film, then sorted and copied slides. The usual "drug store" processed prints were adequate and it beat the amount of time I would have spent in the darkroom making Cibachrome prints from several hundred slides.

Finally we come to the old black and white negatives. If you can identify the negative image as something you want to include in your album, there are ways to do this. Unfortunately, black and white printing is becoming something of a lost art except for a few of us who retain our darkroom equipment. Epperson's lists a printing service for 120 negatives at $2.25 each that requires special handling and a 5-day turn-around. If you can scrounge up a couple of trays, a safelight, a contact proof printer (or simply a sheet of glass large enough to cover a sheet of printing paper), you can do your own contact printing. You will need a bottle of print developer, a bottle of rapid fixer, a package of printing paper and a dark place — remember, that was probably how most of those old prints were initially made. Those old box cameras took large format roll film because processing usually consisted of developing the film and making contact prints.

MISCELLANEOUS COPYING PROBLEMS

Some photographs present unique problems in getting them into reasonable reproductions for the photo album. One of these is the occurrence of photo-oil-colored prints. These were popular from the 1920s through the 1950's when few photographic studios had the equipment to make full color photographs. Most of these were done by more-or-less skilled persons using the Marshall's Photo Oil Colors available at the time.

They don't look bad, but a copy-photograph on today's color film may not be satisfactory – the film simply does not see the same colors that we perceive visually. Photographing the colored photo with a digital camera and using that image may solve the problem. If you find that you cannot produce a satisfactory color print, you can simply convert it to grey-scale in the computer and print it as a black and white print.

If these are very large photographs, and some of them were, it may be necessary to have a professional studio photograph or scan and process the image [Checked with Eppersons for maximum size they can scan. It's fairly large, but if print is larger, it can be scanned in sections and reassembled in printing. They can also photograph it digitally, alter it as needed and print it. Expect to pay accordingly].

Another strange problem that I encountered was a black and white portrait of my Grandmother and Grandfather taken about 1900. This was a large oval-shaped frame, the print of which was convex in shape — I guess to give a sort of primitive 3-dimensional effect. The problem was, the print wasn't flat; it definitely bulged out in the center. I ended up making a copy negative of it, lighting it with 45-degree lighting, focusing on the near surface of the print and stopping down to f-22 to keep it all sharp.

If you haven't been around long enough to have your Ektachrome slide colors change to a nice overall magenta, consider yourselves lucky, and younger than I am. I took extensive photographs on Ektachrome during the '50s and now they leave a lot to be desired. Unfortunately many of these transparencies were taken on medium and large format which precludes scanning them on cheap equipment. As mentioned earlier, several upper-level flat-bed scanners allow the scanning of transparency material and negatives of these larger sizes — they are expensive and I haven't finished researching their possibilities yet. If you can get a scanned image into your computer from these magenta-enhanced transparencies, many software programs can shift the overall color back to a more reasonable level. The same is true for scanned images of faded Kodacolor prints.

ASSEMBLING THE ALBUM

Here you need to decide what kind of actual album you are going to put these identified, enhanced, sized and copied pictures in. My own choice was a set of loose-leaf albums with black pages to position prints and having a clear folding overlay over page and print. The choice is up to you, but make sure you can get enough pages for all your prints that you intend to include.

Now there are some important things to do. First and foremost, label those prints! How you do it is immaterial. I assembled each sheet by laying out the prints on a table beside the computer in the configuration that I plan to use. These were placed directly on top of the loose leaf album sheet. Then, in a word-processing program, I typed labels for each photograph giving names (in group photographs from left to right, front to back), the approximate year the photograph was taken, and any other pertinent data about where the photo originated. Remember, we wrote this on the back of each print when we sorted them!   I then mounted each photo, printed my titles and data for each, cut them out and glue-sticked them under the photo. Someday, your descendants will bless you for this, believe me!

ARCHIVING YOUR PRINTS

Now is the time to archive those prints. While you have them in your computer, burn them to a CD. You will need a CD read/write drive. This is a simple act – CD's are inexpensive and lot more permanent than the old prints. To do this, first click on print (if using Photoshop Album) while the collection of photos is in the active file, then click on thumbnails, and print a record of the photos in the file. Next, click on Archive and follow the instructions to transfer your photographic file to a CD. Record the data you need re-access it, place the recorded CD in a protective case, then cut the thumbnail print sheets to size and include them in the case. You have insured that you have a record that will outlast the prints themselves.

I have found that after each album page is completed and labeled, that the entire page can also be scanned, printed and archived in its final completed form. If you have need for more than one copy of your photo album (i.e., multiple relatives, etc.), this is something you might consider.

NOW, SOME THOUGHTS ON WHAT TO INCLUDE IN THE ALBUM – FUN STUFF!

This is your photo album – your great-great-great-grandkids are going to look at it and wonder what you were like. Don't be shy about putting things in that seem silly – nobody is going to laugh at you 'cause you won't be around.

PETS --- How about pets? I put in two pages of cats and dogs who have allowed me to live with them. Over a period of time, they trained me so that I could do almost anything they wanted me to do. These little furry critters also have a place in the family album.

VACATIONS – These are always something you need to remember. Don't forget to include those labels telling where, when, and maybe how.

KEEPSAKES — Maybe this is silly, but I found a box of stuff that my mother had saved from when I was a kid – this included a stuffed cat that I carried when I was 3 years old and afraid of the dark. As long as I had the stuffed cat with me, I was a tiger! There was celluloid bank and some coins that were birth gifts and other baby stuff. I had a blanket that Mom had made, and using it for a background, I did a tabletop photography setup and included it in the album describing the contents of the photograph. This isn't important, but the artifacts will probably end up in a garage sale someday, and their photograph and what they represented will remain.

FAMILY HISTORY — let your imagination run. I had an aunt who lived to be over 100 years old, alert and active up until the end. She came across Oklahoma Territory in a covered wagon from SW Missouri/NW Arkansas when she was 8 years old. I asked her to describe the trip, tape-recorded it, typed it up and included it with her photograph in the album. This is living history!

Above all, have fun with your album project. There is no wrong way to do it.