

Guidelines for Organizing Your Family Photographs

It is our experience that most people have a difficult time when it comes to organizing their family photos and records for long-term preservation and sharing. Simply, organizing a lifetime's worth of pictures can be a daunting experience. While you probably have a number of photo albums, these are typically based on a single topic, such as a wedding, baby book, or special vacation. However, you probably also have boxes of other pictures that are not as organized or suitable for sharing. You might also have acquired or inherited a collection of pictures from prior generations that are also stored away in boxes. The situation is further complicated by the advent and popularity of digital pictures, which are usually no better organized than their film counterparts.

Whether you want to convert your pictures into a medium for long-term preservation, family history book creation, or website-based sharing with family and friends, the very first step is to organize them.

DigaL!FE has prepared these guidelines to assist you in organizing your photographs and preparing them for digital scanning. These guidelines are intended to make the organizing experience as efficient as possible.

Why organize and digitize your family pictures?

If you're like most of us, you've accumulated a lifetime of treasures and pictures that reflect your incredible life experiences. If properly organized and preserved, these will be invaluable keepsakes to your children and your children's children. They chronicle your life and will allow your descendants to relate and connect with your life and times. They should be preserved and shared.

Additionally, film photos deteriorate in time. Colors fade and they become torn or scratched. Improper storage and handling can turn beautiful 100-year old photos into relics. By digitizing the photos and applying some basic restoration, the photos can often be brought back to life.

Digitization also ensures that your photos will endure. Despite the changes in technology, the current digital formats will survive indefinitely or may be easily transformed if and when new and greater technologies come about.

Digitization allows the most precious and valued photos to be cleaned and restored electronically.

Digitization also allows photos to be preserved and protected by saving copies to multiple locations, such as onto CD-ROMs or to personal databases on the Internet.

Finally, digitization allows your photos to be shared rather than buried away. By creating a personal family history book, you can provide your family members with a lasting heirloom – a chronicle of your life. Or, by posting your pictures to a personal family history web site, you can share your life with family members near and far.

DigaL!FE Organizing Services

DigaL!FE provides three tiers of services to assist you in organizing your photos based on your needs.

- ❖ *Getting Started Consultation* – The *DigaL!FE* Organizer will meet with you for approximately two hours and explain the various methods of organizing your photos and provide an Organization Kit to assist you. These guidelines are part of our getting-started consultation.
- ❖ *Initial Assistance* – If you prefer some hands-on aid, the *DigaL!FE* Organizer will work with you directly in four-hour sessions to help you organize your photos. Often after one or two sessions with the Organizer, our Customers have overcome the magnitude of the project and can complete the organizing project on their own.
- ❖ *Ongoing Assistance* – If you prefer more extensive aid, the *DigaL!FE* Organizer will work with you throughout the organizing experience to ensure that your photos have been organized, identified, and are ready for digitization.

Some Tips

Before beginning your photo organizing project, please consider the following tips:

- ❖ *Do not try to do it all in one day.* You have spent a lifetime taking and storing your pictures. In most cases, you cannot possibly organize them all at one time. We suggest that you set aside some time each day or week to work on this project.
- ❖ *Break the project up into small manageable tasks.* Starting and completing one small sub-task will help ensure that you don't get overwhelmed by the project and that progress is made. For example, today set a goal to organize just your vacation pictures.
- ❖ *If you do get a bit frustrated, take a break.* Organizing anything as complicated as all of your family photographs can be very frustrating. Be gentle on yourself and take some breaks.
- ❖ *Use our professional Organizer for assistance.* Often a second pair of fresh eyes can quickly push through most confusion. Your family pictures carry a great deal of sentimental and emotional value, and our Organizers can work with you to ensure that you reach your goals.

Organization Kit

We have included an Organization Kit to assist you in organizing your photos. The kit includes:

- ❖ A copy of this Guidelines
- ❖ Sharpie, extra fine point permanent marker for recording information on the photos
- ❖ Pre-printed labels for recording information on back
- ❖ Cardboard sorting trays
- ❖ Ziplock bags and banker's box

Let's Get Started...

Step 1. Locate All of Your Photos

The very first step is to find all of your pictures and get them centrally located in a work area. If you are like most of us, you have pictures boxed up in a closet, some in drawers, a few here and there. Look for strays in the basement, spare bedroom, dresser drawers - anywhere you might find them. Now is the time to go through everything and locate all of your photos. Remember, your objective is to get *all* of your photos organized, not just some of them.

If most of your pictures are still in their packages, leave them there. At this point, you don't want hundreds or thousands of pictures all lumped together.

Step 2. Label the photo packages

Now that you have gathered all of your photos into a central location, it is time to start arranging them. When you received your photos from the photo processors, they arrived in envelopes that contained the prints and the negatives. For most of us, our pictures are still in those envelopes. In this step, we want to clearly label the outside of the envelope with the *subject* of each package and the *date*.

For example, let's say you have a package of prints dated April 12, 1976, which are of little Johnnie's twelfth birthday. On the outside of the envelope carefully write "John's 12th birthday" and "April 12, 1976." Do this for each set of photo packages.

If you have a stack of photos that are not in their original envelopes but clearly part of the same set, then place them in a small ZipLock bag and label it with the subject and date. Sometimes the processing date is printed on the back of the photos. If not, try to estimate it based on the subject of the photos.

If you have a pile of photos covering a number of different subjects and eras, set them aside for now.

Step 3. Arrange Your Photos

Now that you have all photo packages clearly labeled, you want to arrange them. The easiest way is to start with a few very general topics, and after a few passes, arrange them by more specific topics. The two simplest ways to begin arranging your photos are:

- ❖ By era or decade, where you put all the picture packages for 1940-1950 in one group, 1950-1960 in another group, and so on.
- ❖ By major topics, such as Parents, Childhood, College, Marriage, Family, Children, Vacations, Career, etc. If this is a joint project for you and your spouse, everything prior to your marriage could be arranged by "his" and "hers".

After you have arranged the photos by these general categories, go through each and arrange the packets by more specific topics or in chronological order.

Ultimately you will want to limit your topics to not more than 12, but for now, organize them into as many categories as makes sense.

Now is also the time to go through the stack of bulk photos and add them to the appropriate groups.

Notes of mounted pictures

Often our most treasured pictures are mounted in picture frames or photo albums. However, these photos can not be digitized while still mounted.

1. Please remove any photos contained in albums. We are not able to scan any photos contained in albums. We recommend using small Post-it notes placed on the back of the photos to identify the location of each photo so that you can return it to its proper location.
 2. Please remove any photos contained within picture frames. Again, we recommend using small Post-it notes to identify the location of each photo so that you can return it to its proper location.
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Any photos that cannot be easily taken from albums or frames can be photographically recaptured. However, this process requires specialized equipment and must be performed in our office.

Congratulations, you have now (hopefully) organized the majority of your photos!

Step 4. Select Your Best Photos

The next step is to edit your collection down to images that mean the most to you. While that sounds easy enough, for most of us, it is the most difficult. Photos are probably the hardest items to throw away because of their sentimental value.

Following are some guidelines to assist you.

- ❖ *Best tell your life story and would make treasured keepsakes.* You should include a variety of photos from the different periods of your life, such as childhood, school, youth activities, college, wedding, children, vacations, and other notable events.
- ❖ *Include your parents, grandparents, and other members of the family.* Pictures of their life combined with your recollections make priceless treasures that will be treasured forever.
- ❖ *Are in relatively good condition.* Although we can perform digital photo retouching and restoration, it is always best to work with good original prints. If you are not sure about the quality of your photos, ask the Organizer for advice.
- ❖ *Any pictures that are blurry, boring, make the person in them look awful are best left in their box.* You don't want to toss them out, but rather just store them away. Even if they aren't technically perfect, they may be irreplaceable because they may be the only record of a particular event, time or person in your life. When editing a photo collection, you should allow your emotions and instincts to be your guide.

Step 5. Labeling Your Best Photos

As a rule of thumb, any photographs that cannot be identified will have little or no value to succeeding generations. Thus, all of those wonderful pictures of your grandparents back in the

old country will mean nothing to the family if they don't know who they are, when they were taken, or where they were taken. We strongly recommend that you go through **all** of your photos and add important information to the back of each photo, including:

Names – identify everyone in the photos

Location – where was the photo taken

Date – when was the photo was taken (at least the year)

Event – what was occurring when the photo was taken

If you have not already done so, please label each of your photos with at least the above information: names, location, date, and event.

CAUTION: Photos are fragile and identifying information should be marked very gently on the back of each photo. Please do *not* use hard ball point pens, but rather soft, thin felt tip pens. Press lightly.

Alternatively, for our project, write the identifying information on large Post-it notes and affix them to the back of each photo. Our technician will then add the digital file name to the post-it and retain the post-it for our compilation.

Step 6. Bundling Your Photos

Now that you have all of your photos organized and some isolated for digital scanning, you need to bundle them for transport our office for scanning.

In our Organization Kit we included a banker's box. Simply place all of the packets of photos in the box and let us know when we can pick them up.

Step 7. Scanning Your Photos

Our technician will be bringing some equipment to perform the scanning, which consists of a laptop computer and high-quality digital scanner. They are not large pieces of equipment, but the technician will need some assistance from you.

1. A comfortable work area, such as a kitchen table capable of using his equipment and the photos to be scanned.
2. Although the technician will bring a power strip, s/he will need access to a nearby power outlet.
3. In order to maximize the technician's time, please direct any questions *prior* to performing the scanning. The scanning process is relatively demanding and requires some concentration. We want to make sure that nothing is left out and that we have accurately captured your photos.

Step 8. Reviewing Your Photo Scans

As soon as the pictures have been scanned, we will enter them into our master database and perform some minor retouching. We will combine the photos with the identification information that you had provided. We will then send you a copy of the pictures and information for your

review. Please verify that all of the information is correct and either a) send us any changes and updates, or b) call and let us know that everything is okay as it is.

Step 9. Storing Your Photos for the Long-Term

Now that you have all of your photos organized and some isolated for digital scanning, you need a system for properly storing all of your prints for future use or generations.

Albums are great for capturing special moments, events, themes or important people in your life, but most of us can't store all of our photos in them. We recommend organizing your collection in archival-quality, pH-balanced or acid-free photo-safe boxes (visit online sources, photo- or scrapbooking-supply stores) and then deciding what to highlight in albums.

When storing photographs for the long-term, please consider the following:

1. First, take your photos out of "magnetic" albums. The materials, ordinary plastic, glue and cardboard, will damage them over time.
2. Eliminate any glue, tape, staples, rubber bands and paper clips that might stain, scratch or dent photographs.
3. When framing, use acid-free mats to keep photos from touching the glass and acid-free backboards to avoid deterioration of the image.
4. Place photographs in plastic sleeves that do not contain PVC. These can be purchased at photo supply stores.
5. Use plastic sandwich bags for a good, inexpensive alternative to plastic sleeves.
6. Store large quantities of photos by layering them between sheets of 100 percent acid-free paper in metal or acid-free cardboard boxes.
7. Wood and wood products, like cardboard and paper, harm photographs and should only be used if labeled "acid-free."
8. Keep photos out of attics, garages and basements where they'll be subject to extreme temperature fluctuations and excessive humidity.
9. Temperature, humidity and light are the three greatest enemies of photographic materials. A good rule of thumb is storing photos where you are also comfortable. In other words, not too hot, cold, wet or dry. This means keeping them out of attics, garages and basements where they'll be subject to extreme temperature fluctuations and excessive humidity. Since damage to photos can only be reversed through expensive conservation methods, avoiding harmful handling and storage really pays off. Be kind to your photos and they'll last a lifetime, or two.

We trust that these guidelines will assist you in selecting, gathering, and organizing your photographs for the scanning session. Should you have any questions, please contact your DigaL!FE Agent at your earliest convenience.

Very best regards,

DigaL!FE