Restoring Old Photographs

By Harvey Powers, EFA Webmaster

The "good news" is that you can quickly and easily improve the quality of many old family photographs. The "bad news" is that there is no "digital" solution to identifying the people in those old pictures. If the name isn't written on the back, or if you or other members of the family cannot identify the person(s), you have little recourse.

If I sound frustrated, you are correct. As the unofficial family historian, I've been handed boxes of old photographs with no identification and the most I can find is, "Well, that might be Uncle Fred!"

So, my first suggestion is put a name on the back of all your family photos. You may know who they are but will your children or grandchildren?

Once you know who is in the photograph comes the task of trying to "clean up" the picture so it's easier to see the person. Just remember, you will not be able to "fix" every single flaw, but you can improve faded pictures or single out one person from a group or remove creases and dust.

This is something I try to do when posting photos on the EFA website.

Step one is to scan the photograph with a good quality scanner. Clean the scanner glass first. Scan it in as high a resolution as possible (100% usually works best).

Step two is to save the photo in a format that saves the most resolution. I suggest saving as a .tiff. Using a .jpg save may lose some detail.

Step three is to open the image in your best "photo editing software." Here there are many options…and a range of prices. I use Photoshop but it's expensive. There is a less expensive option called "Photoshop Elements" that has many of the same features. There's a product called "Fotophire" ($50) that works well. And there is a product called AKVIS Retoucher ($113), which has an extensive tutorial and is almost automatic.

Step four is to do your retouching. Use only the basic editing levels if you are a first-timer in this. If the photo is too dark, use the brightness slider to brighten it up. Washed out photographs can be given a fresh lease of life using the contrast tool. The dust and scratches filter can be used carefully to remove scratches, taking care not to remove any details. If any areas are removed or torn, you can use the Clone stamp feature to copy and paste the portion you want to clone to the damaged portion. Torn edges can be cropped using the crop tool.

Finally, experiment with it! Save your finished product and perhaps try again. Then pick the one that looks best.

I also suggest you "Google" the person's name and select images. You may find there is a better photo of that person online. It's not likely but it has happened. Also search the *Eller Chronicles* archives.

If you are going to print the result, remember the quality of your printer will be important.