

# Preserving Your Digital Photos

## **Presentation Notes**

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## **Advantages and Disadvantages of Digital Photos**

- They cost almost nothing.
- They can last forever.
- You can make unlimited perfect copies.
- They'll never fade, smear, or tear, unlike traditional printed photographs.
- However, digital photos are intangible—just collections of bits and bytes in electronic memory—and so many people don't think about the need to preserve them, just as is necessary for traditional photos, and don't know how to make sure the photos survive.

“ Our family history ended the day ”  
we got a digital camera.

## **Preserving Your Photos**

When you think of preserving your digital photos, there are three things you want to think about:

- How can you make sure that your photos survive? You must be sure that your photos are recorded on something that can last through the decades, and you want to do your best to ensure that people many years hence will have the equipment to read your photos. Remember Edison's wax cylinders?
- How can you make sure your photos are identifiable -- that is, that people know who and what the photos are of?
- How can you make sure that your photos are found -- that someone stumbling across them decades from now will realize what they are and want to keep them?

## **Make Sure Your Photos Survive**

- One of the advantages to digital photos is that you can make lots of copies. Do so! Your computer's hard disk should never contain the only copy of a photo. All hard drives fail eventually. Don't take the chance that if your computer's hard drive fails, you'd lose years of photos.
- Photos stored on your computer's hard drive are too easy to erase. I've done it! When looking at photos on your hard drive, one slip of the finger and you've hit the "Delete" key by accident.
- It's easy for people to overlook photos on a hard drive. If some day in the future your children inherit your computer, will they take the time to look through the contents of the hard drive, searching for photos? Will they find them?
- When thinking about the survivability of your photos, there are two main concerns:
  - What will physically survive?
  - What will people be able to use?

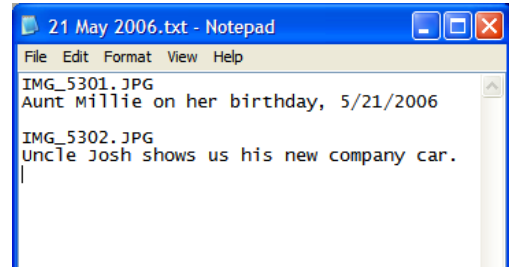


- Nobody knows the long-term survivability of today's electronic memory. Paper has been around for thousands of years, so we know how it holds up over time. But camera memory cards, CDs, and modern hard drives have been around for only a few decades, and the technology used today is different in some cases from what was used only a few years ago. No one knows whether any of the components made today will work a hundred years from now.
- CDs are probably your best bet right now. Do not use rewritable CDs (CD-RW). These CDs can be reused many times, but don't last as long. You're not interested in reusing your CDs -- you're interested in them lasting a long time.
- If you have so many photos and movies that you can't fit them on a reasonable number of CDs, then DVDs are the next-best choice. As with CDs, don't use rewritable DVDs (DVD-RW, DVD+RW, and DVD-RAM). Use only one-time DVDs (DVD-R and DVD+R).
- Blu-Ray discs from Sony are still very expensive, but will surely come down in price. They hold a lot of data -- roughly 10 times what a traditional DVD holds -- but for now you shouldn't use them for long-term storage. The long-term availability of Blu-Ray is still very much up in the air, and it may turn out that within 10 years or so Blu-Ray has gone the way of the wax cylinder.
- Do everything you can to make sure your CDs and DVDs survive well into the future. Store your CDs in a cool, dry, dark place. Keep them out of sunlight. Store them in plastic cases. Don't write on the CDs, or if you must, use an acid-free pen made especially for that purpose (available from any office supply store). *Never* use stick-on labels -- the glue is almost guaranteed to damage the CD eventually.
- Make new copies of the CDs and DVDs from time to time. Not only does this "reset the clock" (a CD made 10 years later should last 10 years farther into the future), but CD technology is getting better all the time, and the CDs you buy a decade from now are likely to last longer than the CDs you buy today.
- Buy name brand CDs. The ultra-cheap no-name CDs are fine for your latest music mix, but if you want a CD to last, buy a name brand such as Memorex, TDK, JVC, etc.
- Consider buying archival CDs. They use gold to record your data, rather than aluminum, which is found in standard CDs. Years ago it was definitely true that the gold CDs lasted much longer than standard CDs, but today -- because of improvements in CD technology -- there's some disagreement about whether this is still true. Gold CDs are much more expensive than standard CDs, not to mention harder to find, but they may be worth it. Expect to pay \$3 or so for each CD (compared to 10¢ or so for a standard CD).
- No one knows the life expectancy of a CD. Estimates range from 10 to 100 years.
- Make lots of copies of your photos. Keep lots of copies at home, but keep copies elsewhere in case something tragic happens to your house. Every couple of months make a copy of your photos and throw them in your desk drawer at work, or make an agreement with a friend to keep copies of each others' photos. One fellow I read about had a great tradition: Every New Years Day he made copies of all his photos, and mailed them to members of his family. The more copies you have of your photos, the greater the chance that decades from now some family member will have them and (hopefully) treasure them.
- Free online services such as Shutterfly and Flickr are a great place to share photos with friends and family, but never count on these services as your one and only repository of photos. These services can go out of business, and many similar services have done so.



## Make Sure Your Photos are Identifiable

- People often write names and dates on the backs of traditional photos. People usually don't do this with digital photos, but you can! In any folder in which you store digital photos, create a text file (using Notepad or some similar text editor). List the file name of each photograph (or at least the photos you want to describe), and put a description next to each file name -- see the example shown here.
- Never use Microsoft Word or any word processor to create these files. A hundred years from now these software programs almost certainly won't be around, or will have changed radically. A plain text file is the only type of file that you can create today with the certainty that people will be able to read it in the distant future. Also, don't use photo organizing programs such as Picasa or Adobe Photo Album to add captions, for the same reason. (Feel free to use these programs to view your photos or do slide shows -- just don't count on your distant descendants having access to this software.)



## Make Sure Your Photos are Found

- It's almost a cliché to hear about someone discovering a box of long-forgotten photos in the attic. Anyone is able to recognize a box of photos for what it is -- no special equipment is necessary to be able to see the photos and understand what they are.
- If your digital photos become lost for a time, you want to maximize the chance that someone will recognize them for what they are. If the finder finds nothing but a CD, he/she may well throw it out, never realizing what a valuable treasure it contained.
- The simplest strategy for making your photos "findable": Carefully label all your photo CDs, and put copies with all your important papers.
- Make sure your kids know that these CDs exist.
- My favorite technique: Create a really beautiful book with a sample of your photos. Attach a CD to the inside back cover of the book, along with a note explaining that the CD contains all the photos in the book, and more. It's great fun, and not terribly expensive -- a beautiful glossy hard-cover photo book of up to 120 pages will set you back about \$45 plus shipping. (Shorter books or paperback books are even less.) Some good book publishers:
  - blurb.com
  - mypublisher.com
  - shutterfly.com
- If you don't want to create a book, then just create an album. Have a selection of your digital photos printed, put them in a nice photo album, and include a CD and a note in the back.
- The idea is to make it absolutely obvious to anyone that "Here Are Photos"!



## **The Family Archivist**

The real solution to the problem requires a culture change. Consider nominating someone in your extended family as the Family Archivist. This person collects materials -- not just photos and movies, but papers, journals, letters, etc. -- from family members and makes sure they're preserved, using some combination of the techniques described here. Ideally this person should have an interest in keeping up with technology, so that they can adapt as new types of storage come along. An archivist would have noticed when the 3.5-inch diskette started to become rare, and would have transferred all the materials from diskette to CD. Years from now, they might transfer materials from CD to ... whatever the next big thing is! The position of family archivist should be appointed in each generation as a position of serious responsibility. It's likely to be the same people who have an interest in genealogy!

## **Conclusion**

Your family history might end with your digital camera, but it doesn't have to. Digital photos and movies have unique challenges, but also extraordinary benefits. Imagine looking at a photograph that's 100 years old with the colors as crisp and vibrant as real life. Wouldn't you love to have such flawless photos of your great grandparents? With a little attention to preserving your digital memories, your great grandchildren will have such photos of you and those around you.