

# Interpreting the Image

## How to Understand Historical Photographs

by Loren N. Horton

IN PHOTOGRAPHS as in life, there is often more there than first meets the eye. People who have unidentified photographs in their own family collections can use the following analysis to help determine the who, what, when, where, and why of the photograph.

The simplest way to interpret or understand a photograph is to begin by asking the following questions:

- What is revealed or suggested by clues of architecture, clothing, and setting?
- Why was the photograph taken?
- Why was it saved? What was its value to the possessor?

The intentions of the photographer, or the subject of the photograph, may seem apparent, but additional information of interest can be found in almost any photograph. When examining a photograph, pay attention to the people (and how they are arranged), the buildings, the context within which the people and structures are shown, the setting, objects, and any seemingly peculiar or unusual aspects. Not all photographs will answer each question. But a surprising number do have clues to help us give tentative or approximate answers. Some clues will be quite small, so pull out the magnifying glass.

A note of caution before beginning: Whenever we use architectural styles, fabric patterns, clothing styles, or room furnishings to date or place a photograph, we should remember that not all persons followed fashions at the same time. Time lags might be due to economic circumstances, personal tastes, geographical isolation, or lack of opportunity to buy the latest fashions and fads. Such aspects are clues to dates and places, but can never be depended upon absolutely. All of us know people whose clothing is a decade out of high fashion, or whose room furnishings may remain the same for decades. House construction may

be out of style because of the lack of skills of the available builders. Time lags may hold especially true in isolated, rural, or poor regions less affected by the convenience of mail-order catalogs and rapid transportation.

Let us examine this particular photograph and see what conclusions we can come to. The photograph shows a building with people in front. A bit of landscaping is also visible.

### Architectural Clues

To start with the basics, we might assume that this building is a house, because of the people in front of it. Also, we know that it does not resemble closely any type of public or commercial structure with which we are familiar, and the setting does not seem appropriate for anything other than a residence for people.

The house is of frame construction, is L-shaped, has a porch, two dormers, and a bay window. The basic siding is clapboard, the shingles are wooden, and there are two crowned chimneys (an element of sophistication). There are varicolored scalloped or "fish scale" shingles, millwork on the porch posts and balcony rail. The lintels, sills, and corner-board quoins casing the clapboard siding have been factory-milled rather than hand-hewn. The rosettes in the lintels over the windows are repeated in the cornice-like board over the front porch. The porch floor is wooden rather than dirt.

Although this is surmise, the two front doors leading to the porch seem to indicate a separation of functions within the house. One door may lead to the kitchen area, and the other door may lead to living or sleeping quarters. Bay windows are usually found in the parlor, sitting, or dining areas, rather than the kitchen or bedroom areas.

These observations help us date the house. The L shape was common for decades but was



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most popular from 1880 through 1910. Earlier L-shaped houses were usually the result of building an extension onto an existing small house. This house seems to have been built as one unit at one time, because the roof lines are even, the gable angles are the same, and identical millwork is used throughout.

Millwork of this type was available in Iowa as early as the 1840s, but the details and trim were more common in the last third of the nineteenth century. While we cannot date this building exactly, houses that resemble it were often found in the Midwest during the 1890s. There are no elements present on the building, or at least none visible in the photograph, that would be anachronistic in 1890.

### Clues About the People

An adult female and adult male, with a young child on his lap, are in the center of the photo. An adolescent male sits to the left, nearly obscured by the fence post. Two children stand on the balcony. One is clearly a girl. The younger one is probably a boy, but gender-neutral clothing was common for very young children, and the short hair could be hair grow-

ing back after an illness such as a fever.

The combination of ages in the photograph suggests a nuclear family. The adults could certainly be the husband and wife and all of the others could certainly be their children. We don't know that this is true, but the visual evidence suggests this strongly. Considering the setting, we might go further and suggest that this family is posing in front of their own home. But are there other reasons why this combination of people of various ages might be in this setting?

### Clothing Clues

Clothing is often evidence of time and attitudes of the persons photographed. In this example the clothing is not very formal, yet it is not ragged or shabby either. The man is wearing a vest but no coat. The woman's dress is practical but not high style. No jewelry or other ornaments are visible on it. The pattern of the cloth suggests that it was probably a work dress, because "dressy" dresses of the period tended to be solid colors. Its style, skirt length, the sleeve, waist, and collar all are typical of women's clothing in the last decades of the nineteenth century. The clothing on the

younger people is not distinct enough to help date or geographically place the photograph.

### Clues About the Setting

In the foreground, a barbed wire fence creates some sort of boundary, and the wire is strung on wooden posts. (Barbed wire was patented after 1870, so the picture has to have been taken after 1870.) Fences, of course, are useful to keep things out, or to keep things in. The height of this fence suggests that it was meant to keep animals out rather than to keep people (children) in. Although not visible in the photo, this presupposes a gate through the fence that could be opened or closed.

Also visible on the grounds, presumably the front yard, are examples of ornamental vegetation that may have been set out. There is a lilac bush, a cedar tree, and other young, deciduous trees. The grass is cropped rather than shaggy. Set-out vegetation seems to indicate an effort on the part of the owners or residents to beautify the environment in which they live.

Adjacent outbuildings or neighboring buildings are always good clues for locating a structure in its context. No other buildings are visible on either side, nor in the background. Because of the barbed wire fence, we might think this is a rural scene, but the absence of all other buildings is inconclusive. The house could be on a farm, on the outskirts of a small town, or isolated on a large lot in a town.

### Seasonal Clues

Because the leaves are out but the lilac is not in bloom, it is probably early summer. Were it later in the summer, things might appear drier. There is no evidence of drought or mud, and it is warm enough for people to be outside without coats on. The chair outside and table on the porch would also indicate summer time. The light seems bright, so it is probably mid-day.

### Clues About the Photographer

The photograph shows definite clues about the skills of the photographer. The placement is beautiful, with the building centered and framed nicely. There is a lot of sky showing (perhaps for contrast to the darker colors of the

house) but only a small amount of yard and fence. The perspective is a bit distorted because of the angle of the camera. The details are very clear, showing some care in developing.

### Clues About Why the Photograph Was Taken

We can safely assume that the building was as important as the people, because great care was taken to include the entire house in the photograph. If the people had been the major focus, then the photographer would have probably moved in closer so that they would have appeared larger, with the house appearing only partially, as a background. The young man would not be blocked by the fence post.

### Conclusions

From all of the clues observed, we can conclude that the photograph was probably taken by a professional photographer or skilled amateur towards the end of the nineteenth century, perhaps in the 1890s. Photographs of families standing or sitting in front of new homes are a common genre for the times. This is probably a single family in front of their home, and the chances are it is a rural scene rather than an urban scene.

From these observations, we may also conclude that the house was constructed after processed lumber was available in the area, that the purely utilitarian aspects were not paramount (hence the decorative details on the building), and that the people who paid for the construction were not satisfied with a tiny cottage-type house.

We cannot isolate this photograph geographically, except to note that it is very similar to other photographs taken in the Midwest during early summer. The people involved have some pride in the appearance of their home and of themselves. While the clothing is not formal, it is neat and respectable. We surmise that the house is prized, because there is trim and decoration beyond what is required for simple function.

By looking at all parts of the photographic image, we can learn a great deal about the people and places represented in it. Try it on your own family photographs. □