

place? Would a formal parlor seem warmer and more homelike if people are in it? Perhaps the people are really the center of attention, with the furnishings of their home as mere background. One observation that supports this idea is the careful positioning of the people. They could not have been more clearly centered if they had been posed in a studio with props, and the adults seem placed to frame the children.

### Conclusions

This photograph is a rich source of information about late Victorian furnishings and an artifact

that would be enormously useful in understanding one's own family or community. The dates and sources of most of the furnishings are clearly traceable through catalogs and identified photographs of Victorian parlors, of which there are hundreds. Yet it is the anomalies — the posing of the people, the inclusion of the children, the lack of chairs for visitors — that intrigue us. We might speculate that this photograph shows a family that has lately risen to middle-class status and still does not quite know what to do or how to act, but does realize that having lots of possessions, in the eyes of Victorian society, is indeed a “good” thing. □

## Tips on Storing Negatives of Historical Photographs

*by Mary Bennett*

In many respects, protecting the original negative is the most important step in the preservation of your photographs. If the negative is properly cared for, multiple copies of an image can be created long after the original photograph has deteriorated. Since color dyes are not permanent, one way to save an image before it fades is to make black and white prints from color negatives.

1. Store negatives separate from prints in archival envelopes or interleaved with rag paper. The emulsion side, which is the dull and non-reflective side of the negative, can be easily damaged. Handle negatives by the edges only as fingerprints can harm the delicate chemical composition.

2. Glass plate negatives, in use from the 1850s to the 1920s, require special attention and care. Handling should be kept to a minimum due to the fragile nature of the glass and emulsion layer. Again, handle the glass plate negatives by the edges only and store vertically in a sturdy archival box or metal drawers — not in stacks. Give the glass plates adequate support as the weight of the glass itself may cause the plates to crack. If

the glass is cracked or broken, use glass of the same size to “sandwich” and support the negative, preventing further damage.

3. Nitrate-based film, introduced in the 1890s and manufactured as recently as 1951, is dangerous because it is sometimes capable of spontaneous combustion. Remove nitrate negatives from the collection immediately as their chemical decomposition will seriously affect other items stored nearby. Nitric acid is formed as the chemicals break down, so store nitrate negatives in paper envelopes. Do not use plastic, which will trap the dangerous gases.

4. In advanced stages of deterioration, the nitrate negatives become brittle or warped and the emulsion may tarnish or become iridescent. One can identify nitrate negatives by trimming a strip of film from the edge and testing it. A lighted match close to the film will ignite it at once with an orange flame. Due to the flammable nature of nitrate film, test any unmarked film before storing it near other negatives or photos. Make prints or duplicate negatives as soon as possible. Kodak Professional Direct



## For more information, consult these sources

R. Barry Blackburn, ed., *Art, Society, and Accomplishments: A Treasury of Artistic Homes, Social Life and Culture* (Chicago: Blackburn Co., 1891). A collection of articles giving advice about room furnishings, table decorations, parlor games, and interior decoration.

William Seale, *The Tasteful Interlude: American Interiors through the Camera's Eye, 1860-1917*, 2nd edition (Nashville: American Association of State and Local History, 1981). Dated photographs of Victorian rooms with descriptions and explanations of features and functions.

Henry T. Williams and Mrs. C. S. Jones, *Beautiful Homes, or Hints in House Furnishing*, Vol. 4 in Williams'

Household Series (New York: Henry T. Williams, 1878). One of hundreds of furnishing guides and etiquette books published in the Victorian era.

Gail Caskey Winkler and Roger W. Moss, *Victorian Interior Decoration: American Interiors, 1830-1900* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1986). Photographs and illustrations with detailed text outlining styles, colors, and materials used for floors, windows, walls, and ceilings.

Additional useful sources for interpreting and caring for historical photographs appear in Parts 1 and 2 of this series, in the Spring and Summer *Palimpsests*.

Duplicating Film (SO-015) offers good results.

5. After 1935, film manufacturers began to mark or print "safety" on the border of the negative. This "safety" film is more stable than the flimsy nitrate-based films and can be stored without danger. Store these negatives in sleeves made of triacetate, polyester, polypropylene, or polyethylene, and label each sleeve. These archivally safe negative files are available in a variety of sizes suitable for 35 mm, 2¼", or 4" × 5" negatives. Strips of negatives can be placed in these sleeves to prevent curling or damage. Slides can be stored in a similar fashion and then housed vertically in file drawers or arranged in binders.

6. Make contact prints or enlargements from glass and film negatives that do not have prints available for viewing. These can be labeled to match the negatives, to simplify the organizing or filing arrangement. Choose a printing paper with a medium contrast and a glossy surface.

7. If a negative is dirty, use professional film cleaner on the non-emulsion side. In the case of glass plate negatives, use distilled water and cotton balls on the glass surface but take care to protect the emulsion side. Proceed with extreme caution when attempting to clean photographic materials.

8. Any historical photo can be preserved if a copy negative is made. Archivists prefer to use 4" × 5" or large format sheet films, but good-quality negatives can also be made with Panatomic-X 35 mm film, which has a fine grain. Yellow and blue filters can be used when copying to enhance faded or spotted photographs. Glass can be carefully placed over the surface when copying if the photo is slightly rolled or curved.

9. As with all photographic materials, the storage environment is of primary importance. Constant temperature and humidity must be maintained in the storage area year round. Use a pencil, not ink or felt tip pens, for labeling materials. Avoid using rubber bands, paper clips, or adhesives on or near negatives. Do not store negatives in glassine sleeves or poor-quality plastics. Archival boxes or baked enamel filing cabinets are better than wooden or old cardboard boxes, which are acidic. You can prolong the life of these materials if you keep negatives and photographs away from ultraviolet light.

Archival storage materials are available from *Light Impressions*, 439 Monroe Avenue, Rochester, NY 14607, or at local photo supply stores. Be sure that storage sleeves are made of the materials listed in Tip #5.

The next issue will offer tips on displaying photos in albums or frames.