

OPERATION GRANNY FILES

Frozen in Time: Photo Dating Guide & Oral History Interview Kit

Read the clues hiding in plain sight — then capture the voice behind the face

Field Guide & Quick-Reference

Mission 27: Frozen in Time — Photos, Artifacts & Oral History

Clearance Level: Biscuit-Tin Operative

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QUICK-GRAB SUMMARY: Mystery photo? Start with format, then mount, then fashion — in that order. The type of photograph (daguerreotype, tintype, cabinet card, RPPC) gives you the widest date range first. The card mount and stamp box narrow it. The clothing and hair narrow it further. Three clue-classes, used together, can pin most photos to within a decade. Once you've dated it, store it right — and then schedule the interview before another name disappears with someone who knew it.

Section 1: Photo Dating Guide

How to Read What a Photograph Is Telling You

Every antique photograph carries at least three independent data streams: the technology it was made with, the physical object it's mounted on, and the fashions worn by the subject. Work through them in order. The first clue-class alone will usually narrow your date range to thirty years or less. Combined, they can narrow it to five.

Photo Format Identification Table

Format	Approximate Date Range	How to Identify
Daguerreotype	~1842-1856	Mirror-like silver surface on copper; image reverses (positive ↔ negative) as you tilt it; housed in a small hinged case with a velvet pad opposite
Ambrotype	~1854-1865	Image on glass; no mirror shimmer; similar hinged case to daguerreotype; image does not reverse when tilted
Tintype (Ferrotype)	~1856-1900s	Thin iron plate; magnet will stick to it; often cut small and loose (no case); no shimmer; image appears slightly flat
Carte de Visite (CDV)	~1859-1870s	Small albumen print (~2.5 x 4 in.) mounted on thin card; often has photographer's imprint on reverse; frequently found in album sleeves
Cabinet Card	~1866-1906 (peak 1870-1895)	Larger albumen or gelatin print (~4.25 x 6.5 in.) on thick card mount; photographer's name/studio on front bottom

		edge or reverse
Real Photo Postcard (RPPC)	~1903-1930s	Actual photographic print with a postcard-format reverse (stamp box, divided or undivided back); matte or semi-matte surface

GRANNY PRO TIP: Not sure if it's a daguerreotype or an ambrotype? Tilt it under a lamp. If the image reverses — going from light to dark or dark to light as you shift the angle — it's a daguerreotype. No reversal? Ambrotype. This trick has never failed Granny yet.

Mount and Stamp-Box Dating Guide

Card-stock characteristics and manufacturing details give you a second, independent date range. Combine this with the format for a tighter window.

Cabinet Cards and CDVs — Card Stock Clues:

- **Rounded corners** — approximately 1870s-1900
- **Square corners** — approximately 1900 onward
- **Thin, lightweight card** — earlier (1860s-1870s); heavier stock is later
- **Gilt (gold) edges** — common 1880s-1890s
- **Colored card stock (tan, gray, olive, maroon)** — 1880s-early 1900s; earlier cards are nearly always white or cream
- **Photographer's studio imprint on reverse** — cross-reference the studio name and town against city directories to find the years that photographer was in business (a technique from Mission 21)

Real Photo Postcards — Stamp Box Dating:

The stamp box in the corner of an RPPC's reverse identifies the paper manufacturer and narrows the date significantly.

Stamp Box Mark	Paper / Manufacturer	Approximate Date
AZO — four upward-pointing triangles (▲▲▲▲)	Kodak AZO	~1904-1918
AZO — four small squares in corners	Kodak AZO	~1925-1942
VELOX	Kodak Velox	~1900-1930s (various marks)
SOLIO	Kodak Solio	~1903-1920
CYKO	Ansco/Agfa	~1904-1920s

AZOTURA	Kodak	~1940s-1950s
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Divided vs. undivided back: RPPCs with a line dividing the reverse (one half for message, one for address) were produced after 1907, when US postal regulations allowed messages on the back. An undivided back is pre-1907.

Fashion Dating Reference

Fashion changes faster than photographic technology — use it to sharpen your estimate to within a few years. These indicators are most reliable for women's dress; men's fashions changed more slowly and are harder to date precisely.

Women's Sleeves (the single best indicator):

Sleeve Style	Approximate Date Range
Narrow, fitted sleeves	1860s-1889
Slightly puffed at shoulder, fitted below	~1890-1893
Large leg-of-mutton / gigot sleeves (very full at shoulder, narrow at wrist)	~1894-1897
Narrowing again, slight puff fading	~1898-1902
Full, flounced, or ruffled sleeves (Edwardian fullness)	~1903-1910
Narrower again, straighter line	~1910-1920

Collars and Necklines:

Detail	Approximate Date Range
High choker collar / boned collar	~1895-1910
Soft lace or ruching at throat	1860s-1890s
V-neck or lower neckline visible	~1912 onward
Sailor collar	1880s-1910s (especially children)

Hairstyles:

Style	Approximate Date Range
Hair parted center, pulled back smooth	1860s-1880s

Fringed bangs at forehead	~1880s-1890s
Full pompadour (piled high, waved at sides)	~1900-1910
Looser, waved bob or softer updo	~1910-1920s

Two Cautions Granny Will Never Stop Repeating:

- **People wore clothes for years.** Older women especially continued wearing the styles of their youth long after fashion moved on. Treat fashion clues as a no-earlier-than floor — the photo cannot predate the dress, but it may postdate it by a decade.
- **Rural and lower-income subjects ran behind the trend.** Fashion reached remote communities slowly. Add a few years of buffer when dating photos of country or farming families.

Granny's Date-a-Photo Checklist

Work through one photo at a time. Fill in what you can find.

Photo I am examining: _____

Step 1 — Identify the Format

- ☐ Is it in a hinged case? → Likely daguerreotype or ambrotype
- ☐ Does the image reverse when I tilt it? → Daguerreotype (~1842-1856)
- ☐ No reversal, on glass, in case? → Ambrotype (~1854-1865)
- ☐ Does a magnet stick to it? → Tintype (~1856-1900s)
- ☐ Small print on thin card (~2.5 x 4 in.)? → CDV (~1859-1870s)
- ☐ Larger print on thick card (~4.25 x 6.5 in.)? → Cabinet card (~1866-1906)
- ☐ Photographic print with postcard reverse? → RPPC (~1903-1930s)

Format identified: _____

Earliest possible date: _____

Step 2 — Read the Mount

- ☐ Corner style: Rounded (→ pre-1900) / Square (→ post-1900)
- ☐ Card weight: Light (earlier) / Heavy (later)
- ☐ Photographer's imprint: Studio name _____ Town _____

Note: Look up this studio in city directories to narrow the window.

- ☐ For RPPCs — stamp box mark: _____ Date range: _____
- ☐ For RPPCs — divided back (→ post-1907) / undivided back (→ pre-1907)

Mount narrows date to approximately: _____

to _____

Step 3 — Read the Clothes and Hair

- ☐ Sleeve style: _____ Suggests: _____
- ☐ Collar/neckline: _____ Suggests: _____
- ☐ Hairstyle: _____ Suggests: _____
- ☐ Military uniform, mourning dress, or wedding attire visible? Note: _____

Fashion clues suggest no earlier than: _____

Step 4 — My Best Estimate

Combining all three clue-classes, this photograph was most likely taken:

Between _____ and _____ (decade/year range)

My reasoning: _____

Where I stored this estimate:

On an acid-free slip tucked alongside the photograph, NOT written on the back of the print.

Section 2: Oral History Interview Kit

Capture the Voice Before the Clock Runs Out

A dated photograph tells you when. An oral-history interview tells you what it was like — the texture, the humor, the grief, the ordinary Tuesday that turned out to matter. These two sources together are worth more than either alone. The following kit gives you everything you need to record one good interview this month.

GRANNY PRO TIP: Before you do anything else — before you set up the recorder, before you think about questions — get a signed consent note. It takes two minutes, costs nothing, and means the recording belongs to your family in perpetuity. A voice recorded without permission is a voice you may not be able to share, transcribe, or keep legally. The template below is written in plain language. Print it, explain it simply, get the signature, then begin.

Consent & Release Note (Plain Language Template)

Print, fill in, and have your interviewee sign before recording begins.

Oral History Interview Consent & Release

I, _____ (full name), agree to be recorded in an audio/video interview for family history and genealogical research purposes conducted by _____.

I understand that:

- This recording will be kept and used for family history purposes.
- It may be transcribed, shared with family members, or included in a family history publication or archive.
- I may stop the interview at any time and ask for any portion to be deleted.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Interviewee name (printed): _____

Interviewer name: _____

Equipment & Setup Checklist

Before you sit down:

- ☐ Phone or small recorder with good microphone — test it first
- ☐ Quiet room with no background noise (no TV, dishwasher, HVAC hum if possible)
- ☐ Do a 30-second test recording and play it back — can you hear the voice clearly?
- ☐ Backup option ready (second device recording simultaneously if possible)
- ☐ Consent form printed and ready to sign before you start
- ☐ Your question list printed or written out — do not rely on memory
- ☐ Glass of water for your interviewee
- ☐ Enough time: plan for at least 30 minutes; let it run longer if the person is engaged

Interview Question Bank

Use these as starting points. You do not need to ask them all — pick 8-12 that feel right for this person. Follow the energy of the conversation; the best material always comes from unexpected turns.

Early Life

- Where were you born, and what was it like growing up there?
- What did your house look like? What do you remember about your street or neighborhood?
- What did your parents do for work? What did their hands look like?
- What did a regular weekday look like when you were ten years old?
- What did your family eat? Was there a dish your mother or grandmother made that you still think about?

Family Memories

- Tell me about your grandparents. What do you remember most about them?
- Who in the family told the best stories? What was one of those stories?
- Were there relatives people didn't talk about? What did you eventually find out?

- What is something you know about our family history that you're afraid will be forgotten?
- Who do you think I most remind you of, and why?

Photographs and Artifacts

(Show them a mystery photo or family object while asking these)

- Do you recognize anyone in this photograph?
- Where was this taken, do you think? What makes you say that?
- Who did this [object] belong to? Do you know how we came to have it?
- What would you want people to know about this person in the photo?

Turning Points and Hard Times

- What was the hardest thing your family went through when you were young?
- Was there a moment when everything changed — in your life or in the family?
- What did people do during [Depression/WWII/another period event] in your family?
- Is there something you wish you had asked someone before they were gone?

Closing Questions (always end with these)

- What do you want your grandchildren and great-grandchildren to know about you?
- What is the most important thing you've learned in your life?
- Is there anything you've always wanted to say that nobody ever thought to ask about?

The Follow-Up You Always Need:

- "Tell me more about that."
- "What was it like?"
- "How did that make you feel?"
- "Who else was there?"

Interviewer's Conduct Notes

- Go in roughly chronological order — early life first, then working life, then later years.
- Ask one question at a time. Silence is not failure; let the person think.
- Do not interrupt a story to correct a date or name. Note it privately, clarify gently later.
- Never push past what the person is comfortable sharing. If they say "I'd rather not talk about that," move on immediately and warmly.
- You are listening, not leading. Your job is to ask and then get out of the way.

Post-Interview Checklist

After the interview:

- ☐ Thank your interviewee warmly — this was a gift
- ☐ Save the audio file to at least two locations immediately (cloud + local drive)
- ☐ Name the file clearly: [Interviewee Name]_Interview_[YYYY-MM-DD].m4a (or .mp3, .wav)

- ☐ Transcribe using OpenAI Whisper (free, open-source, high accuracy) or a consumer app such as Otter.ai or Rev
- ☐ Review the transcript for names, dates, and places — each one is a new research lead
- ☐ Note any corrections (wrong dates, garbled names) in brackets within the transcript: e.g., [she said "Ella" but family records suggest "Ellen"]
- ☐ Write a citation for the recording in your genealogy software

Citation format for an oral history recording:

[Interviewee Full Name], interview by [Your Name], [Date], [Location]. Audio recording and transcript in possession of [Your Name], [City, State].

Storage Recommendations

- **Audio file:** Save as .m4a, .mp3, or .wav — all three are widely supported and long-lived
- **Transcript:** Save as a .txt or .docx file alongside the audio; never rely on a proprietary format only
- **Both files:** Back up to at least two locations (cloud drive + local drive or external hard drive)
- **Label the files now** — do not trust future-you to remember which "Interview 3.m4a" this was
- **Share a copy:** Send the transcript to at least one other family member; distributed copies survive disasters

BONUS INSIGHT: A dated photograph tells you when a moment happened. An oral history interview tells you what it felt like. Pair them deliberately: show your interviewee the mystery photo you just dated and watch what surfaces. Memory is often triggered by image in ways that a direct question never reaches.

GRANNY SAYS: A recording left unlabeled in a drawer is just a smaller version of the problem you started with. Write the name on it today.

Notes

Use this space for personal notes and discoveries.
