

Identifying the Age of Your Photographs



Sometimes we find an old photograph and have no idea when it was taken. If you find photos in a photo mat sleeve, you can check for dates on the sleeve, as well as receipts. When you find the photo in an album, check the photos near it in the album. Most people put photos in an album in dated order. Here are some tips and tricks to give you a range of dates of when your photograph might have been taken.

First, check and see if there is a development date stamped on either the front or the back. With slides, this date could be printed or stamped into the cardboard mount. Remember, the date shown is when the film was developed by the lab, not when the photograph was taken.

Cabinet Cards, a popular format in the 1870s and 1880s, was 4.5" by 6.5" - Mounted on cardboard. Photos tend to have a reddish or purplish sepia toning.

Most images before the 1870s have a sepia tone. A "true" black and white image will have been produced in the 1890s or later- likely the early 1900s.

Tin types first appeared in 1856 and were most popular between the 1860s and 1870s. They are images printed directly onto thin sheets of metal- which contrary to the name, were actually printed on a lacquered iron, not on tin. They ranged in size from 1"x 2" to 6" x 8" depending on what fraction of the metal plate was used.

Gelatin prints have obvious silver deposits, which show up very visibly in scans and are mounted on thicker paper, not cardboard. They were used in the 1930s and 1940s or even earlier.

Sepia Tone. Most images before the 1870s have reddish or purplish sepia toning.

"True" Black and White. If the image has true black-and-white tone, it was produced in the 1890s or later, most likely in the early 1900s.

Printed on Metal. Tintypes first appeared in 1856 and were most popular in the 1860s and '70s. They are printed directly onto thin sheets of metal. Contrary to the name, they were printed on lacquered iron, not tin. They ranged in size from 1"x2" to 6"x8", depending on what fraction of the original metal plate was used.

Visible Silver Deposits, Thick Paper. Gelatin prints have obvious silver deposits, which show up very visibly in scans and are mounted on thick paper, but not cardboard. They were popular in the 1930s and '40s, but could be older.

Looking for the development dates on a photo is one way to identify the age of a photograph. Sometimes the photograph is not stamped with the development date. You can also date the photograph by the edges and borders.

Toned photos with ornate black decorative borders were developed in the 1930s.

Black and white photographs with scalloped borders were used in the 1940s.

Square black and white photographs with white borders were used in the 1960s.

Square color photographs with white borders were used in the 1970s. Polaroids were first unveiled in 1948. The peak production time was in the 1970s

Colored photos with rounded edges were used in the 1980s.

4" x 6" prints started being used in the 1990s.

Slides and Negatives

Glass plate negatives were popular in the late 1870s and 1880s.

Dry plate negatives were commonly used from the 1880s to the 1920s.

127 film and negatives were introduced in 1912 and were very popular in the 1950s. It was commonly used in marketing tourist attractions and gift shops.

126 slides were marketed by Kodak in 1963.

110 film was introduced in 1972 and was very popular until the early 2000s.

Disc negatives were marketed in 1982, but they never gained much popularity.